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CRICKET2005 in association with

Helpline just the tonic for players

By **Steve James**
 (Filed: 03/07/2005)

The launch last week of a confidential helpline by the Professional Cricketers' Association is to be applauded. It is too simple to dismiss it as an exaggerated and purely reactionary [response to the recent spate of drugs cases](#): Graham Wagg and Keith Piper, both of Warwickshire, and Scotland's Asim Butt have all being banned in the past 10 months, while former player Dermot Reeve has admitted to a cocaine habit.

But it is much more than that. Indeed its raison d'être extends beyond just narcotic abuse, even though the PCA have been helping fund Piper's stay at a detox clinic in Hampshire. So for the members of the PCA - who include past and present professional cricketers - it will provide a free worldwide, 24-hours-a-day service, manned by professional counsellors and therapists (who are not ex-cricketers but are well versed in the vagaries of the profession) for the myriad emotional problems which curiously seem to affect cricketers more than most other sports people.

Quite why that is remains a topic which could be debated ad infinitum. There is no absolute answer but my brief observation, indeed occasional personal experience, would be that there can be no crueller game than cricket for the mind. For that is where it is played most agonisingly. So often capricious fate, wholly out of your control, can conspire against you, and that, allied to the extraordinary time it takes to play the game, can precipitate deep introspection. Clearly some are better able to deal with that than others.

The helpline is the brainchild, long in the making, of Jason Ratcliffe, the former Warwickshire and Surrey batsman, now a most conscientious and thoughtful director of player services at the PCA. But it will be run by an external organisation, Performance Healthcare, with the PCA only knowing the number of calls made rather than any specific details of individual cases. So, crucially, the number can be called in complete anonymity because, in general, sport, maybe more than any other walk of life, dissuades the admission of one's failings.

I can hear the querulous groans of the old guard: that there is no need for such nonsense, that today's cricketers need to toughen up and not be so mollycoddled. Well, history suggests such problems have always afflicted cricketers. The break-up of Shane Warne's marriage is but only a recent example of how potentially damaging professional cricket can be to wedlock; Bill Edrich, the England batsman of the Forties, was married five times.

And via the impressive research and writing of David Frith we already have some cognisance of cricket's alarmingly high suicide rate. In his tome, re-titled *Silence of the Heart* in 2001, after the initial publication of *By His Own Hand* in 1990, Frith believes there are at least 150 cases of cricketers taking their own lives. And two years ago in these pages, my colleague Mike Atherton revealed a well-known county cricketer had attempted to end his own life. By the greatest of fortune a colleague rescued him in time.

"I can't speak highly enough of them," said the anonymous cricketer of the PCA, who made contact immediately, organising counselling and helping him regather his life. Thankfully he has done that successfully, with the PCA still keeping in regular contact.

The new helpline will sit alongside existing schemes run by the PCA to assist cricketers once they have retired. For that is the majority of problems surface. Retirement for any professional sportsman is devilishly difficult, even for those like me who are extremely fortunate to have been granted the opportunity to progress into such a thoroughly enjoyable and rewarding second career. Even two years after enforced retirement I still regularly wake up having dreamt of a comeback. There are some voids which can never be filled.

The PCA are concerned that, while the numbers of those undertaking educational programmes are on the increase (they have spent £100,000 in the last three years on the 50-50 funding they offer for educational and vocational courses), there are still too many cricketers who are blasé about their future.

County salaries are much improved: estimated figures

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show the average income per annum (excluding overseas players and those centrally-contracted by England) ranges from £30,100 at Essex to a high of £51,650 at Surrey, with 11 counties averaging over £40,000 per player. In addition, it is thought that three current county players earn over £100,000 and at least half a dozen others pick up £80,000. So while we are not talking about the obscenely inflated salaries of footballers here, these are sufficiently large sums so that most county players do not now work in the winter months. A seven-month commitment is now the bare minimum, with two counties (Lancashire and Glamorgan) using 12-month contracts; so time is short, even when there is the inclination.

At least now playing for England has become a life-changing experience, as it should be. We might be witnessing the first generation of cricketers who do not need to work when their playing days are finished. Not that that will necessarily preclude any emotional difficulties, but an England contracted cricketer, who plays in Tests and one-day internationals, can now be expected to receive at least £300,000 per annum.

With the addition of prize money and other commercial deals, the bigger names such as Andrew Flintoff might be able to double that figure - still only about 10 per cent of what his footballing equivalent might make - but a figure which could swell further if England win the Ashes this summer. The team have been offered a £500,000 incentive (to be shared from their team kitty) to pull that off. I think we all might be willing to contribute a little extra if that happens.

► [10 June 2005: Random drugs tests on cards](#)

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