

Sport Cricket

'I felt helpless watching final ... I was screaming at the TV'

John Westerby Bloemfontein

Out in the middle, he is moving in to bowl with the same rhythmical ease, the pace he generates far exceeding the amount of effort seemingly expended. Off the field, as he sits down after practice, the golden neckchain and the stud earrings are still glinting, and he is speaking with the same shy smile.

After 22 months on the international sidelines, this is the unmistakable sight of Jofra Archer, back in an England shirt and ready to make his return to international cricket in the first of a three-match one-day series against South Africa here in Bloemfontein tomorrow.

In this series and beyond, the question that will occupy English cricket this year, as he eases his way back towards full fitness after such a long absence, is whether this version of Archer, for all the excitement that his return engenders, can be the force he was before those injuries to his elbow and back interrupted his budding international career.

Will he be the same bowler who burst into the national consciousness in 2019, playing a central role in England's World Cup win on home soil and then taking 22 wickets in four Tests — his first four Test matches, lest we forget — in the Ashes series that followed? And if he even approaches those rarefied heights, will such performances be sustainable in the longer term?

Asked yesterday whether he felt like the same bowler, having recently played five short-form matches in the SA20 competition, the 27-year-old's answer was straightforward. "Don't know," he shrugged. "It's just been good to play cricket and not actually have to worry if my body's going to give way. I think that's the most important tick for me so far."

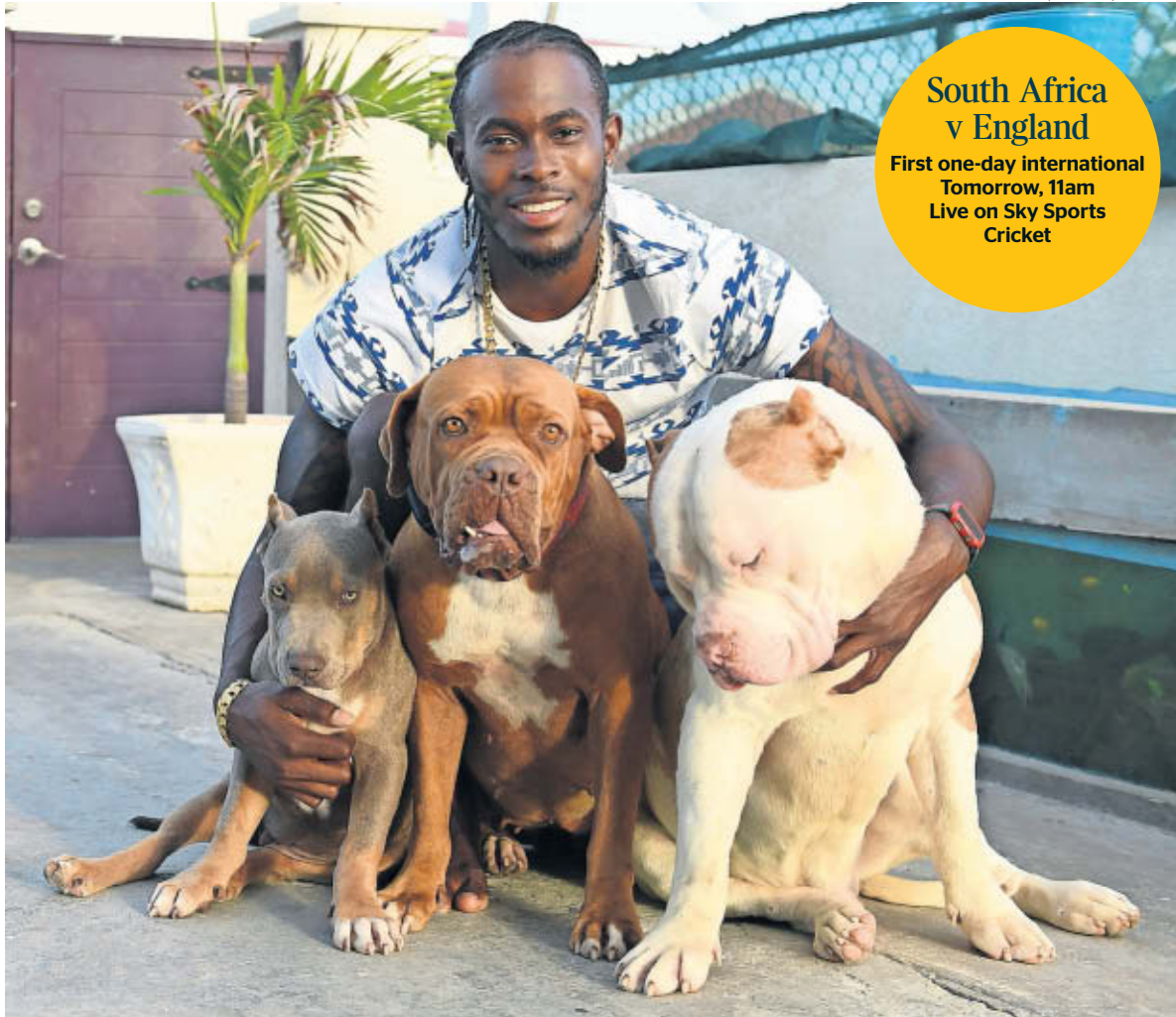
First things first. Having made his return in T20 cricket, the 50-over matches this week will be a further step in the public examination of his durability. Test cricket will be another matter altogether and the Ashes series that begins in mid-June can resemble only a speck on the horizon in terms of Archer's fitness, even if the man himself is firmly setting his sights on proving his robustness so that he can renew hostilities with Australia.

The defence of England's 50-over World Cup title, in India in October and November, is still further away, but Archer has needed long-term goals to maintain his motivation on his way back to the international stage. "Hopefully it can be a repeat of 2019," he said. "We've got a 50-over World Cup again and an Ashes in the same year, so more of the same, please."

His captain here, Jos Buttler, along with England's Test captain, Ben Stokes, have attempted to ease him back into the fold by reassuring him that he is not expected to set the world alight in the early stages of his return.

Archer, who turns 28 in April, is not fooled. "[Stokes] said there is no expectation, so did Jos," he said. "It's nice to hear that, but people will have expectations anyway."

He felt those expectations when he played the first of five games for MI Cape Town in the SA20 competition earlier this



Archer, with three of his six dogs in Barbados, is back with England in Bloemfontein, below, after 22 months out of the side

Archer turns to Pilates in attempt to "future-proof" his career

As part of his rehab programme Jofra Archer has been working with a Pilates instructor, Anaya Grover, near his home in Hove (John Westerby writes). Pilates exercises act to strengthen the fascia, the connective tissue that runs through the body, and to stabilise muscles in the core that build the body's durability.

"Everyone wants the biceps, the glutes, the quads, but the smaller, stabilising muscles are so important to keeping you finely tuned, future-proofing and preventing injury," Grover said.

One of the main issues for fast bowlers is that their problems can be stored up from an early age. "If you put powerful repetitive movements into a teenager, because they're still growing, without stability there, you have a potential

eruption of issues," Grover said. "It's often the really talented people who are more likely to pick up injuries, because they play as much as possible when they're younger, and their bodies may not be stable enough."

"In grassroots sport, we should be building in conditioning at a younger age."

England are now hoping that Archer's body will enable him to do justice to his remarkable talent.

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month. His first over was a wicket maiden, hurrying Wihan Lubbe into a pull to mid-on with his third ball, then delivering three dot balls to Jason Roy. "Not playing for such a long time, I think everyone was watching and I sensed that, however that over went, I probably would have been judged for it," he said. "I'm glad I was on the good end of it."

And will he feel a similar awareness of the watching world on his international comeback? He nods. "Yeah, that is how sport goes. If I don't do well when I play, a lot of people will be watching. I will be judged again and no one will remember the good stuff I've done. You are only as good as your last game."

In those five appearances for Cape Town, Archer reckoned that he was operating at "probably about 80 per cent" of capacity, even though he reached speeds of 92.4mph. He generally looked to be enjoying himself, taking eight wickets from 19 overs in the five games, adopting the celebration of Manchester United star Marcus Rashford — pointing to his temple — along the way. "I don't know what it means," Archer said. "But I've seen him do it and he's a pretty nailed-on guy."

With each passing game, crucially, he moves further away from that painfully prolonged period of inactivity, which reached its nadir when, on the verge of a return from his elbow injury in May last year, he suffered the stress fracture that ruled him out of the rest of the 2022 season.

He spent most of his time away from the game back home in Barbados and

Lions and Lees catch Bazball bug

Elizabeth Ammon

The "Bazball" message seems to have been received loud and clear by players hoping to break into the Test team, if the performance of England Lions yesterday is anything to go by.

The Lions blasted 413 for eight declared in 67 overs on the opening day of their three-day warm-up match against the Sri Lanka Board President's XI, with Alex Lees — dropped from the Test squad at the end of the summer — leading the way, smashing a century off 97 balls with 14 boundaries.

He was well supported by a hard-hitting middle order, with fifties for Somerset's Tom Abell, Lancashire's Josh Bohannon, Worcestershire's Jack Haynes and Surrey's Jamie Smith, who was batting at No 8.

Having racked up more than 400 runs at a rate of more than six an over, England then pulled out to give the bowlers a go in the evening session, during which they took two wickets — one each for the spinners, Liam Patterson-White and Jack Carson.

Though the opposition are not the strongest, this was an impressive statement by the Lions batsmen. Lees's century was the second fastest at England A/Lions level, behind Luke Wright's 91-ball effort against New Zealand A in 2008.

● The Indian cricket board has sold five franchises in an IPL-style T20 tournament for women for a total of £462 million. The owners of the IPL's Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore franchises were among the purchasers, with the Adani group making the highest bid of £127 million to buy the Ahmedabad franchise, while Capri Global Holdings Private Limited agreed to pay £75 million for Lucknow.

Russians may get go-ahead for Paris 2024

Olympics

Martyn Ziegler Chief Sports Reporter

Russian and Belarusian athletes could be allowed to take part in international competitions, including the Paris 2024 Olympics, as neutrals despite warnings of a possible boycott.

The IOC issued a statement saying the "Olympic Summit" set up to look at the issue of Russian participation had unanimously decided the athletes should be permitted to take part.

After the invasion of Ukraine last year, the IOC recommended a ban on Russians and Belarusians but, with the qualifying competitions for the Paris Games either starting or about to start, the committee is set to backtrack.

The IOC statement read: "Governments must not decide which athletes can participate in which competition and which athletes cannot. No athlete should be prevented from competing just because of their passport."

"A pathway for athletes' participation in competition under strict conditions should be further explored [including how] athletes would participate in competitions as 'neutral athletes'."

Earlier this month, the Norwegian former IOC member Gerhard Heiberg warned of a possible boycott of the Games by Ukraine's allies if Russian athletes were allowed to compete.