

'To me, state cricket is all about winning'



Brydon Coverdale

Queensland wicketkeeper Chris Hartley on his record dismissals, the frustration of remaining on the sidelines, and the dangers of fast-tracking young players too soon



"Wicketkeeping is a very physical part of the game, so your physical preparation needs to match that. I've taken that very seriously over my career" © Getty Images

Since December 19, 2003, Australia's selectors have chosen ten different wicketkeepers to represent the country in Test, one-day international or T20 cricket: Adam Gilchrist, Brad Haddin, Matthew Wade, Peter Nevill, Tim Paine, Graham Manou, Luke Ronchi, Ben Dunk, Peter Handscomb and Cameron Bancroft.

During the same period, eight men have been picked to keep wickets in first-class matches for Australia A, the kind of selection that tells a gloveman he is not far off a baggy green: Haddin, Wade, Paine, Nevill, Ronchi, Bancroft, Sam Whiteman and, going back to the week of December 19, 2003 itself, Wade Seccombe.

Why is that date of relevance? Because that is when Chris Hartley, then a 21-year-old understudy to Seccombe in the Queensland squad, made his debut for his state. And it was some sort of an entrance: while Seccombe was in Hobart playing against the touring Indians for Australia A, Hartley scored 103 on his first-class debut at the Gabba. More importantly by Hartley's reckoning, Queensland won the match.

For most of the 13 years since, Hartley has been a fixture of the Queensland team and has been regarded by good judges as one of the best - perhaps at times *the* best - gloveman in the country. Last week, he surpassed Darren Berry's Sheffield Shield record of 546 wicketkeeping dismissals, which he described as "a very proud personal achievement".

Another remarkable feat is approaching: this week against New South Wales, Hartley will play his 100th consecutive Shield game. Only two other players in history have managed 100 consecutive Shield games, both Tasmanians: opener Jamie Cox, who played 106 in a row from 1994 to 2004, and allrounder Shaun Young who played 104 straight from 1991 to 2001.

"I didn't realise that, but I'll take a lot of pride in that as well," Hartley says. "Wicketkeeping is a very physical part of the game, so your physical preparation needs to match that. I've taken that very seriously over my career."

It is natural that these feats bring Hartley immense pride. But they are also achievements that have been possible only because higher honours have never been his, in much the same way that Cox never played for Australia and Young gained a baggy green only in exceptional circumstances. Notably, every one of Hartley's 129 first-class matches and 562 dismissals have been for Queensland.



Hartley now holds the Shield record for the most keeping dismissals in a career © Getty Images

A gloveman could accept not playing a Test - there is only one spot in the team, and always six state keepers competing for it - but never even getting a first-class game for Australia A? That, Hartley admits, has hurt a little. The only time he has ever been called up for Australia A was back in 2005, for three one-day games in Pakistan when Haddin was injured mid-tour.

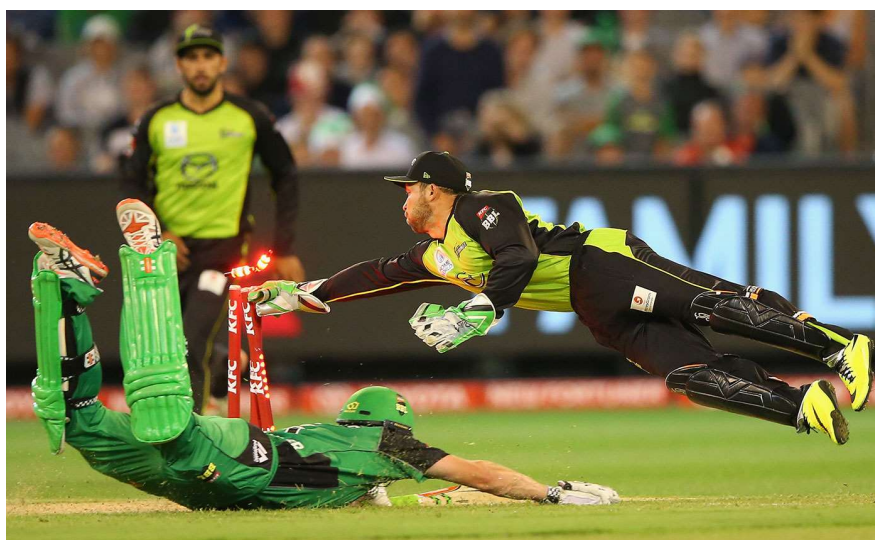
"That's been an area of frustration for me," Hartley says. "I was fortunate that I played some one-day games with Australia A very early on. Brad Haddin was injured on a tour of Pakistan and I was given an opportunity on the back of only a few games at first-class level. Certainly selectors were looking at potential there.

"What's been frustrating is that I know that clearly I've improved as a cricketer since then, for a long period of time now, and I feel like at some stage through the journey there would've been a chance to show at that level again where those improvements were. The feedback I always got over the course of that time was that the selectors ... knew what I was capable of and it was about putting performances on the board.

"I feel like I've consistently been doing that. It is an area of frustration not to be given more chances to represent there, but any time you go out for your state anyway you're still only one step off playing for your country. Any time I got frustrated I just redirected that back into my training and preparation and making sure I could find a way to play my best cricket for Queensland."

And that he has done with exceptional skill and consistency. A quick look at his stats would mark Hartley down as not a good enough batsman for the next level. A first-class batting average of 33? Forget about it. Such is the superficial view. But that number is skewed by early seasons of lower output. It took Hartley five more summers before he added another hundred to his century on debut.

Instead, consider the list of batting averages among wicketkeepers since the start of the 2013-14 season, with a ten-game minimum: Nevill (53.18), Hartley (42.88), Wade (38.61), Whiteman (36.52), Alex Carey (26.82), Paine (22.84), Tim Ludeman (22.25). Make no mistake, Hartley can bat, and is viewed by Shield bowlers around the country as one of the hardest batsmen to dismiss. As an opener in the 2014 Matador Cup, he was third on the tournament run tally.



"To me, the best measure of any player is whether they're contributing to a side winning games" © Getty Images

"You hope that your performances do all your talking for you, and that's where some frustration has come in, because I think certainly in the last three or four years at least, my performances have spoken loudly, particularly in terms of what I can do with the bat," Hartley says. "People also need to understand that you do different roles for different teams."

"In my formative years with the Bulls I probably wasn't relied on with the bat as much, because of the strong top order that we had. Quite a few times an innings might have been trying to get a few quick runs leading into a declaration, and not getting as many opportunities to have a long innings. Current form is what's most important and that's what I'm really focused on."

And if we're talking current form, then Hartley has all of his contemporaries covered. In the Shield last week, he scored an unbeaten 102 as captain to lead Queensland to a win over Tasmania; this season he has 374 runs at 74.80, more runs and a better average than any other keeper (leaving out Josh Inglis, whose 40 and 49 not on debut for Western Australia last week left him averaging 89).

Yet Wade is the incumbent Test wicketkeeper, Nevill the man he replaced, and Whiteman the Australia A gloveman of last year. So where does a 34-year-old Hartley sit in the pecking order? Your guess is as good as his, but he has not given up hope.

"I still believe that you pick a cricket team based on the best players," he says. "Yes, other factors come into it and certainly the selectors will always have an eye to the future. But I think the best teams are the ones that have the best players in them, in terms of form and performances on the board.

"While I'm still in the position of not having played a Test match, it will still be a goal of mine to achieve that. I think I've got the performances on the board, I think I've got the game to play at Test level. I think the wicketkeeping position in the last 12 months has been looked at closely, so if ever there's a time to be putting some performances on the board, right now is a pretty good time."



"I think the [Test] wicketkeeping position in the last 12 months has been looked at closely, so if ever there's a time to be putting some performances on the board, right now is a pretty good time" © Getty Images

He thought 2009 was a pretty good time, too, and that he had a reasonable chance of being the reserve gloveman behind Haddin on that year's Ashes tour. Instead, the job went to Graham Manou. Undeterred, Hartley signed to play Lancashire League cricket that year in order to be ready and nearby just in case, and when Haddin and Manou were both recovering from injuries in the lead-up to the fifth Test, Hartley got called on to keep in a two-day game against the England Lions.

"To be able to watch the preparation of players like Ricky Ponting - even only being there for 48 hours, I learnt a hell of a lot in that space," Hartley says.

But time moves on: both Haddin and Manou are retired, yet still Hartley finds himself somewhere in the middle of the national wicketkeeping queue. Who does he rate highest for pure glovework among current Australian keepers?

"Purely on glovework, I think Peter Nevill is the best keeper in Australia," Hartley says. "He's clearly done a lot of hard work on his game, because he's very, very efficient. His basic wicketkeeping technique is very, very sound. That's why he makes very few errors. He's a very accomplished gloveman, and I think he's still at the top of the tree.

"I think one to keep an eye on is Alex Carey from South Australia. He hasn't played a lot of cricket at this level just yet, and it's not just the fact that he's taken quite a few dismissals this year - I've kept an eye on the way he's gone about it. He moves well, he's got some very good basics. That's key for any cricketer, but certainly for wicketkeepers: if you don't have your basics in order, when you're under pressure or fatigued that gets found out."

And pressure is something that Hartley would like to see return to domestic cricket. Pressure to perform, pressure to win. When he first joined the Queensland squad, he was told by Matthew Hayden and Andrew Symonds that team performance was all that mattered. If you focused on the team and on contributing to a win, individual results would naturally follow.



Among Australian keepers, Hartley rates Peter Nevill (keeping) as the best, and Alex Carey (batting) as one to watch out for © Getty Images

Thirteen years later, the landscape has changed somewhat. The Matador Cup now features a Cricket Australia XI, designed to expose young players to the elite level even if they are not good enough to make their state squad. Yet because this team is not expected to win, individual performances become the focus. This, Hartley believes, is a concern.

"One thing you want to do when you're developing players is find a way to get them contributing to the team," he says. "If you've got 11 players going out there and basically having a net or trying to put their own name up in lights, that starts to go away from the fabric of the great state teams and Australian teams of the past, that are very team-focused."

And the Sheffield Shield? Winning seems now to matter less than producing players who will go on to represent Australia.

"Where players these days feel it might have changed is that the producing of Australian players and the focus of that development side of it has maybe overtaken the competition side of it," Hartley says. "To me, the best measure of any player, whether they're young or old, whether they've played a lot of games or not many games, is whether they're performing and contributing to a side winning games."

"The Australian side, every time they walk out on the park, should be trying to win games of cricket. So who are the players who are actually going to help win that game of cricket? They're the ones that should be getting picked. That's how it was when I first started. That's how I learnt the game. That's always been a very successful way for the Australian team to operate. What you want is to try and mirror that at the level below with state cricket. To me, state cricket and international cricket is all about winning."

Instead, it seems at times that the Sheffield Shield has simply become an extension of the pathways system. Greg Chappell, a national selector as well as national talent manager, last week referred to a "pick and stretch policy we have with our young players, to keep exposing them to more challenges at the highest level possible, to help them develop their skills."



"For wicketkeepers, if you don't have your basics in order, when you're under pressure or fatigued that gets found out" © Getty Images

There are times when this even seems to extend to the national side. When fast bowler Billy Stanlake was picked in the ODI squad, selector Trevor Hohns said that "now is the right time to give him a chance to stretch himself". Of Hilton Cartwright, handed a baggy green in Sydney, Hohns last week said: "He was another young player who we took the opportunity to introduce into the team environment, hoping that down the track, that will spur him on to want to get back there again."

While Hartley understands the balancing act required of selectors to consider the future as well as the present, he believes that development belongs at levels below state and international cricket. The pathways system, he says, has changed since he came through Queensland's under-age sides and the Academy. As Hartley recalls, his pathway still led to a door that needed bashing down even to earn a game for Queensland.

"One of the best things that happened to me at the start of my career was, right at the end of that Under-19 phase. I was stuck behind Wade Secombe in the state squad, and had to do at least a two-year apprenticeship behind him," Hartley says. "I was desperate to play for my state as some of my contemporaries were doing - Nathan Hauritz and Mitchell Johnson and Shane Watson - but I had to keep waiting.

"One thing that did do for me was it taught me about never taking an opportunity for granted and then when you do get a chance, holding on to that opportunity and making it count. I think perhaps that's somewhere the game has changed a little bit. We want to give our young players a lot of opportunities to expose them, but we don't want to give them too much, because we need them to be hungry and we need them to be motivated to push to that next level.

"The absolute pointy end of the pyramid is playing for your country. That's it. That's where you've got to be picking your best XI. That's where it's got to be about winning matches and about competition. To me, all the development and the exposure and all of those things happen along the way, in the pathways system.

"There really are a lot of opportunities for young guys these days. The way you get those best performances out of people is to make them hungry, and I think if you give them too much too soon and too often, players perhaps get comfortable and they're not quite as resilient."

And resilience, as anyone who has listened to Steven Smith speak at almost any press conference in the past six months, is what Australia crave right now. Talent is a given, but only resilience will help Australia avoid repeats of the humiliation they suffered in Sri Lanka last year, or at home to South Africa earlier this summer.

So maybe in this week of recognising Hartley's remarkable on-field achievements, Australian cricket should also heed his sensible words. For how many of the new generation will remain as hungry as Chris Hartley in another 13 years?

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