

Those pals of mine



NICHOLAS HOGG

A new collection of essays celebrates the companions you play with



Mike and Gus: Atherton and Fraser developed a bond while playing together for youth teams - and during a hospital stay © Getty Images

Cricket is a team sport made up of individual performances, and Stephen Chalke, editor of *Team Mates*, a collection of essays from 27 cricketers on their favourite team player, acknowledges this in his introduction with a quote from John Arlott: "Cricket is the loneliest game of all."

Any of us who have played the game at any level may have felt that isolation in the corner of a changing room. You might have dropped the catch that lost the match, run out your star batsman a few runs shy of his ton, or simply got stuck in traffic on the way to the ground and forced your comrades to take the field a player short.

Or, like Kevin Pietersen, you may have texted the opposition captain your own skipper's batting weaknesses. That the great KP debate should even get a mention in such a warm and wonderful collection as this may surprise some readers, but Chalke and fellow editor John Barclay were inspired by the debacle to look for something more uplifting when talking about team spirit. In their wisdom they asked 27 cricketers "to write about team-mates with whom they enjoyed playing, and to reflect on what those team-mates gave to their fellow cricketers that was positive".

The resulting essays, by those ranging from Test match legends to journeymen club players, evoke what cricketing skills and character traits make that particular player's name first on the team sheet.

Fittingly, [Mike Atherton](#) opens with an ode to his old school friend, and later fellow England fast bowler, [Angus Fraser](#). Although Atherton confesses he's a cynic in the Steve Archibald school of team spirit ("an illusion glimpsed in the aftermath of victory"), he does realise that players born of the same time and cricketing culture will share memories and bond. From their first tour together with a Young England side to Sri Lanka, Atherton and Fraser began to get to know one another, but it wasn't until they were injured at the same time that a true friendship began in a Nottinghamshire hospital in 1991. Back on the pitch, Atherton was made England captain and delighted to have Fraser back at his disposal, a bowler who always gave "his absolute all in the field". Did Atherton choose Fraser as the subject of his essay simply because he's the captain's sycophant? No, for his old pal was always the first to tell him when he had "behaved foolishly".

So is it honesty and directness, as well as the ability to win matches, that make the ideal team-mate?

Or the fact that they turn up on time and have a car?

Where the professionals in the collection choose legendary match-winners such as Zaheer Abbas, John Lever, Rahul Dravid and Javed Miandad, the amateur player is more likely to choose the bloke with a reliable Ford Escort and the ability to get five out of six deliveries on the track. Sunday-side captains Chalke and Michael Simkins focus on their loyal stalwarts who were never late and could bat, bowl and catch - all three of these skills rare in a full friendly XI, let alone a single player.

To highlight his star clubman, Chalke regales the reader with tales of some of the worst team-mates he has come across, including the college lecturer who blocked up an end without scoring for most of the overs before announcing that he "wouldn't bother to stay for the fielding" if that was okay with the rest of the team.

The essays may vary in style, choice of player, and abilities brought to a changing room, but sunny dispositions or steely resolve are common factors. And some players have both. [David Gower](#) goes for his old Leicestershire team-mate [Brian Davison](#), a fearless ex-Rhodesian army soldier who could face Sylvester Clarke in a sun hat and then joke about it afterwards with a wine or two. Former England star, and now director of England women's cricket, Clare Connor, chooses Charlotte Edwards for her remarkable record and infectious love of the game, while Mike Selvey wisely picks two lethal pacemen (better to have them in your team than the opposition), Vincent van der Bijl and the "bull-charging" Wayne Daniel.

By starting with such an optimistic premise for a cricketing recollection, the anthology brings out the best in both the writers and the team-mates they write about.

Team Mates

Edited by John Barclay and Stephen Chalke

Fairfield Books

192 pages (hardback)

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