

Autumn

play could ease school to county switch



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retired — he gained nine GCSEs but chose not go on to A-levels — whereas Smith comes from an academic tradition. The son of an English master at Tonbridge who taught both Chris and Graham Cowdrey, he maintains a long English tradition of the scholar-sportsman. The chances are that he will have two careers and that, as with Brearley, the second will not embrace the game which is destined to pay his wages for the next decade or so.

There is room for both routes to professional cricket, but both need help.

All would concur with Flintoff's assertion in this year's *Cricketers Who's Who* that "Cricket should be promoted more in state schools", but reform is needed in the independent schools too and only a mutual agreement among them all can bring it about.

For many years the length of the summer term has been dwindling as exam results assume ever greater importance: matches are fewer and the time for practice less. There is an obvious solution to this, but no one has had the drive to push it through. It is to play at least five weeks more cricket in late August and early September, when the autumn term begins and when sports grounds are often too hard for rugby or other body-contact sports.

The even better idea of reverting to a longer summer term and moving all public exams — GCSEs, A-levels, university exams, the lot — from the languid middle of summer to the

THE traditional sign of advancing years comes when policemen start to look younger, but for me it is when county cricketers suddenly seem to be in the flower of their youth. This is not, however, entirely an illusion: the nature of the modern game, despite every team needing a leavening of experience, demands younger players. Unfortunately, our educational system does not always permit the desired fast track from playground to Test arena.

Consider the different paths which must be trodden to county dressing-rooms by present-day Mike Brearleys and Ian Bothams. Their approximate equivalents might be Ed Smith, of Cambridge, and Kent and Andrew Flintoff, of Lancashire: both are 20 and both are poten-

bracing period leading up to Christmas, is apparently not feasible. Would that it were: dark nights are better than hot, light ones for hours of study; and the common cold of December is more or less cancelled out by hay fever in June.

Happily, there are plenty of initiatives not only to revive cricket within state schools but to fill in the gaps beyond school hours. One extraordinary example is the transformation of a derelict seven-acre ground off East End Road at Finchley in Middlesex. In October 1992, the county's Cricket Development Association took loans to buy a 50-year lease, with a further 50-year option, and converted it into what is now the Wiff Stack Memorial Ground.

Aided by a £150,000 loan from the Foundation for Sport and the Arts, and by funds raised by the Trust which was formed when that exemplary cricketer died so tragically

tial future England players. Smith has played very little first-class cricket this year, after 1,165 runs at 43 last season, and he has recently been locked in conflict or, touch wood, joined in harmony, with the history examiners.

Flintoff, though he made only 245 runs last year at 30, went on the A tour, did well and is making faster strides. He is a mighty striker of a cricket ball and a brilliant catcher at second slip; if he can build his bowling up again after back trouble the comparisons with the young Botham will be valid.

No one can be sure which will prove the better player or end his working life wealthier or happier, but Flintoff's future is likely to be dominated by cricket, even when he has

young, the county now has a fine ground with two squares, good grass nets and a quite magnificent pavilion.

All six county cup finals and four league knockout cup finals will be played there for the first time this season. The Development Association's chairman, Vic Cook, remembers his feelings at the start of what became a £600,000 investment: "Shortly after signing the lease, certain members of the committee walked over the ground, in some places sinking up to our ankles, trying to locate the vandalised buildings, all of which were unusable, and knowing that we then had the princely sum of £8,000, vice-chairman Gareth Williams asked, 'What have we done?'"

Shown faith, was the answer, in the game's continuing attraction to new generations of cricketers. The same faith shown by Ted Hayter, librarian at St Thomas the Apostle College in Peckham, who takes youngsters from one of the most deprived areas of London to a ground eight miles away for their only exposure to real, as opposed to playground, cricket: by the Arundel Castle Cricket Foundation, which, in vastly different surroundings, coaches 100 local primary and secondary schools and thousands of young cricketers from further afield; by charitable sponsors like the Lord's Taverners, or commercial ones like NatWest Bank or Colonial Financial

Services, who have supported Durham University's Centre of Excellence; and by the English Schools Cricket Association, still "serving children, serving cricket" 50 years on from its foundation just after the war.

Their chairman, Alan Bennett, speaks with justifiable pride of the various age-group competitions fostered by ESCA and echoes words from the ECB's *Raising the Standard* about the dependence of youth cricket generally on a "vast army of enthusiastic volunteers".

For most the enthusiasm never dies, not excluding one E W Swanton, to whom county cricketers have appeared youthful for some time. He has just made an inspired contribution to the MCC's debate over women members by suggesting that the club should approach the problem not out of commercial interest or political correctness, but by asking how MCC can help women's cricket?

Swanton proposes that talented young women cricketers should become playing members of the club, taking part in games against girls' schools, universities and clubs, in just the same way that young men have traditionally qualified for membership by playing in matches as probationers. Thus are they sifted for skill, character and behaviour.

This would be good for the development of female cricket and good for the club, too: the more cricket-aware the MCC membership is, the sounder will be its influence on the game. The committee should heed the advice of the Seer of Sandwich.