

GAUTAM GAMBHIR

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I think it was in early 2000s. I was playing for India A. I came back from practice and opened the mini-refrigerator in my hotel room to get some water. I saw three pairs of underpants – 2 blue and a black — neatly folded right on the top shelf of the refrigerator! On the middle shelf there were three pairs of socks! I was bemused.

Those days we used to share rooms. So I asked my room-mate, who was an already quite decorated player for India. Of course, the clothing belonged to him. All he could say was: “*Bahut pressure hai yaar*, you won’t understand.” The pressure to perform had got to him. So instead of going into the wardrobe, the underwear and socks had landed in the refrigerator!

It is again that thing called pressure which resulted in R. Ashwin running out Jos Buttler. Ashwin, the player is trying to resurrect his cricketing career, more so in white-ball cricket. He knows time is running with the World Cup looming. Ashwin the captain has to deliver for his franchise. Rajasthan were some 100 odd for one in 12 overs when the incident occurred. More bashing from Buttler and the game would have been Rajasthan’s. I didn’t like what Ashwin did but would be disappointed if history judges him on this incident. He is a proud cricketer who has a lot at stake at the moment.

Ashwin and his men will be out again on Wednesday. This game against KKR will be far more challenging. Kings XI and KKR have opened their campaigns with a win each. But KKR has points and confidence as they won a tough game against Sunrisers Hyderabad. They not only chased down a daunting target but also bowled well to keep Sunrisers under 200. For me it is a contest between KKR’s batting and Kings XI’s bowling.

A lot has changed in the personal life of Nitish Rana. He is a married man now. Last time I saw him I spotted a few grey hairs too. I am not sure if it is pressure or fashion – with this PubG Generation anything is possible in the name of fashion. Whatever it is, Nitish has started off well. Now he should be searching for consistency.

I have heard some good things about Shubman Gill. He is quietly confident of his game and is a *beeba munda* (obedient boy) of his parents. He doesn’t look flustered at all, not one of those who would stack clothes in a refrigerator.

By the way later that night in 2000s, I discovered some chocolate and some left-over food in the wardrobe.

GAUTAM GAMBHIR

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I am boring and uninspiring when it comes to colours of my outfits. In my wardrobe you can find all shades of grey, followed by variety of dark, darker and darkest blue, plenty of browns, blacks and some honest whites. Colours like lavender, orange or yellow are for brave men. But my special salute is to those males who can wear pink and still strut around.

Personally, I am still warming up to the idea of the pink outfits of Rajasthan Royals. But the players look dapper. The fans look sharper, especially the females where pink is a far more natural extension. They would have loved the idea more as they are loaded with more pink accessories than men. Although I am reliably informed that one RR player is contemplating pink streaks. That will be some fun. All in all I feel "Men In Pink" is a marketing masterstroke.

But the RR guys will have to put points on the table. Marketing moves can get teams eyeballs but it is success that wins them loyalty of fans. I know this first hand having been in Delhi and KKR dressing-rooms. KKR always had the support of the magical Shah Rukh bhai but till the time they didn't win in 2012 and 2014, "Korbo Lorbo Jeetbo" sounded more like an advertising jingle. Post those title wins it has become a war cry. In my days at Delhi we had a film star performing stunts. But the act wasn't complimented by on-field performances.

This year Delhi has a new name, a bundle of marketing activities, new video to announce their ideology, freshly designed outfits and points on the table. They nearly didn't have the last set of two points almost having made a hash of an easy game against KKR. Chasing 186 to win DC were galloping at 170 for two. From there to win the game in a super over is challenging your luck far too much. They should thank Kagiso Rabada for some old-fashioned death bowling in the super over. Prithvi Shaw is carrying his high backlift riding on an even higher confidence quotient. When they take on Kings XI Punjab on Monday, Prithvi's role should not be altered. Mohali is an even better wicket and it should suit his style of play.

The Punjab team are in good health. The way they dominated Mumbai on Saturday it is obvious that they have moved on from Buttler-Ashwin episode, while the analysts are still debating. Former England opening batsman, Mark Butcher came up with his macro view on Mankad. He says, "A Mankad is like sleeping with your best pal's ex. Perfectly legitimate but don't complain if you get chinned for it." There is something about left-handed opening batsmen... they are just too good, with or without pinks in their wardrobe!!!

GAUTAM GAMBHIR

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A lot of people ask me that how the Kolkata Knight Riders discover Andre Russell? Was it modern-day cricket analytics? Was it a genius head-hunter who recommended him? Or was it a masterstroke at the auction table? Being a former KKR captain I can tell you that it was none of the above. It was a classic case of not finding a table at the best Italian restaurant in your city and ending up at a lesser-known joint. Let me explain.

In 2013-14 we were searching for a backup for the great Jacques Kallis. One of the very few options available was Russell. Till then he had played two seasons for Delhi. With 58 runs in seven games Russell was the lesser-known Italian joint waving at the customers passing by. They would stop, look, ponder, and move on. KKR booked a table purely as there was no choice. And the INR 60 lakh price tag for Russell didn't hurt at all.

I must confess I only knew that Russell could hit sixes. But he could do it to good balls and in pressure situations... and above all with this consistency was something I stumbled upon. Now, when he bats like the way he did against Bangalore on Friday, I just admire the talent and feel sorry for the opposition.

It is another matter that Bangalore didn't help their cause. I would start with last year's auction where they messed up. Why did they go for Marcus Stoinis and Nathan Coulter-Nile if they knew these players were not available from the start? At a small venue like Chinnaswamy, where the wicket is flat, I would have gone with an out and out fast bowler. You look at Mumbai Indians. They also play at a high-scoring venue. But if Bangalore look at Mumbai's bowling attack they would know what I mean. While Virat Kohli the batsman is an absolute master, Virat Kohli the captain is an apprentice. He has loads to learn. Rather than blaming the bowlers he should take the blame on himself for the loss. For example instead of getting Stoinis to bowl the remainder of Mohammad Siraj's over, he should have gone with left-arm spinner Pawan Negi on a pitch where the ball was gripping. It is a no-brainer that Russell likes pace on the ball. This is not to say that Negi wouldn't have gone for runs but the chances were relatively less.

I was very disappointed in the way Tim Southee bowled. With all his experience he kept altering his plans. That is when Virat the leader should have been in the ears of Southee reminding him of his plans for Russell. I remember against Chris Gayle I would always tell my bowlers not to worry about getting hit but whatever happens, "DON'T CHANGE THE PLAN".

From INR 60 lakh, Russell has now progressed to INR 8.5 crore. The new Italian restaurant in the town is buzzing. Kolkata are all smiles while other franchisees are eagerly waiting to be seated.

GAUTAM GAMBHIR

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I am not sure if social media is the right space to be but some of the stuff that is doing the rounds there is fabulous. Especially on Instagram. The other day I noticed that Rohit Sharma had posted a video of someone speaking in Spanish to his three-month old daughter, Samaira. Rohit's bundle of joy is an absolute chocolate box as she tries to get around "*hola como estas?*" (Hello, how are you?).

The other one came from Mahinder Singh Dhoni's Instagram handle. It was a picture of Dhoni and his wife Sakshi stretched out on the floor of what looks like an airport. This picture was forwarded to me by a young cousin. He told me that he could relate so well with the Dhonis lying down at an airport as "it is such a common-man thing". I think what he wanted to say was that you don't expect a former India captain to be lying down on a floor at a public place. I too liked this picture and other stuff that is posted on social media especially from the official handles of the franchisees.

No one is complaining as all boxes are getting ticked. Players love their rise on the popularity chart, franchisees seize it as an opportunity to monetise and increase their fan base, team sponsors pounce on these platforms to integrate their brand campaigns and followers of the game are getting some engaging content. But then there is the other side to this as well. A few years back a young player confided a strange concern. He told me how he was not featuring in the team videos of his IPL franchisee while some of the other "lesser performers" were at the fore front.

I was disappointed to note that rather than worrying about consistency in performance this talent was worried if he featured on his team's Instagram handle or not. Sadly he was not the only one. I noticed players who were trying to make a comeback into the Indian team also felt the same way. They felt that even half-decent on-field performances supplemented with some cool moves on social media can get them brand endorsements, a fan base and the selectors' attention. I am not sure in what order of preference.

It is KKR vs Delhi at Eden Gardens on Friday. To me KKR wins the social media contest hands down as their content is so varied. On the playing field the contest is more even. I am slightly in Delhi's corner as their bowling is better suited for Eden Gardens. Kagiso Rabada on new Eden pitch is quite a prospect. There could be a case for Delhi to play Trent Boult too. I am keenly looking forward to some interestingly shot, post-match celebration videos on Delhi's Instagram handle.

GAUTAM GAMBHIR

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So our squad for the 2019 World Cup had been declared. I must say I am surprised by the fact that we are going in with just three specialist fast bowlers. I tried to visit and then revisit this fact but I have still not been able to get my head around these selections. I have always believed that whatever be the format, it is the batsmen who set up the games and bowlers are the ones who win them. Therefore, I feel we are a little light in the fast bowling department.

With due respect to Hardik Pandya and Vijay Shankar, I feel they are still works in progress. With two new balls at each end and strike rates going through the roof, any captain would need a cushion of an extra fast bowler. To cut a long story short, I would have gone with one more, perhaps Navdeep Saini in place of Vijay.

The other names which are being furiously debated are Ambati Rayudu and Rishabh Pant. Let us talk about Rayudu first. It is disgusting to see that he is being judged more on his IPL form and less on his overall skill sets. I am not a big fan of statistics as they never tell the whole story. I am sure you would remember what I wrote about Andre Russell and his inclusion in the KKR squad back in 2014. Before we played him in 2014 Russell had only 58 runs to show in seven games for his earlier franchise Delhi Daredevils. If these dry numbers were the only criterion, Russell should have been fishing somewhere in Jamaica. In short, Rayudu had a strong case to be in the team.

With regards to Rishabh, I think he has age on his side. I am certain with better shot selection he will serve India for a long, long time. He is a bundle of talent who needs to be handled carefully.

Back to the IPL, and there are two games on Sunday. The second one features RCB vs CSK. It is a huge game for the team in red and black. In the last game against KKR they almost gave their fans a heart attack, eventually winning by just 10 runs. I think if you score 213 runs at a venue like Eden Gardens and the winning margin is a mere 10 runs there is something seriously wrong. In the end it was a question of two more hits and the result could have been in favour of KKR. I am happy for RCB fans that their hopes are still alive. But the way the team is currently playing they seem to be living on a prayer. Unfortunately, sports needs both – prayer as well as prowess.

GAUTAM GAMBHIR

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We are not living in the most secure times. Last month's attack in New Zealand and the string of blasts in Sri Lanka on Sunday have clearly told us that no country is safe. I was devastated at news coming from both these extremely peace-loving cricketing nations. As a well-travelled cricketer I never imagined that even New Zealand could be attacked in such an audacious manner. I thought the same way about Sri Lanka. After decades of unrest ended in the island nation, I considered it to be one of the best places in the world to play cricket. Sadly, I was wrong on both counts. But the question is have we learnt our lesson? Are we cautious enough?

As a professional cricketer we play in front of packed houses, travel through some of the busiest airports in the world with every pair of eyes on us. While I have never felt any challenges leading this rather blessed life, as a young father of two little girls that "what if?" always lingered in my mind. I am not an expert when it comes to security but I hope that marquee tournaments like the IPL or the upcoming World Cup are well guarded. I hope the administrators are up to speed with the threats the terror attacks pose to the sporting properties.

I was trying to put myself in Muttiah Muralitharan's shoes – he was in the Sunrisers Hyderabad dugout on Easter evening, the day the blasts took place in Sri Lanka. It couldn't have been easy for him to concentrate on cricket with all that was happening back home. Should the franchise have given Murali the option of returning home? Well, knowing the SRH management, where my good friend VVS Laxman is, they would have definitely proposed this.

Murali's former franchise, Royal Challengers Bangalore, is in a precarious situation. I wonder how much of confidence they could have taken from their wins over KKR and CSK. A lot of boxes still need to be ticked for RCB. Personally, I see an individual battle in Wednesday's game as well. R. Ashwin may have a point or two to prove to Virat Kohli, the India captain. Ashwin is currently out of favour when it comes to playing for India. He would want to show the world, and Virat, that he is still a force to reckon with. I can tell you from experience that this was my thought when I led KKR against Chennai. You can call it an ego thing but I loved a battle with MS Dhoni. Therefore I won't be surprised if both Ashwin the bowler and Ashwin the captain would want to come out on top in this game.

Gameplan

GAUTAM GAMBHIR

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It is the most interesting phase of this season's IPL. I can't recall such a closely contested one. While Chennai, Mumbai and Delhi are close to qualification for playoffs, five teams are still in fray to claim the fourth spot and join the Big Daddies. The reasons for such close points table are aplenty. They largely revolve around the conditions in which the matches are played and the team combinations.

None of the teams have actually been able to break free in a real sense of the word. The clear domination by teams like Chennai or Mumbai has been missing. The playing conditions at most venues are similar so things like Eden being a fortress for KKR or Chepauk a fortress for CSK are an exaggeration. And I am not going by the result of CSK's last game against Mumbai. The season started with CSK producing a low, slow track but thankfully it has got better as the tournament has gone on. The other reason I feel is that most teams read each other very well. While you will always have an odd Russell or a Warner changing the game, it doesn't seem to be a 700-run season for any of the top batsmen.

The bowling plans are more accurate than ever and the field placements are clearly very well thought out. It seems that computer analysts and coaches are using Google Maps to plan field placements! I am all for a tournament which has a say from the bowlers too otherwise it becomes a routine between bat and human bowling machines. I don't know about you but I hate it when it becomes a slam-bang affair.

Now is the time foreign recruits are heading home for their World Cup preparations. Clearly Rajasthan Royals will be hurt the most losing out the backbone of their outfit. RCB too will miss their foreign recruits, especially Moeen Ali. A left-handed batsman in the late middle order is a big advantage which any team wants to have. The most interesting one to note will be Sunrisers Hyderabad. They are at 10 points from 10 games and now without Warner and Jonny Bairstow. It will be a test for their middle-order to respond to this new combination.

KKR play Mumbai on Sunday at the Eden. Things are tight for the home team and I can imagine some anxiety amongst players and the supporters. I have a feeling that if KKR wins this one against Mumbai it may just galvanise the team. Dinesh Karthik needs support from the senior members of the team. Sometimes as a leader you want someone to put his arm around you and say, "Things will happen, Skipper". I hope someone is doing this in the KKR dressing room.

Gameplan

GAUTAM GAMBHIR

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I was disappointed with Andre Russell's comments where he termed the KKR team atmosphere as "unhealthy". In one of the recent interviews I did express my regret. But looks like, I jumped the gun. One of my journalist friends sent me a link to his press conference with a message that I had misinterpreted Russell's comments. He was right. Russell was only mentioning about disappointing team atmosphere after a string of losses. May be his choice of words was wrong which led me to think that there were cracks in the KKR ranks.

But Russell then goes on to talk about "lack of passion" and "bad decisions" by the team. In my humble opinion this was uncalled for. I can understand his emotions for KKR but I'd be disappointed if I was Dinesh Karthik. No one wants to lose. No one wants to take poor decisions and KKR did take some ordinary calls this year. That doesn't mean that these things should be discussed in a press conference!!!

In crunch situations like these where one loss could be the end of KKR's season, senior guys need to close ranks even more. I have had plenty of disagreements with my team-mates. On more than one occasion I didn't agree with captain MS Dhoni but these things remained within the team. I think someone from the coaching staff or KKR management should sit down with Russell and explain to him the relevance of a cohesive dressing room. I know the media is just trying to do their job and get their headlines but as a player I never obliged them.

Paddy Upton, my former team-mate from the coaching staff, is out with his book. In it he has mentioned that I am a "pessimistic, weak-minded" individual. The media wanted me to react on it. I read the excerpt of his book "The Barefoot Coach" which looks like an exciting collection of stories. I just hope it is not psychological jargon, Paddy.

I feel Paddy could not explain the perspective. In the book he says I was grumpy even after scoring a 100 and wanted to have a 200 against my name. He is right. Unfortunately Paddy doesn't know the dynamics of Indian cricket. For a boy like me, for whom the fees of INR 16,000 from a Ranji Trophy game mattered a lot, it was crucial for me to score big... really big. For a boy like me, who never had a Godfather in cricket, every opportunity was his last and he had to make it count. I played my first World Cup, of any level, at the age of 25 before I missed out on three occasions where I should have walked into the team. I don't blame Paddy. He is a top guy who knows his stuff but the complexities of the Indian cricket scene are tough for him to decipher.

GAUTAM GAMBHIR

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I just watched a video of David Warner and Steve Smith making their return to Australia. From the variety of colours they had been donning during the IPL it was refreshing to see them in the Aussie green and gold. In the clip, which is about three minute long, I was trying to ascertain the confidence quotient of both these guys. I can tell you, sitting miles away, that there were nerves at the Allan Border Field in Brisbane.

I had the honour of spending some time with Justin Langer, the current Australian coach. He helped me fix a few things in my batting. If I know him right and if I know a thing or two about Warner and Smith, the pair could be even more productive from here on. This is what a good voice in your ear can do. In the context of the IPL, all four qualifying teams have at least one sane voice in their dressing-rooms. Mahela Jayawardene for Mumbai, Stephen Fleming for Chennai, Ricky Ponting and Sourav Ganguly for Delhi and, of course, VVS Laxman for Hyderabad all fit that role.

From a distance, I can work out how a young Suryakumar Yadav is developing assurance in his game. He is an ex-KKR player and I can say with some confidence that Jayawardene would have a role to play there. Same goes for a Kedar Jadhav or a Deepak Chahar and the role of Stephen Fleming in the Chennai dressing room. Not all these impacts can immediately translate into a good looking scoreboard or a batting/bowling honours board. It is a process which can sometimes take a season or two. A classic example is Virat Kohli. When he first burst on to the scene no one knew he would be a world-beating batsman. But then things happened for him too. I think the presence of Gary Kirsten and Sachin Tendulkar turned things around for Virat.

From a team point of view I think both Jayawardene and Fleming have been carefully joining the dots. More in the case of Chennai as they have managed to retain their core despite a two-year ban. It is amazing how they have done that. I have been especially impressed with the Chennai bowling; they have exploited home conditions really well. I think Chennai has a clear advantage over Mumbai.

Back in 2011, I was accused of choosing to play for KKR rather than going on the tour to the West Indies. Critics alleged that I could have made myself ready for India duties. Well, that story is for another day. The same critics will now be closely watching MS Dhoni's wobbly back. With the World Cup looming they would be watching his 120 sit-ups behind the stumps and his bat swing. For me, I'd be hoping for some objective assessments rather than over-the-top reactions on this.

GAUTAM GAMBHIR

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About two years back I was at dinner with some friends. We were discussing Sachin Tendulkar's retirement speech. We all thought it was very moving and inspirational. One of my friends asked me what I would like to talk about in my retirement speech. I paused for a moment and then shared that I would like to talk about the most underrated aspect of cricketing ecosystem – the supporters.

Just like I have never liked when people say that “cricketers serve the nation”, I have never liked the term “fans” either. On the first one my view is that playing cricket for the country is an honour but it is a very well paid job, too. If we were doing this as an honorary job then serving the nation concept would have been apt. Secondly, I use the term “supporters” as without you all we won't have been as well paid.

To me the equation is simple. The players make money from the BCCI. The BCCI makes money through TV rights and sponsors. Television/broadcasters and sponsors pay that money to the BCCI because supporters love to watch the game which gives broadcasters the TV ratings which in turn gives them sponsors. The sponsors benefit as their products/brands get eyeballs. Imagine if supporters were to be taken out of the equation!

Given this, it disturbs me that we almost take supporters for granted. I remember once going to Eden Gardens for a practice session. At the time Sourav Ganguly wasn't involved. I wanted to use the toilet urgently but the dressing rooms were locked for some reason. I had to rush to the first floor and was appalled to see the state of the toilet. Trust me, I felt ill!

What hit me most was that this was the Eden, this was the IPL, and the tickets for the area right above the dressing rooms must be sold at a premium and even then the patrons were not getting access to a decent washroom. I don't understand this: if we have world class outfields, top level players, and international standard broadcast, then what is stopping us from providing a basic spectator experience in stadiums? I think after a point the action takes over. It is sad but true that supporters have learnt to hold on to their bladders when Russell or Gayle is firing.

I am no different. Despite all that is going on in my current phase I somehow treat myself to some action. The fan in me somehow emerges and I forget my aches and pains when ball meets the bat.

GAUTAM GAMBHIR

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For me the best shot of the IPL final happened minutes after Mumbai Indians won the title. Their captain Rohit Sharma was having some cuddle time with his daughter Samaira. Sitting on his lap no one knows what the little princess was thinking. Later, he held his bundle of joy. I am convinced no number of trophies can beat the feeling of a father holding his daughter aloft. Life is so much more than just cricket and its wins and losses.

All teams that qualified for the play-offs deserved to win the title. For sheer perseverance and ability to handle pressure Chennai Super Kings and Mumbai Indians deserved it more than others. You may say that Sunrisers Hyderabad were fractured by the absence of their foreign recruits and Delhi lost due to some inexperience. I don't buy these excuses.

Mumbai and Chennai are good because they work to a plan, a strategy. Win or lose they don't deviate. Look at how Chennai has continued to play Ambati Rayudu despite a not so consistent performance this season. Another example is Shane Watson, who too was having an off-season before he came into his own. Even in the final on Sunday he almost took his team home. Same goes for how Mumbai never lost hope in Ishan Kishan. When I was leading KKR I always maintained that we never drop a player, we only select a playing eleven.

Other bit that stands out for me is how Mumbai identifies their talent pool. The Pandyas are an example. They were picked out of nowhere and developed into a real force. Honestly, I was worried how the Mumbai team management would react to Hardik's talk show fiasco. Team owners can be very sensitive to such things but all credit to them for how the whole thing was handled. Hardik never seemed out of depth or out of confidence. I am not advocating what he said on the talk show, I am merely stating that Hardik and important stakeholders in his life handled the whole thing really well.

Delhi Capitals should be proud to have made to the play-offs. They need some solid talent scouting to have a bigger pool which will stop their dependence on the likes of Rabada or others. Most importantly their scouting team needs to look inwards for Indian talent rather than imported. Besides, a good off-season camp will help the team camaraderie no end.

Gameplan

GAUTAM GAMBHIR

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I love summers. Believe it or not but I like 40 plus degrees centigrade, dry heat and sun on a full voltage. I have a reason. It meant that I could have full day of cricket without worrying about shorter days of winter or rain playing spoilsport. But when I was not out in the streets or parks of Delhi bossing around with my bat, I would be inside in front of TV sets watching cricket and weaving my own set of dreams—mostly unrealistic.

One dream was woven back in 1990. I was 8 years old. I can't remember what month it was but it was raining in Delhi that day and I had to be indoors. But cricket was on TV. India were playing in England and Kapil Dev was on the show. All of a sudden I saw him hitting four consecutive sixes against off-spinner Eddie Hemmings.

As an 8-year old I discovered three things in that passage of five minutes. First, you could hit sixes in a Test match. Second, Hemmings playing for England told me that you could play cricket even if your waist size was in late 30s or early 40s. And third, England was a gorgeous place to play to cricket. I wanted to do number one and three: hit sixes in a Test match and play in England. At that time acquiring Hemmings' waist size seemed a more realistic goal.

As the World Cup returns to England, that craving, that itch has returned full blown. Although I have moved on in my career, all those postcards of cricket in England have remained. It always amazed me that spectators in England were allowed to sit next to the boundary line and hold on to the ball sometimes by intruding into the ground. Maybe that ended with the innocence of our times. The concept of a man and a dog at county cricket games, fish and chips for lunch, hot dogs and ice-cream vans around the ground, the smell of roasted meat made England a postcard.

I am big on traditions and love the way grounds around England have preserved them. It may seem a tad orthodox but then I have always enjoyed these ceremonial activities. When I played county cricket for Essex in 2013, the club traditions there amazed me. The after-dinner speeches, the community work that the players do is a lesson for someone like me. A legend like Graham Gooch would be so easily accessible for Essex fans. The after-dinner conversations by Ronnie Irani were hilarious. In all, cricket in England is a complete package and something that can never tire a cricket fan like me. So, if you are still contemplating traveling to the UK for watching cricket, take my words: it is an experience which will not fail you.