

R. W. Taylor: last of the line?

Jeremy Blackmore talks to BOB TAYLOR, who has made more wicketkeeping dismissals than anyone else in first-class cricket

BOB TAYLOR remembers his 97 in the 1978-79 Adelaide Test well. It's not just that the innings set up an unlikely English victory. As Taylor himself admits: 'I don't make that many normally!'

With a Test batting average of 16, the former Derbyshire keeper made only two other international fifties. He played 57 times for England simply because of his genius behind the stumps, his glove work putting him ahead of his rivals at an age when many players would be considering or even taking retirement.

Yet the man who still holds the world record for most first-class dismissals doubts if his expertise would be called on by the England selectors if he were playing today. 'If Jack Russell cannot get in the side with an average of 27 — and he's obviously one of the best, if not the best, wicketkeeper in the world — then I'm sure I would stand no chance of getting into the England team.'

Speaking before Russell's call-up for the recent Edgbaston Test — and then only as emergency cover for Alec Stewart — Taylor believes the Gloucestershire gloveman has been sacrificed to get another batsman or bowler into the team.

Picking a batsman-keeper may have its merits in balancing the side, but the policy is a double-edged sword, says Taylor: 'I've always advocated that whenever you are picking a team, the most important member is obviously first the captain. And I'm not just saying this because I'm an ex-wicketkeeper, but as a coach I've always advocated that the second-most important man in the side is the keeper.'

'You pick him on his wicketkeeping abilities alone, so that if he's going to miss chances as a batsman-wicketkeeper, he's letting the team down, and it's amazing how much effect it has on the team.'

Purists will echo Taylor's sentiments wholeheartedly, but for more than a year the England selectors have followed a different tack. Stewart and Yorkshire's Richard Blakey went on tour to India, Russell being offered the vice-captaincy of the 'A' team in Australia.

Taylor says: 'I was concerned that Alec Stewart wasn't keeping regularly for Surrey. Now he is, I'm pleased to say, and I think Alec, despite all the criticisms, has done quite well. I still don't think that he's as good as Jack Russell, but it's this old story of having the *batsman-wicketkeeper*.'

Taylor is well placed to offer Jack Russell some advice on losing out to those with better batting averages. After making a record number of dismissals (10) in the 1979-80 Jubilee Test in India, Taylor was dropped for a year and missed out on nine

Tests against West Indies. The equally brilliant keeper Alan Knott was recalled in Taylor's stead, to add his own unique brand of batting in the battle against the Windies pacemen. David Bairstow and Paul Downton went on the winter tour of the Caribbean in 1980-81.

'Obviously I wasn't particularly happy, because I'd played 57 Tests and I'd never played against West Indies,' says Taylor, 'only in one-day internationals. It wasn't my doing. I wanted to play against them, but I was never selected.'

Throughout the early and mid-1970s, Taylor waited in the wings behind Knott, shadowing him on winter tours, winning just one Test cap — against New Zealand in February 1971.

Of the 1970-71 tour Down Under, *Wisden* commented: 'MCC have perhaps never had two such accomplished wicketkeepers on tour. There was not much to choose between the two. If Knott's agility gave him a marked advantage when standing back, Taylor was at least his equal standing up. If anything he looked the more polished in that position. It was fitting that Illingworth should give him a Test in New Zealand, a well-earned reward for an always cheerful and uncomplaining understudy.'

In 1977, Taylor's days as an understudy came to an end. Knott signed up with Kerry Packer, and at the age of 36 Taylor became England's first-choice keeper — a position he was to hold, with the exception of those Tests against West Indies, until 1984.

Taylor is realistic: 'I'm philosophical enough to realise that if it had not been for World Series Cricket, I would probably have played only the one Test against New Zealand and that would have been the end.'

Over the next six years he played in some of the most exciting matches in England's Test history. There was Headingley 1981, and Melbourne 1982-83 — 'probably the most exciting game I've played in.'

He also kept to the bowling of Ian Botham in his prime: 'Ian was at his best then as far as being able to swing and seam the ball, and I got the majority of my Test catches from him, which was tremendous. I enjoyed it! He was a great performer — the sort of cavalier cricketer who gets people into grounds. He will be sadly missed.'

Essentially a team man, Taylor speaks of his achievements in the context of England's match position. He was bitterly disappointed at failing by three runs to reach an Ashes century at Adelaide, but says: 'At least it got us back in the game, and from being just 150 on, we finished up leaving Australia 350, and eventually we won.'

Taylor retired at the end of the 1984



Patrick Egan

Wicketkeeper Bob Taylor: 57 Tests — and a surprise 'recall' in 1986

season, having been dropped by England, again against West Indies, in favour of Paul Downton. 'I said if I lost my England place — I always like to think through age rather than ability — I'd got no goals to aim at and I was going to retire from everyday county cricket.'

It was said Taylor had become disillusioned with attitudes in the modern game.

'I think I may have overreacted slightly. It is a different game nowadays. Players have to adapt to various conditions, and it's difficult, whereas in the old days you could just play county cricket and that was it. It's no good the old-timers saying "It's not like that any more, it wasn't like that in my day." Times change and people change.'

Cricket had been part of Bob Taylor's life for more than two decades when he retired, and not surprisingly his working life since has continued to be centred on the game he loves. He has been kept busy coaching, including stints with former England captain Bob Willis, teaching the sport aboard the cruise liner *Canberra*. In the English summer, he can be found working as Cornhill representative at the Test matches — 'Too good an opportunity to miss getting back on the Test match scene.'

He even had a surprise England recall in 1986 when Mike Gatting called Taylor on to keep wicket in place of the injured Bruce French during the Lord's Test against New Zealand. 'I thought it was a joke, a *Candid Camera* thing!'

He was even presented to the Queen during the tea interval. Modestly sitting alone in the Lord's dressing-room while his team-mates lined up, Taylor was told by MCC secretary Colonel Stephenson to join the presentation party.

'I was worried whether Mike Gatting would remember my name when the captains present individuals to Her Majesty. Fortunately for me, he did!'

England cricket fans will long remember Bob Taylor. And they will be hoping he won't be seen in years to come as one of the last in a long line of fine specialist England keepers.