

The Flanders in the Land of the Rising Sun

--- A Captain's Journal by Matt Young (July 2008)

When I was a kid, I remember yearning to play for Australia. The dream of playing in the baggy green cap was an incessant nagging thought for many years.

I suppose when I got to 30 years old and hadn't played any serious cricket for nearly nine years, I gained the valuable personal insight into the fact that I was probably never going to achieve the dream. But just as life changes and ambitions mould into new forms, so my cricket dreams underwent a metamorphosis. The mighty Ned Flanders Cricket club came into being in the 1997- 98 season and we have played in the Churches Cricket Comp for the last 11 summers. Recent years have seen the Golden Age in Flanders cricket with four A grade premierships and one 1 day title coming our way in the last six years.

Many teams win premierships. A few win them undefeated and a tiny group manage to conquer multiple competitions. To stand out from the crowd in terms of cricket clubs requires some lateral thought and some inspiration. In 2006, 14 men from the Flanders decided that the Queensland Cricket comp, although a very noble and proud competition, was not quite the stage that we wanted to be limited to.

Many of the boys love travel and so it seemed a natural progression in the club's evolution that we take the Neddies overseas.

Perhaps the odd club game against some exotic foreign teams may have been what most people would settle for but the dreamers in the Flanders camp felt that playing against the might of a national side would be a little bit more our style. And so it came to pass that with a lot of help from the Vanuatu Cricket Association, we played a series of games in their lovely country. Despite patchy form in the three warm up games, the men in the baggy maroon caps of the Ned Flanders Cricket Club triumphed on two immortal days to defeat the Vanuatu National XI by two games to nil.

From years of pawing over cricket books and many biographies of the grand games greats, I came to realise that the thrill of the big stage could not be sated by the odd game here or there. The men of the Flanders shared this progressive way of thinking and so it became the team's next project, to back up our inaugural International series with a second tour.

Vanuatu were ranked 38 in the International Cricket Council (ICC) ranking in 2006 and so we felt we could take a conservative approach and aim a bit lower or we could take the cocky attitude and try and progress our unofficial world ranking upwards.

Stevie Derksen, the Vice captain, Brett Whalley, the club stalwart and I shot emails out across the globe to see which country would like to get on board the Flanders juggernaut. Brett tried India but the logistics of playing a 10 day tour there and the extra negative of not being a chance to play their National XI put that idea to bed. I spent my time in the Pacific, negotiating with Western Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands and Fiji. Western Samoa were extremely enthusiastic and planned out an itinerary for us that included International matches but then the logistics fell apart. Stevie had more luck, casting the net wide across Asia. With his intimate knowledge of Japan that he gleaned with his girlfriend Tazza while they spent six months over there last year, he made a great ally in Mr Miyagi at the Japan Cricket Association.

After discussion with the team, it was decided that the Ned Flanders Cricket Club would travel to Japan. The tour roster would be over ten days and would include some matches against university teams and prefecture teams and also one 40 over International against the Japan National XI.

Six months out, the skeleton for the tour was taking shape.

Numerous issues needed to be addressed before we flew out from Brisbane.

The best time for the tour was going to the first week of school holidays to cater for the three school teachers in the team.

Economic considerations also needed to be considered and Stevie, Taz and also Roey's wife, Kristen Roe investigated economical accommodation possibilities.

Frankie and I spent plenty of hours in the phone book and on the phone pursuing sponsors. Much like my pre marital, love life, our endeavours were met with innumerable knock backs.

The only real enthusiasm came from a few medical companies.

MAP, QDI, QML, and Avant were proud to put their name behind the Flanders project and their donations really helped us out.

Total Steel also helped us out later on with some costs for some shirts. They had also shown their generosity on our Vanuatu campaign. Brett Whalley did brilliantly to tee this up.

Churches Cricket also threw in some cash as they did with our previous tour and this was well appreciated. Emma Whalley's parents' printing firm called Beez Kneez did a marvellous job on the embroidery of our touring shirts and gave us a great deal.

Just as in Vanuatu, we didn't want this trip to be a one dimensional sporting event. In Vanuatu, a few of the boys helped at the local hospital. The team is well endowed with doctors, nurses and physios.

Meanwhile, some of the other lads spent a day coaching the local school kids in the art of cricket. All the fellas involved in both these projects rated these activities as incredibly rewarding and we were all eager to reproduce this style of tour.

Conquering Mt Fuji was put up as a suggestion and was quickly met with great enthusiasm by the boys. It was pencilled in. This physical challenge and its unique symmetrical beauty would make for great team spirit building exercise.

A day trip to Hiroshima appealed. The history and the awful human tragedy of the place inspired us to list it as an absolute necessity. The Flanders decided we ought to pay our respects there to the 200 000 people who died as a result of the first ever nuclear bomb on 6th August, 1945.

We weren't about to make any sort of political statement, we just wanted to express our sadness for the horrendous suffering of the people of Hiroshima. Having been there before with my wife, I also felt that the remarkable tenacity shown by the folk of Hiroshima in rebuilding the city would hopefully be a useful inspiration for everyone.

The culinary experience of Japan was always going to be met with great enjoyment by most of the team, although a few fellas found the idea of raw fish to be a bit of a culture shock.

Himeji castle, Nara and Kyoto were other day trips listed as suggestions for the touring party to enjoy as unique and quintessential Japanese experiences.

Another feature of Japan that was always going to happen by osmosis was an appreciation of the people's marvellous hospitality and the gentle, polite ways they conduct themselves.

None of the team could really imagine how the Japanese people that we met and interacted with, would touch our hearts in so many ways.

So as the sponsors' contributions started rolling in, the next step was to send out official invites.

Adam Frankel went way above and beyond the call and did a sensational job printing up the invites.

Perhaps it was an opportunity to have a dry run before he sends off his wedding invites later in the year.

All the recipients of invites appreciated the work he had put into them.

Of the 20 blokes invited, 13 eventually answered the call.

All the blokes who couldn't make the tour were shattered, especially men like Roey, Harry, Tommy and Frankie who had been there in Vanuatu and knew what a ball would be had.

A few other blokes couldn't make the tour either. Liam and Benny had other commitments that meant they couldn't fly with the Flanders. Both were devastated about missing out and I really felt for both blokes.

They are two heroes of the club.

Musa seemed to be all booked up but then his touring aspirations unravelled at the last minute. I was really broken for the kid.

All these seven blokes were sorely missed and they all would have added immensely to the fun and the cricket of the tour.

Meanwhile Stevie D was working tirelessly with Mr Miyagi to arrange a match schedule.

The final draft read this way:

Game I and 2- two 20-20 over games against two university teams on Sunday the 30th June. Then the big game, Ned Flanders First XI vs. Japan National XI on Saturday the 6th June. Sunday, June the 7th would see us pitted against Sano Prefecture team; this is the equivalent of one of their State teams.

This schedule gave us all plenty of time to arrange all the extra curricula activities that we hoped to achieve, as well as a nice opportunity to play plenty of cricket. The most important issue was that we would achieve our fantasy of playing against the Japan National XI.

In the weeks leading up to the tour the Neds enjoyed following the progress of the Japan team at the Division 5 ICC tournament in Jersey. They had some tough games against Norway, Mozambique and Jersey and had a strong win against Vanuatu, of all teams.

By the end of the tournament they had moved to 29 in the ICC world rankings.

A top 30 listing beckoned for the Neddies.

Just as in years past the Flanders entered the Queensland Corporate 8's tournament under the name of Chookie's computer company, Aurion.

Tragically, despite smashing all four pool games and our quarter final, we lost to the eventual winners in a very tight and nerve wracking semi final. Add in a few weekend net sessions and this was pretty reasonable preparation for Japan. Even though our regular season had finished in late March, the three months absence of cricket from our lives was well and truly compensated for.

Roey and Benny came down to plenty of the net sessions even though they couldn't make the tour and that meant a lot to the squad. Everyone was moved by those boys' selfless endeavours.

Roey, our resident stats king also did up a stats package with all the updated career stats and Flanders records for me to take over on tour, so that we could all be kept in the loop as far as milestones were concerned.

Chico was about to break 3000 career runs. He will be the first. Stevie is six runs shy of 2000 runs- he'll be just the fourth man to climb that peak and club legend Mick Menagh has played 99 games under the baggy maroon and he'll pick up the ton on tour.

As well as 13 players we also had a crew of supporters coming along.

My lovely wife Freya was the first to sign up, and in quick succession, Stevie's girlfriend Taz, Chook's girlfriend Mel and Meadie's fiancée Jacinta all paid up and were swept along by the magnitude of the project.

Frankie's dad, Phil signed on but tragically, Adam was unable to procure leave despite trying every possible avenue, from the Princess Alexandra Hospital where he is doing his Intern year as a young doctor.

The last two aboard were my Mum, Jane and my step father Coll. I must say I was extremely thrilled to have them come along.

Along with me, the chosen 12, along with their nicknames, read like this:

Matt Young Captain-----OC

Stevie Derksen Vice Captain-----Stevie D the VC

Mick Menagh Vice Captain-----Menag, Menaagggghhhh

Pete Simmons-----Sneaky Pete

Sean Mead-----Meadie, The Kingaroy Express

Brendan Dillon-----Chico, Choc

Mattie Dillon-----Poochie

Roland O'Regan-----Roles, Roly, Chief Justice

Andrew McMurtrie-----Chookie

Craig Crossan-----Crossie

Brett Whalley----- B Whal, The Schemer

Mark Dowling-----Daffy

Mat Ford-----The Predator, Pred

I was pretty stoked every time I'd get the phone call to confirm that a player had booked his airfare.

Especially once 11 had paid up.

A few were out of the blue though. Poochie has lived the last three and a half years in London and it was a real thrill to have him sign on. He is an inaugural Hall of Famer and his presence will be a great asset. I know Chico was absolutely thrilled to have his brother back in the fold.

Daffy has played eight games for the Neddies- four in Australia and four in Vanuatu. He will now have played less than a dozen games but they will be spread over three countries.

By an extraordinary piece of luck, despite now living in Melbourne, where he recently knocked over his Ph D in nuclear physics, Daffy has lined up six weeks of research work in Yokohama that exactly corresponds to the Flanders touring dates. So, the young man was absolutely thrilled to be able to rejoin the Flanders fold in Japan.

Crossie has been in Canberra this year with the army but his leave just corresponded perfectly with the Japan dates and he was very excited about getting on board.

Meadie and Pred will make their International touring debuts and both are pretty excited about the prospect. Pred hasn't stopped talking about the tour for the last six months. He is rearing to go.

With about six weeks to go, Chico started an official count down on the computer. It read out the remaining days, minutes and maybe even seconds until we climbed on board the Jet Star flight.

The Ned Flanders Race day gave everyone a chance to get together and talk Flanders. It was a tremendous day out. Everyone backed the odd winner but Mel's effort in picking the first three winners made her the racing icon for the day.

It was a muddy track and roughies seemed to be winning everything.

It was about at this time that the Flanders were interviewed by the extremely sincere and knowledgeable Bernie Pramberg from the Courier Mail. He featured our touring aspirations in his Saturday column called 'For the Love of the Game'.

Roles, Brett, Stevie, Chook, Mick and I had a wonderfully warm yarn to Bernie who really seemed to appreciate the camaraderie that the Flanders experience. He reckoned we played the game for all the right reasons and that our ideas on mateship were well and truly in line with what being an Australian and especially a cricketer were all about.

Later on we had a ball hamming it up with his photographer with a few staged shots with bats, ball, and even my samurai sword. It was a laugh a minute.

On the following Saturday when the story ran, I know everyone in the Flanders empire was up early to get their copy. We received lots of great feedback. Personally I lost count of the number of very excited patients who had read the article and lauded us for it.

The week before take off, the Oshin Japanese Restaurant played host to the official tour launch.

Roey and Benny and his lovely wife Delia came along too in a show of solidarity for the squad. The great Tommy Dover, who like Adam Frankel was prohibited from making the tour by the rostering situation at Princess Alexandra Hospital, turned up and donated an Aussie flag bum bag to be worn by the tour junior. The Oshin dinner gave all the sushi and sashimi novices a chance to sample what I consider to be the best foreign food going around. Tragically for Chico, he didn't share my tastes and it looks like it will be a long and hungry tour for him.

The best line of the night came from the delightful Emma Whalley, who had brought along her Sheryl persona. When her sashimi (that's raw fish) came out she told the waiter that the fish wasn't cooked enough and could they take it back for a bit more frying. The Sheryl persona, is just the normal Emma plus a few Chardonnays.

Several presentations were made at Oshin.

The official touring shirts were distributed to all 13 players and also to the seven supporters. We each received a shirt to wear in the lead up games. It was a dashing blue colour complete with number and nickname on the back.

To honour the occasion of the international game against the Japan XI we had standard white shirts with the Japanese flag and boxing kangaroo insignia as well as the tour details embroidered on. They looked pretty flash and even as a fashion refugee I reckon they looked great.

MAP and QDI also donated shirts that were later embroidered with the club insignia and they will be used for the lead up games against the university teams.

The most important item, for me at least, was the maroon and white touring cap, inscribed with Ned Flanders XI, Japan Tour, 2008.

It will be a cap I will long cherish and always wear with immense pride.

Everyone had a ball and the sad farewells to the blokes not coming were extremely heart felt as were their very sincere best wishes for us to do the club proud.

As I said at the presentation, the 13 fellas making the trip are representing not just themselves but all the men who play at the club at present. Furthermore they will be representing all 121 players who have proudly worn the baggy maroon over the last 11 years.

It was a responsibility that none of us took lightly.

A long week at work for everyone finally gave way to the excitement of Friday the 27th of June. That was marked as our departure day.

The day started with some fun. Roles and his girlfriend Pru managed to line up a live to air radio interview with Nova 106.9. Luttsy was on the phone at 6 30 in the morning and we had a great yarn about the Flanders and what we stood for and what we were doing heading to Japan.

He had been worded up about our meeting with the former Miss Universe, Jennifer Hawkins and how she was a big fan of the Flanders.

He seemed quite impressed and maybe just a trifle awe struck that a humble Churches cricket team should be aiming to take on the might of a National side. He was quite gob smacked that we had done it all before, and triumphantly at that in Vanuatu.

I told the listeners that it was important to dream your dreams and then get on and actualise them.

I think that that is a great way to go about life.

The tour was off to a great start and certainly my adrenaline was well and truly pumping.

My Aunty Simi did the taxi run by picking up Mum and Coll and then collecting Freya and me and we were soon at Brisbane International Airport.

Staggeringly, the first person I saw was Chookie. Chook really is the world's latest man. It was later speculated that Mel, who is extremely punctual must have seen to it that the two of them arrived on time. Meadie and Jacinta were there as well.

Mick arrived with his dad, Peter. Mick was extremely relieved that all the visa requirements had been taken care of and that he would not have to go through the same ordeal as the Vanuatu trip.

Crossie arrived and was presented with his cap and shirts. He looked hugely proud.

Daffy and Pooch were meeting us in Japan.

The next pair to arrive was Taz and Stevie. Stevie looked about ten feet tall and bullet proof as he strutted in proudly wearing his maroon Ned Flanders touring shirt. His parents, Bernie and Pat were there to see Stevie and Taz off and to wish everyone good luck.

Sneaky had flown out on a different flight an hour before us and we'll see him in Osaka. B Whal had headed over the day before. It will be great to catch up with these two boys tonight.

Pred arrived with his lovely wife Nic and his two clones of sons- the Mini Preds.

He wouldn't stop smiling . He was absolutely off his nut with excitement.

As we headed through to the book in area we were still sweating on Roles and Chico. Although this stressed me slightly, I quite suspected that they may be a bit tardy and I wasn't really too worried.

Roles lobbed in first. Unlike on the previous tour, when he forgot all his cricket gear, this time at least Roles brought along his box.

Now we just had to wait on Chico, or 'Chicio' as he had ended up with on his shirt. I am still not sure if it was just an accidental spelling mistake or if Stevie stitched him up by supplying the wrong spelling to the printers, but either way 'Chicio' went perfectly for the rest of us.

It just had that Japanese feel about it, especially when we all used our best Japanese accents.

Anyway just as we were at the head of the queue in rocks Chicio.

As if keeping with our status as international cricketers, Jet Star opened up a separate check in area just for us and we headed for the top of the queue just to cheese a few punters off in the standard one.

Through customs and into the lounge for a few purchases and then it was all aboard for Osaka via Cairns.

With the whole assembled Flanders throng kitted out in our maroon touring shirts, we certainly attracted a fair bit of attention.

Plenty of people wanted to know all about the Flanders and the boys delighted in telling them.

The first leg to Cairns was fun and I even scored a couple of free scotches from the hosties as they seemed very much enamoured with the Flanders. I suppose being captain does have the odd perk. At Cairns the team dined at 'Little Tokyo' and got stuck into the Japanese grub. Chico had a sandwich I think. It will be long 11 days for him.

Back on board and thanks to a bit of Flanders charm at the seating desk, we were reissued seats and we all managed to sit together in a pretty big group.

The major talking point on the second leg was the public announcement of Chookie and Mel's engagement. It came over in English and received a round of applause and then came over in Japanese , much to the shrieking thrills of a few dozen Japanese school girls sitting right behind Chook and Mel.

All of a sudden they were celebrities and everyone wanted a photo. They received at least four rounds of rapturous applause. Every photo was snapped with the Japanese girls holding their fingers in what was to become the classical 'V' for victory pose.

No one was sure who worded up the steward to make the announcement but smart money would be on the bloke who had the same thing happen to him on the last tour. Rumour has it he ended up getting married last December. So my wife of seven months and I took great delight in the plight of the Chicken and his girlfriend.

I think Chook loved the attention and even the shy Mel got used to the adulation I think.

The laughter at their plight was really excellent for team morale and I am sure they were happy to take the hit for the team.

Meanwhile Preds was running amok with the Japanese. He seems to have invented some kind of pidgin Japanese that involves a lot of bowing and smiling. He was the star of lots of photos and very popular with the kids.

Roles entertained a couple of kids that looked like they had ADHD. He was very patient and played along for hours and hours.

Mickey had a few beers but ended up well short of David Boon's Brisbane- Osaka records.

Crossie didn't hold back on the scotch and had plenty of laughs.

Stevie just seemed to be feeling pretty proud that the tour was going ahead after all his hard work.

Ginge and I stayed pretty quiet but really we loved the engagement announcement saga.

As the hours ticked over and the blood alcohol level went up and the Flanders revelry starting overflowing into the adjacent seats, one old goat had a bit of a whinge about the noise. Ironically it was her two kids that were squealing with delight playing with Roles for about two hours. The Flanders were already into their ambassadorial role.

We lobbed into Osaka's Kansai airport at about 8 or 9 pm and then endured a three and a half hour saga on a variety of trains and through a multitude of train stations to get to the hotel. Lugging 20 kg of suitcase as well as 20 kg of cricket kit up and down a thousand steps really lost its novelty value very quickly.

By midnight we arrived and the rooms were sorted out.

Big Bad Brett Whalley came down stairs to meet us but no one could find Sneaky Pete. Sneaky had just snuck in from Tokyo by train and had snuck into his room unannounced.

The room mates made for interesting reading.

The boring couple set was already easy to work out but all the boys travelling solo had some big decisions to make.

Roles and B Whal have been mates for many years and they teamed up in one room.

Mickey and Crossie ended up in together. Perhaps that was some kind of smoking fraternity for them.

Chico had a room to him self to start with until his brother Poochie arrived in a couple of days.

Chook was in with his new fiancé, Mel.

The oddest coupling though was Sneaky and Pred. No one could envisage how that was going to work out. Sneaky is very neat and tidy and is always impeccably groomed and Pred is a rough and tumble sort of bloke. They were the Flanders edition of the 'Odd Couple'.

The team and the tour party rendezved downstairs for brekkie after a fair old sleep in.

A variety of activities were available for the free day in Osaka.

Stevie and Taz with their local knowledge were off to the Osaka Aquarium complete with its two whale sharks. A few people jumped on board their tour and Ginge and I, with our far more rudimentary local nous headed out with some people to see Osaka Jo- the local castle.

Chook and Mel, Roles and Brett, Mum and Coll, and Phil joined Freya and me at the castle. It was interesting to see the traditional architecture of the Osaka Jo and it certainly was very unique.

Inside there were samurai warrior outfits and even a few helmets that you could try on for a few yen.

Naturally all the boys had to stick the noggins into the helmets and there were plenty of photos snapped off of the Flanders in their samurai attire.

Silk prints and some interesting historical documents were on display. There was even a suit of armour that had been imported from where else but Flanders. It thrilled us all to see the word Flanders written. It was one of the very few English words in the whole museum display.

The garden area was even better to see. A heron stood implacably still by the shore just waiting to spy a careless fish and now and again it would dart its long slender head and beak into the water and skewer its lunch. The serenity and serendipity of the gardens was very relaxing and it was nice to unwind a bit after the long travel day, yesterday.

Lunch for me is usually a salad sandwich and it seldom rates on the highlights package of my day, but here in Japan the food is a real cultural as well as a culinary experience.

Today we stopped in at a traditional noodle bar and pulled our seats up at the counter. Despite there being no English menu and there being no English forthcoming from the staff and no Japanese forthcoming from any of us, we managed to have a superb bowl of noodles and better still a sensational cultural experience.

The chef was kitted out in the traditional white outfit, with a white 'Thunderbirds' hat on and he did a whole stack of bowing. And for this quintessential Japanese dining experience we paid \$6.50 and we were eating within five minutes of arriving.

Mum, Coll and Phil then peeled off and headed to the ceramic museum and the rest of us headed to the aquarium. The whale sharks were awesome, as was the amazing collection of other sharks and rays. The hammer head sharks were a treat to see.

I always get a bit sad to see wild animals cooped up in zoos and aquariums, but there is no doubt the animals on display here were well cared for and they were fascinating to see.

The octopuses were enormous- some were about a metre long and their shenanigans were extremely entertaining.

The otters were cute as buttons and the penguins were quaint. Some muscular dolphins swam about and did a few jumps for us.

Next stop was the the giant Ferris wheel. Roles and Mel both have a few woes with heights. How Roles can say that after going to 5364meters at Mt Everest Base camp defies belief. The rope suspension bridges over there didn't hold any demons for him by the end of that trip, but he still maintained the Ferris wheel was a little bit daunting.

Anyway, Brett and Roles, Chook and Mel and Ginge and I all squeezed into a tiny cabin and around we went. The views of the bay and the shipping district were spectacular. As we approached the top which stands at 100 meters, there was a bit of tension in the air as I started to rock things around a bit and wanted everyone to move around to get better photos. Calmness was re established as we came down and everyone got off the wheel feeling happy.

By the time we got home, Daffy had arrived. He had caught a train down from Tokyo.

We all met in the foyer and I presented Daffy with his tour shirts and his baggy maroon and white cap.

He looked just as proud as he did when the same honours were bestowed on him two years ago in Vanuatu. As it was our first real night together, it was decided that a team dinner was essential.

Brett had seen a reasonably priced, but stylish venue and we all lobbed in there. It was only a short walk from the hotel.

I reminded the boys, maybe even a trifle tersely, that the next day was to be our first game on tour and I expected everyone to be ready to play in good shape. I suggested a bit of discretion with regards to alcohol might be a beneficial thing.

That was not a popular way to go.

Anyway the team had a ball at dinner. We were pointed down the steps of a cosy little restaurant and herded into a booth complete with rice paper walls.

The food was great and apparently the beer was cheap and plentiful.

Ginge and I headed home at about 11 pm and the boys rolled home a fair bit later.

Boys will be boys and Flanders will be Flanders.

Brett reminded me that the boys are all on holidays and I must say I probably did need reminding that everyone needs to cut loose on holidays now and again.

Later that night, as the remnants of the team reassembled in what was to become known as 'Club Sneaks' or 'Club Sneep', one of the legendary episodes of the tour took place.

Apparently, as Pred was later recorded to have said in his eye witness account, "two men....dressed in black.... Walking....one of us....went toilet....smell toilet....steam....walk outside....war zone"

This all translated to the fact that somehow the fire extinguisher in Pred and Sneak's room had been let off and covered their whole bath room in dust and foam.

When told about it at the foyer, by the very eloquent Pred, the hotel manager could only say, "Cleaning staff.... Too late"

The derivation of the 'Club Sneeps' comes like this. Sneaky is generally a very mild mannered bloke. Quiet at times and a bit shy until he knows people. Over the years that he has played with the Neddies, he is much more relaxed and every now and again the party Sneaky comes out. This party animal persona is called Sneeepy. A bit like Emma Whalley turns into Sheryl when the chardonnay is added

None of the boys had ever seen Sneeepy to such a degree as we did in Japan. He was on fire for the whole trip. It was an absolute riot.

When the team assembled for the next time on Sunday morning the news was all bad.

Our first games were off. Stevie gave me the news that Mr Miyagi had sent through a message, which was translated by the hotel staff into "No play today due to candy".

I really don't know what they do with their lollies here and how they manage to ruin a cricket game but either way we weren't going to be going to Kyoto for our two 20/20 games against the university teams. To be fair we had heard that rain was forecast for Kyoto. In Australia it would be very odd to call a game off at 7 30 am when the games doesn't start until 11 and the second 20/20 was pencilled in for 2 pm.

I suppose it turned out to be the best call though, as I found out the next day that it had pelted down in Kyoto for the entire day and the early cancellation enabled us all to get out and do something else rather than just watching the rain come down on the Kyoto cricket ground.

Taz came up with the idea that we all head down to Nara for a day trip. At such short notice, Taz did a great job teeing this up. It was a master stroke of genius and we were all soon enroute to the picturesque city of Nara with its many temples and its deer.

The trip by train to Nara started off in hilarious fashion. The whole team had successfully negotiated the ticket gate and Mickey was the last through. A couple of incidents had occurred where people's tickets had got a bit moist from sweat and ended up getting stuck in the machine, necessitating the station master to come over, open up the machine and hand their ticket back.

On this occasion, as Mick passed through the gate, his ticket was swallowed and didn't come out the other end. The gate in front of him wouldn't budge and the gate behind him locked him in. Mick stood there trapped like a mongrel dog. The station master came over and worked frantically. He had a couple of trips back to his room and fetched more tools.

He was puzzled at the trapped ticket. Meanwhile Mickey stood stroking his chin, perplexed at why so much bad luck seemed to come his way.

The whole JR railway complex was slowed down by the blocked gate. People who had never been late to work in their whole careers were tearing their hair out. Companies went bust due to the reduced productivity by their absence.

The huge Japanese economy and its share market took a big blip downwards. The Nikkei nose dived. I won't be surprised if the government will be on its way out at the next election, all because of Mick's saga.

After 15 minutes of frantic work, the station master had found the root of the problem and he pulled it out of the machine and held it up, extremely bemused. Mick shook his head and as it dawned on everyone else assembled and all the masses that had become intrigued by the event, giggles started rippling and soon a huge tsunami of laughter was breaking out around the Flanders and all the locals who had taken a keen interest.

It turns out Mickey had tried using his room key as a rail pass.

Turns out it didn't work.

As usual Mick had taken it upon himself to turn the morale of the club around after the disappointment of missing our games. Well done Mick.

As we headed to Nara, Daffy had decided that Hiroshima was a bigger priority for him and so we said goodbye to him at the station. We'll catch up with Daff in Tokyo later in the week.

The spirit in the team had been knocked by the wash out but soon positive angles were coming from everywhere.

The word 'forfeit' was mentioned. 'The Flanders two-nil up after two games' was expressed.

Something about the divine winds of Kamikaze that protected Japan from nautical invasion many centuries ago was seen as a parallel piece of fate.

Mickey's 100th game would now have to wait until the next Saturday. An easy game against an inexperienced university team was probably not going to be a great forum for such an auspicious event anyway. Mick's 100th, will now be the international game. A far more fitting scenario.

The cricket in Japan is played on two levels. There is a university competition that contains eight teams. These teams are all made up of young students who have little cricket experience.

The senior comp also has eight teams and is made up of ex pats from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Plenty of Poms play too. The ex pats are spliced together with plenty of Japanese born players and the cricket here has a real multicultural feel.

Once Mick's ticket was extracted and his composure reinstated, we headed to Nara.

Past the numerous rice paddy fields we travelled and the weather looked bleak but the rain held off.

The temples at Nara were spectacular. The largest wooden building in the world was on show as we ventured into the Todai-ji Buddhist temple complex.

Huge wooden sculptures greeted us at every glance.

There was a support beam with a small hole in it that offers eternal enlightenment to anyone that crawls through it.

The word was that Mick wouldn't fit through but he successfully inserted his room key and will be granted a small amount of enlightenment by Buddha.

Each temple is serviced by deer. The frisky ones do a bit of head butting with each other and any kids that stray too close.

All the gardens have ponds and these are always well stocked with enormous carp fish. The bright orange and gold colours really are stunning. They are very peaceful and I can feel the tension leached out of me after just a few minutes of watching their smooth, tranquil swimming.

A few boys bought the traditional Japanese head bands. None of us had a clue what the Japanese characters said but we had a ball modelling them and plenty of great photos and great memories came out of that purchase.

A big day of walking around hilly Nara necessitated a bit of a breather back home, before a dozen of the party headed out to dinner.

Meadie and Jac, Ginge and I, Chook and Mel, Pred, Crossie, Mick, Brett and Roles headed out for a lovely night at an up beat local venue. The food was amazing as usual and we all had a few drinks and for the first time in ages I started to feel a bit relaxed. It was great.

After dinner a few fellas adjourned to 'Club Choc'. Club Sneep had been closed down apparently for a variety of reasons. Perhaps it was just to keep the heat off after the fire extinguisher incident.

Poochie had arrived from London and Chico was very excited about seeing his brother.

About ten of us huddled into the tiny room and the mood was relaxed and happy. A few drinks and a few sing alongs and the brotherhood that Pooch and Chico have was well and truly mimicked by the brotherhood that all the Flanders men feel.

Pred and Chico had bought replica guns the day before. It will be a laugh seeing them trying to get them through Australian customs.

Chico has a BB gun and has been copping a few hits from the gun to assist in team morale. It's an odd process that I don't really understand.

Pred meantime had a replica Colt Mark 4. When Stevie first saw it he called it a Colt MKiv (pronounced McKiv).

The Mk IV bit had stumped him a bit with regards to the correct articulation.

By night's end the team morale was really firing and that was despite the huge disappointment of missing today's matches.

On Monday the groups split up and did a variety of activities.

Ginge and I were joined by Mum and Coll and Phil and headed down to Kyoto for a day. The Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines were spectacular but the real highlights were the incredibly peaceful gardens. Every tree and shrub was immaculately manicured and the stone and sand features were so ornate.

The use of streams and ponds was exquisite.

The Silver Garden was my favourite.

After a couple of gardens we wandered along the 'Philosopher's Walk' beside a little stream. The odd giant carp drifted by and the sound of the running water was very peaceful.

Ginge and I enjoyed the shops too, as did our three travel mates. We picked up some nice prints and they'll be great memories when they are hung up on our walls at home.

Lots of young girls were dressed up traditional kimonos and they all looked like pristine dolls.

After walking and bussing it around Kyoto for a few hours we headed back to Osaka and had to change hotels. We are now staying a bit closer to the centre of town. This will facilitate the social actions of the team.

Catching up with a few of the lads, it turns out a few fellas headed down to the batting cage and hit a few base balls from the bowling machine. Some of the balls came out at 140 km/h. I wished I had had a chance to do that. It sounded like a huge amount of fun.

The team recollected in the room of Roles and Brett.

To get the cricket thinking back in our heads, I thought a press conference was a good idea. It would help link the boys back together after we'd all headed off and done our own thing a bit of late.

The concept of the press conference was pioneered and perfected by the great Brett Whalley in Vanuatu. The gist of it is that I sit up the front, as captain and the boys video the media circus as each bloke turns into a reporter.

Some of the questions get a bit personal and a bit sensitive for me, but I love it.

Everyone seems to have a laugh.

Last time lots of questions revolved around me getting engaged and married. Then when that theme got flogged to death, the question of my age and when I ought to retire became the favourite theme.

This time my retirement took centre stage, seeing as how I am now married.

We also reiterated the idea that we were still undefeated after our first two scheduled games and that the dream of the 4-0 score line for the Flanders was still on the cards.

The mood was jovial as we all headed down the streets of Osaka's main social district. Roles covered himself in glory by winning a bear from one of those coin operated novelty machines.

'Neddy' as he became known became the tour mascot.

Neddy enjoys football and was involved in lots of sweeping back line movements (orchestrated and coached by B Whal, the Souths Rugby Union Seconds coach).

Ned also practiced line outs with team.

Sometimes Ned got a bit full of grog and would knock into people and sometimes he even knocked over some bikes.

Ned was generally very well received by everyone he met.

The charisma of the Neddies was running rampant and lots of locals were engaged in conversations and invited into many great photo opportunities. Especially if they were young, pretty and female.

Neddy really did some great wing work and helped the boys meet a lot of lovely young girls, who all seemed very giggly at the prospect of meeting the Flanders and getting their photos taken. The V for victory signs got a real flogging that night.

Chico's uncanny resemblance to the actor Keanu Reeves was thought to be a great asset for the team, but despite many blokes pointing out 'Keanu' none of the locals really seemed to get excited.

There were lots of locals out and about and some of them had some bizarre gear on and had dead set crazy hair cuts. Huge gaudy belts were popular and all manner of ties worn in unusual ways were common too. I suppose this was their slant on being 'metro sexual'. Chico seemed to know where they were coming from and respected them for it.

While it was a ball strutting down the mall, we did have a destination in mind. Karaoke was to be the first event in the tradition intra team competition.

In Vanuatu, the mighty Nerds, led by the great Brett Whalley trounced the insipid Julio's misled by Chico, by two events to one.

This time the teams were divided into Laurie's boys, i.e. those who went to St Laurence's and Wide Bays Boys i.e. those who went to school up there. A third group made up of the supporters was muted but never really seemed to materialise.

Pred and Roles were allocated to the Laurie's team along with those who were there by rite. The full team, being Brett, Chook, Mick, Daffy and me along with Pred and Roles.

Chico had at his disposal, Stevie, Meadie, Sneaky and Pooch, along with Crossie.

The singing went down a treat at the karaoke. A few of the boys really excel at singing and the laughter just never seemed to stop, all helped along by a few drinks. The "all you can drink" advertisement didn't quite translate into what we expected, as the waiters were a bit tardy and found it very difficult to keep up with the Flanders 'hard earned thirst'.

Pred had a blinder for the Laurie's team and easily picked up the three points. He was lead singer for several songs and provided outstanding back ups for Chico as Chico did his hip hop stuff. By the end of it, we were all joining in with 'Go-Go Chico' and 'Yo-Yo Chico'. It was a real hoot.

When I first met Pred he was starring in another club icon's musical. Mark Sherry had written his own musical and then led the band for every night's production. I gave Mark a hand by playing the guitar and Pred starred as Tony the Biker. He was brilliant back then and tonight he carried on from where he left off. Brettie covered himself with glory with his niche market area of expertise, by doing a few Kenny Rogers songs. 'The Gambler' has never been covered so gloriously and John Denver would have been stoked by Brett's 'Thank God I'm a Country Boy' complete with some foot slapping hyjinx.

Then he broadened his spectrum and peeled of 'Hotel California'. Universally, Brett was given the two points.

To complete the Laurie's' clean sweep, Mickey was given the one point, based on the usual huge number of Menagh songs that we did. Some songs can be completely rewritten, by just using the word 'Menagh'. It is one of the great mysteries of music that this can be done. It is a special gift that the Neddies have and we do it whenever we get the chance.

My personal favourite was 'Hey Jude'. The chorus is just perfect for a bit of 'Menagh-naa-naa-Menagh-na-na-na-Meanagh-na-na-na....Mickey.'

By this stage, the whole of Osaka was singing along and as usual Mickey had been elevated to 'legend status' in another foreign country.

So I went to bed that night feeling that although we had missed out on our first two games of cricket, we had well and truly been compensated by some definitive Japanese activities. The Karaoke night will not be forgotten and the fun we had with Roles little friend Neddy the bear was incredible.

Next day was started early. Today was our Hiroshima trip.

I was staggered by the punctuality of the boys. I had never seen the whole team assembled on time ever before. I think it was a reflection of how everyone felt about going to Hiroshima.

While no one was interested in glorifying war, everyone was genuinely looking forward to the emotional experience of going to this site of nuclear tragedy and paying our respects to their suffering.

We activated our JR rail passes and even Mickey kept his room key in his pocket and soon we were aboard the Shinkansen heading west. The shinkansen is a real experience too. It is shaped like a 747 without wings and it moves almost as fast. To stand on the platform and have one roar past is exhilarating.

Despite travelling at 300 km/hr we enjoyed the scenery on the way, including the world's longest suspension bridge. And here I was thinking that my suspension last year was long.

We also saw Himeji Castle and we planned to take a closer look at it later on the tour from a more stationary perspective.

The mood of the party was noticeably sombre as we approached the A Dome and the Peace Park by tram from the train station.

I think everyone really started to appreciate that the entire city through which we were travelling had been flattened in a split second 60 odd years before.

The first thing we saw was the A Dome. This was just about the only structure that stayed remotely upright back in 1945. Its skeletal remains of concrete and girders looked tortured and distorted. Its unique and distinctive domed roof was recognisable.

A few details of the explosion were on display.

On 6th August, 1945, the Enola Gay dropped mankind's first nuclear weapon. The bomb was nick named 'Little Boy'. It detonated 600m above the city. The A dome was originally a trade centre and it was about 200m from ground zero. The target the pilots used was the 'T' shaped bridge that linked an island in the river to the adjacent land mass, but the bomb exploded directly over the city's hospital.

All the party rang the Peace Bell in the Peace Park and did so solemnly and I think we all sincerely hoped that this sort of atrocity would never happen again.

Pred rang the Children's Bell too and he felt intensely moved as a father of two little boys. He confided in me his thoughts about how helpless those parents were to protect their kids on that fateful and frightful day in 1945.

Originally, we'd planned to lay a wreath at the Peace Bell, but after some consideration we thought burning incense would be more culturally appropriate and as it burned near the Peace Bell, we gave a minute's silence in respect for the people of Hiroshima. Several eyes were misty and this was further accentuated when Crossie recited that famous verse from 'To the Fallen'. Lest we forget.

The sombre mood seemed to lighten a bit as we sped back towards our home base. But we weren't finished with activities for today just yet.

Stevie had had a stroke of genius a few months ago and he had researched and worked hard to turn his dream into a reality for the whole team.

That dream was to take the Flanders to a top flight baseball game in Japan.

The Japanese have a proud heritage with baseball and the whole nation seems besotted with the game.

Their national league fills that sports pages of all their newspapers and baseball headlines every TV news sports report. That is when the Flanders aren't touring.

So, Stevie's vision and work saw us heading to Kobe to watch the mighty Hanshin Tigers play the Dragons. The Tigers are way out in front in the National League and it was to be a sell out crowd of over 30 000 that we would join to cheer on the local Tigers.

Originally we felt we ought to go for the away team, seeing as how we were an away team, but the euphoria of the crowd was extremely contagious and in no time at all we were swept up in their hysteria and were cheering for the Tigers.

Heaps of people on the train had their supporters' kits on and they were all smiling and laughing. Their excitement was palpable.

We did our bit for morale by cranking out a few 'Menagh songs'. Hey Jude and the John Butler Trio song really got the locals intrigued.

Upon arriving at the ground, the hysteria built up more and more and by the time we were seated and watching the warm ups, the singing had started. Every punter knew every word to every song and every single person clapped or belted their batons together in unison. Discretion being the better part of valour, we all quickly headed downstairs to the shops and picked out a few shirts to wear emblazoned with the Tigers logo.

Chicio and I had Fujikawa's name across our chests and Lin, Yanu and Kanamoto were also very popular with the other boys.

Fujikawa was a pitcher apparently and I believe he was really inspired by our support. Mickey had Yanu on his shirt and ironically it was Yanu who provided the batting heroics.

We all got stuck into the hot dogs and beers and Pred fired the crowd up by trying to get the Mexican wave going. It was a beautiful moment of cultural cross pollination and it worked. While the wave never made it all the way a round the ground, (there was a problem with the Members being wankers apparently), it certainly provided the locals and of course the Flanders with plenty of entertainment.

The locals really loved the "SUN! NEE! ITCHEE!" (3-2-1) lead in for the wave.

We also taught the locals about the gentle art of sledging. It seemed to be a foreign concept for them but they all embraced the idea of yelling out "MINE!" when a high ball went in the air off a Tigers batsman and funnily enough they all thought it was hilarious whenever any one of us would yell out "I'll get it" when the ball went past a fielder.

Every time a Tigers Batsman hit a run there were all sorts of high fives, hugs and hand shakes.

The crowd did threaten to turn against us at one point when one dope spilt his vodka on the girl in front of me, but I apologised profusely and there was lots of head bowing and I think it all blew over.

In no time at all the Tigers had despatched the Dragons to the tune of eight runs to three. The crowd was off its collective nut with excitement. The songs and the clapping got louder and at one point 30 000 sperm shaped balloons were let off. It was just like some enormous symbolic ejaculation that the crowd experienced. The fun was almost orgasmic.

At night's end we loitered outside the ground for a few minutes just so as to get everyone assembled before heading back to Osaka.

The locals recognised us as being a bit different and I think they were really excited to see foreigners kitted out in Tigers garb. Anyway, for what ever reason, they decided it was good form to give us high fives and hugs and handshakes and dozens wanted photos with the Neddies.

It was the sort of adulation that we had all half expected because of our cricket fame. Perhaps that should be 'fantasised about' rather than 'expected'. In either case, for the next 45 minutes, about 1000 people filed past and every one of them wanted a moment with each of the Flanders. It was unbelievable.

The 1000 estimate was very conservative and some experts estimated that the entire 30 000 capacity crowd flocked to meet the Flanders. It was a huge night for the Hanshin fans. A great victory and an up, close and personal brush with the Neddies. Who could possibly ask for more?

On the way back to the train station everyone still wanted a piece of the Flanders. Dozens of girls all wanted photos and hugs, and plenty of blokes too.

All of us were a bit more flattered by the girls, I must say.

The train trip home was noteworthy for Mickey's urgent need to micturate that saw him jump off prematurely. Most of us thought that would be the last we ever saw of Mick. But bugger me he ended up getting home about an hour after the rest of us. He later told me that two Japanese girls had actually got off their train to take him to the right platform for him to get home. It was certainly not the only time that a Japanese person had gone incredibly out of their way for one of us. The Japanese people were generous and

thoughtful way beyond what we expected. They really are a tremendous race of people, and when we recall highlights of the trip, it is stories like this one that will long be cherished.

Wednesday dawned as another exciting new day and the Flanders party headed off to see the famous Himeji Castle. It's the best preserved ancient castle in the whole country. It is referred to as the 'White Egret' in reference to its elegance and beauty.

A relaxing walk around the castle and its grounds was a nice way to unwind and everyone took plenty of picturesque photos in the peaceful surrounds.

The biggest priority for the day was to move out from our home of the last five days, Osaka, and head to home for the next five days, Tokyo.

All this had to be achieved in time for us to meet Daffy at the "Quest Bar" in Tokyo. Daffy, being a local in Tokyo had been charged with the responsibility of finding a place to watch the third and deciding State of Origin Game. The series was locked at one all and the whole team was very keen to help cheer home our other favourite maroon team.

We had had a similar night in Vanuatu, and tragically NSW had snuck home by a single lousy point, much to Sneaky Pete's excitement. Tonight Sneaky and Pred would be the ones feeling sorry for themselves though.

After some fine logistical work by Freya, some 300km/hr heroics from the shinkansen, a hectic taxi convoy ride and plenty of sweating, we arrived at the Quest bar at half time. The Queenslanders were down 10-8. The Flanders party were all kitted out in maroon. Staggeringly Chook met a teacher that he works with, at the bar. Small world.

In no time, spurred on by the Flanders, Queensland levelled up at 10 all, before Thurston put Billy Slater away for the match clinching try.

Everyone was stoked. Everyone except Preds and Sneaky, anyway.

Freya and I elected to have a quiet night, in view of the fact that the morning would see me up early to head to Mt Fuji for a heavy day's climbing.

The rest of the team had also been keen for the Fuji climb but the idea was germinated that a night climb the following night would have the dual benefits of seeing the sun rise from Mt Fuji and also would allow the post Origin festivities to kick on a bit longer.

Meadie and Jacinta, Chook and Mel and Freya and I took to the conservative' stick with the original plan' option and headed home early.

We had a 'traditional' Japanese pizza around the corner from the hotel and headed home to sleep.

Luckily the rest of the Flanders crew arrived home at 4 am and I was very excited to have the 4am wake up 'bang on the door'.

A couple of hours later, I was being kissed goodbye by Freya and I was joined by Chook and Mel and Meadie and Jacinta, as we formed the Mt Fuji team. After successfully climbing Mt Fuji with me two years ago in horrendous conditions and gale force winds and torrential rains, my wife decided that once was enough for her.

After a few train and bus trips we found ourselves en route to the Fuji area in a coach. The sky was clear and we enjoyed some great post card views of the beautifully symmetrical mountain. After about four hours we were driving up to station five at 2305m.

We each collected a walking pole and rugged up for the cold and set out at about 10 15 am. The initial walk was lovely. The sun was warm and we were sheltered from the wind. The walking path was perfectly maintained and we all shared a few laughs.

By 2600m the vegetation receded down the mountain and the wind became more of an issue to contend with.

We took regular breaks and set a gentle pace. My experience of Mt Fuji and of Mt Kilimanjaro had taught me that the Swahili phrase "Poli Poli" or "slowly, slowly" was the way to go.

Jac did things in her stride. Lithely and limberly she ticked off the steps. Meadie, as he does on the cricket field, just quietly and determinedly set his pace up the slope.

Chook, as usual, was part of everything and was a bundle of enthusiasm. Mel set out with a bad head ache and it just got worse as the day progressed. She showed plenty of ticker to guts it out all day. I was very impressed by her resilience and determination.

The team kept encouraging each other, the same way the Flanders do on the cricket field. When one person was feeling the pinch the others would help them through.

The scree slopes and the rocky parts made for some hard yards to be made but everyone was very determined to summit.

A chilling wind started blowing and was our adversary for most of the ascent. Altitude didn't seem to worry anyone too much but I suppose for the last 500m ascent breathing did become a bit more laboured as the oxygen got a little bit thinner.

After six hours of climbing the summit beckoned and we strode triumphantly to the 3776 m peak. A few photos and some M and M's and a Snickers bar and after two minutes grace we were descending.

The view was pretty ordinary because of the thick cloud cover. The wind was blowing like a gale and the temperature was getting very chilly. Things were a bit harsh and the novelty of climbing was wearing off to a degree.

But no one complained and spirits stayed buoyant in the team.

Running down the scree slopes like skiers was a blast and we made great time.

We took a slightly different route home so as to hasten our descent on the scree.

Until we had descended to 2600m we enjoyed plenty of walls of ice and snow. The clouds blew away and we were treated to some majestic views down the valleys and over the townships below. Mt Fuji is surrounded by lots of other gorgeous mountains and the views were spectacular even to five weary climbers. The final 45 minutes saw us in some lovely forest. It was special to hike through the Japanese woods.

We came down to a station at 1900m only to find that the last bus had left 3 hours before. The local shop owner brought us out a cup of green tea each with no expectation that we'd buy anything. It was just another example of how incredibly gracious and thoughtful the Japanese people are towards visitors and guests. I was really moved.

The shop keeper then ordered a taxi for us and saw us safely on board to return to the train station to catch the train for Tokyo.

Another unusual feature throughout the day was sporadic blasting on the slopes. They were done to orchestrate avalanches to keep the trails safe. All the way the trails were immaculately kept and groomed. The Japanese really love their mountain. It is their national treasure and it was a privilege for us to climb it. The shinkansen ride home seemed to last for ever and at 11 pm, I finally stumbled into the shower and hence bed. I was very relieved and content with what we had done. All five of us were.

It was nice to hear about Freya's shopping exploits and she loved hearing about the climb and we laughed about what a putrid day we had shared two years ago on the same slopes.

Some people don't understand about climbing mountains. I really feel that you take a lot out of such gigs. It's important to push your physical limits and you learn a lot about yourself and how you handle adversity. A lot of people have seen Mt Fuji, but the few that climb it can really appreciate its mysticism and its beauty. It was a treat to climb it with four friends.

The experience will bind us together and it will be great to reminisce and nostalg about the day in the future.

Just as we arrived back at our local train station we happened to catch up with Stevie and Taz. The news was that the other seven who had been full of alcohol fuelled bravado the night before had actually followed through with their plans of doing a night climb up Fuji on this very night. They had spent the day getting kitted out with equipment and had set out and were probably setting foot on the mountain as we spoke to Stevie and Taz.

I must admit I was a trifle surprised and impressed by their conviction. I hoped it would all go well and I really hoped that they'd all be fit for Saturday's big game against Japan's finest 11 cricketers.

The 'magnificent seven' were to return home later the next day and it would be a treat to hear of their heroics. But more of that a bit later.

After a far more relaxing Thursday night compared to Thursday day time, Freya and I emerged from our room for brekkie and then teamed up with Mickey, Mel and Chook. Today was to be a relaxing day to take in some of the sights of the nation's capital.

First stop was Senso ji temple complex. There are some great shops in the area where we could look at souvenirs and plenty of special places to eat.

At Senso ji, the three younger members of the squad paid for their fortunes. Chook received a 'bad fortune' – everything was set to be a disaster for Chookie. His career, his love life, his sporting life and his general

level of happiness were all doomed. Particularly, his greatest ambition would remain unfulfilled. Naturally we all took that to mean he never would score that elusive century for the club.

It looked like Chookie was set to have a terrible day playing against Japan on the next day.

Mel also got bad news with a similar tale of woe to look forwards to, as Chookie.

Mickey on the other hand received 'great fortune'. So it looks like Mick will take the new ball and grab a five for and then come in at number 11 and blaze a match winning hundred.

So after a few minutes trying to revive Chookie and Mel's tragic futures, we headed off for lunch at a quaint little restaurant that Freya and I had dined in two years before. Again the cuisine was outstanding and the traditional feel about the place really added to the experience.

After lunch we ventured off to the War museum.

There was a Zero bomber, some tanks and trains and the notes on the displays gave us a fascinating insight into the Japanese perspective on World War II. They felt they'd been pushed into the bombing of Pearl Harbour by the economic manoeuvrings of the USA. While I didn't know how true it all was, it was certainly interesting to see a different angle.

Everyone thoroughly enjoyed the experience, especially Chook who is quite the history buff, having won the History prize at school.

Yet another extraordinary thing happened today. As we exited the train station in the general vicinity of the War Museum, we asked a young business woman for directions to the museum. She wasn't sure, so headed off to the nearby shop to ask them. Again she had no luck and then headed off to the public phone, with our Lonely Planet book to ring the museum and so procure the directions. She spent at least 15 minutes helping us and refused point blank to accept recompense for the phone call. These Japanese are such a tremendous race of people. It seemed quite ironic that we were heading to the War Museum to learn about how our two nations fought for four years, only a couple of generations ago.

By the time we returned to the hotel, our curiosity was peaking with regards to the 'magnificent seven' night climbers. How had they got on? Had all seven made the summit? Were there any mishaps? Would they all be OK for tomorrow's game? What were the inevitable humorous stories to come out of the adventure?

All these questions would be answered much later than we anticipated. We fully expected them all to be home by lunch time, after presumably summiting at dawn.

But when we arrived home late in the afternoon, none of them was to be seen.

I was a trifle worried but hopeful that all was well.

After all Crossie is a medic in the army and has plenty of nouse in the bush and Sneaky is a Registered Nurse and so they would be able to cover the medical contingencies.

Chico and Pooch are young and fit. Brett is invincible and of course Roles has been to Everest Base Camp. Pred has been playing AFL and was very looking very fit.

By the time the troops starting ambling into home base, it was 8 pm. To a man they were sunburnt and wind burnt. Each was beyond exhausted.

The story went like this.

After they arrived home at 4 am on Thursday morning, the boys were up a bit late and headed into the camping supply shops.

After equipping themselves with some cold weather gear, they scoped out arrangements to get out to the Fuji area.

Just as Stevie and Taz had said, they had made their way out there in the early evening of Thursday. The plan was to start the climb at about 10 pm and summit at about 5 am and watch the sun rise over 'the land of the rising sun' from the nation's mystical peak. A very romantic scenario.

It didn't quite work out that way though.

After a relaxing evening stroll for about an hour, the rain came in and the wind and all of a sudden the temperature starting plummeting.

Pred started getting altitude sickness with nausea, head ache and dizziness. Crossie and Sneaks thought it was safest for him to turn around and so he reluctantly and disappointedly turned back and camped at a hut overnight.

His was one of the better outcomes.

Poor old Roles, who had been battling against his severe sciatica for the whole week, could endure no more by about 2 or 3 am and decided to turn around and try and rendez vous with Pred at the previous hut that they'd stopped at.

Tragically he could not find the way back in the pitch black night and was forced to sensibly drop anchor under a rock, in the pouring rain, gusting winds and the bitter coldness. And all this at the not insignificant altitude of well over 3000m.

It was one of the great acts of endurance that I have heard about.

To make matters worse his camera got saturated and was ruined.

The story goes that in a fit of rage at his misfortune, he was heard to be yelling at the mountain, 'I'm supposed to be on F...ing holidays!' Not a great way to spend one's vacation.

As the sun came up he finished off his descent and rejoined Pred and the two men sat at the station and waited for news of the other five boys.

Roles was shattered at not summiting but I have never heard of a better story of guts and resilience. It really had that Captain Scott of the Antarctic feel about it or maybe even the Australia hero, Mawson.

The other five fellas battled on through the awful conditions and after spending a few hours in the shelter of a hut, they took off early the next morning and made the summit.

Crossie showed off his great photos of the boys all in their proud Ned Flanders Cricket Club caps at the summit.

The chorus from all seven of them was that it was one of the hardest things they had ever done.

I must say that although I felt bad that they'd had a tough time and I especially felt awful for what Pred and Roles had had to endure, I was enormously proud of their achievements. The Flanders boys are made of stern stuff. When the going gets tough, the Flanders get going.

Another story to break was that Sneaky Pete had managed to lose Neddy the bear at the baseball. After a tortuous few days, Pete was let off the hook by Brett producing Neddy at the summit. Brett had valiantly rescued him from a lonely demise at the Tigers home ground. Consensus is that Sneaks owes Brett big time. The five boys and Neddy cut dashing if slightly weathered figures atop Mt Fuji.

All seven of the boys looked broken and shattered. I gave them their prescriptions of early nights, plenty of fluids, a good healthy carbo load for dinner, and cold water to their wind and sun burn.

I also said something about no grog.

Miraculously they all followed the medical instructions and disappeared quite quickly after the hastily arranged press conference.

A press conference would give a good opportunity to focus the team's thoughts about tomorrow's game. It would get our minds back on cricket after seven great days in Japan.

Another highlight for the night was the arrival of Louise Menagh. Louise had flown over from the USA just to cheer on the men in maroon. As a special treat, thanks to last week end's wash outs, she'd have the chance to see her brother M. J. Menagh play his 100th game. So the whole touring party complete with the new addition of Louise, took up their positions for the interview session.

And so the theme of the press conference was about getting our minds focussed for playing the type of hard and passionate cricket that the club is revered for. It was a chance to start the hype and the intense team spirit that this club thrives on and does better than any other team of any kind that I have played with or against. We talked about winning. It's what we at the Flanders organisation do best.

After all it was a cricket tour and though it is important to savour the sights and culture of Japan, we are here to win cricket matches.

We all have a lot more fun together when we are winning and the feeling we had all shared after beating Vanuatu was something to savour for the rest of our lives.

All the boys were steeled and focussed and I went to bed feeling confident.

Phil had penned a poem for the boys and he described how he felt about being part of the Flanders empire and I was moved and I'm sure Franky was somehow part of things despite being stuck in the shackles of Princess Alexandra Hospital's rostering.

Coll penned a great line drawing of the press conference.

It was as though the Neddies were acting as inspiration for the artists.

After a slightly nervous night's sleep, I was up for brekkie at 7 am and joined the team downstairs.

The mood was steely and focussed. It was great to be a Neddy. As usual.

We were escorted out to the ground by Mr Miyagi's younger brother who plays in the National team. His name was Bebe. As the team assembled with all their kit bags in the foyer I got the feeling that today was about to be one of the great days of my life.

There really is something quite comforting about being a member of such a team. The team is always so much stronger than the individual and I felt incredibly invincible in my maroon cap. After all I am the captain of the greatest club side ever and I know that the boys will do anything for their club. It really is remarkably empowering to be at the helm of such an organisation.

I know that no matter what, I will be supported by the whole team and I reckon every bloke feels the same. We left the hotel at 8 am and were on a suburban train soon afterwards. Another connecting train saw us to the station to catch the train to the general Sano region. Sano being the venue for today's game. Then another short train trip, before we were met by a convoy of cars that whisked us away to the ground. All this took 2 ½ hours. Not quite the easy six minute drive to Yeronga for our home games that I am used to. When we arrived, there was a lot to take in.

The temperature was about mid 30's. The humidity was a fraction under 100%. There was no breeze at all. The grass on the outfield was even and quite lush but there was a gravelly soil under it. Diving for the ball was going to hurt. Showering after the game was going to sting.

The pitch had been rolled out and was some kind of plastic arrangement that none of us had ever seen before.

It can best be described as looking like the base of a milk crate.

We threw a few balls down on it and it seemed to play pretty low and slow.

I thought that might neuter our pace attack to an extent.

Getting onto the front foot while batting was going to be imperative.

I decided instantly that winning the toss was vital and that we'd field. I wanted to see how the locals batted on this sort of surface during their 40 over allotment.

Also I thought it was a great chance to get everyone into the game straight away.

Luckily the coin came down heads after I called 'heads' and after lathering up the sun screen we were on the paddock.

A few vital deeds had to be taken care of first.

Of course the official team photos were required and we all proudly lined up in our beautiful maroon and white touring caps along with our 'Ned Flanders versus Japan. Sano. 2008' shirts.

We looked sharp.

The most important job fell to me however.

That was to present Mick Menagh with a commemorative plaque to remember his 100th game for the club. He is just the second man to do it after me.

I remember Mick as a 17 year old kid coming out for his first game. His first ball was short and quick and he gave the batsman a fair old glare. He had the mongrel to be a fast bowler and he has always played with such incredible pride in the club.

He was the first man to take 100 wickets and still holds the record for the most wickets ever taken by a Neddy.

He has always enjoyed batting and has had several centuries terminated because of running out of partners. The hazards of being a number ten or eleven batsman. I know one day he'll get his inaugural 50 and what a day that will be.

He has been part of all 6 premierships- 4 A grade, 1 B grade and 1 one day title.

He is a club icon and easily the most talked about Neddy ever.

Well done Mickey. You are a club legend.

With the weather the way it was I felt that 4 over spells would be about the limit of endurance for our quicks.

Pred took the new cherry and steamed in with the collective passion of all 13 Flanders men riding with him. He started the campaign with a maiden and handed the pill to Meadie who also bowled a great first over. Pred was to bowl four overs in this spell and conceded just two boundaries. It was a great start.

Meadie's second over was phenomenal. Jarrad, the left handed Japanese opener flicked a ball on leg stump straight off the middle of the bat and I presume thought 'That's four'. Four if there was a normal wicket keeper behind him. Chico, the master keeper, had anticipated brilliantly and was haring down leg side even before the bat hit the ball and ended up meters down leg side with his right glove flying into the air. The ball smacked beautifully into the middle of that glove and the Flanders had our first wicket. It was one of the best catches I have ever seen by a keeper, especially given the context.

Four balls later the other opener, Giles-Jones, nicked one from Meadie and this time Chico flung out his left glove and took his second blinder in the one over. 2 for 7 and the Neddies were all over the Japanese.

Nothing gets team spirit humming like a couple of screaming catches. Chico and Meadie had really set things up for us.

Meadie was desperately unlucky not to get a third wicket in his opening four over spell and when Stevie and Brett came on as the first change bowlers from each end, the score was 2 for 20.

The number 3, Beddington, and number 4, Jones, were good. They were both Aussies and had good techniques. Stevie had one very close to being LBW and was shattered to get turned down by the umpire. The two batsmen consolidated and played very sensibly and by the time Stevie and Brett were relieved after four overs each, the score had advanced to 2 for 54 after 16 overs.

They were wresting back the initiative.

Pooch and Mick were next up with the ball.

After getting some tap in his first over, Mick came back with some good overs but couldn't get the break through we needed despite trying his heart out.

It wasn't until Poochie, playing his first game for us for over three years, trapped their number three LBW that we could get excited again. Beddington gone for 65.

That wicket by Pooch was a huge turning point. It broke a 99 run partnership that was threatening to put us to the sword.

It was great to have Pooch back. He had been the work horse of the bowling department for many years and never shirked his work load. It was a just reward for his efforts to take such an important wicket.

Not long after this, the number four, Jones, just a couple of balls after raising his 50, slapped a lofted drive at me at cover off Brett's bowling and I managed to hang onto a hot one.

Next ball Bebe Miyagi played all over the ball and lost his stumps. Five down and the Flanders were getting their knees ready to crush those Japanese tracheas.

This brought another indigenous Japanese batsman, Murata, to the crease and all of a sudden the game was different. The first four bats had been ex pat Aussies who had been raised playing the game but now I felt we had a bit more of a novice to contend with even though we was still good enough to play for his country. Turner was going OK at number 5 and got a few boundaries away before he smashed a ball from Pred way out towards cow corner. Stevie had taken off from his spot at long on and sprinted full bore for 30 metres before flinging his 6 foot 6 inch frame horizontal to the ground and pocketed the best outfield catch that I have ever seen. To make it even more special it was right in front of our supporters and the crowd erupted simultaneously with the other Flanders men on the field.

Pred had his first wicket in his second spell and this was to be the spell of the match.

Meanwhile Daffy had bowled a couple of overs and Pooch had finished up. Meadie came back for his second spell and bowled superbly as usual. He ended up with 8 very tight overs and conceded only 29 runs for his two wickets. He bowled his heart out in the oppressive conditions.

Stevie's second spell was every bit as good as his first and he showed incredible tenacity to keep going despite a swag of bad luck and close LBW calls. His 8 overs for 18 were staggeringly good bowling. It was a tragedy that he didn't get a wicket.

Brett and Pred were to bring us home. Brett was punished a bit but kept plugging away and added his third wicket to his swag by bowling the number 7, Laidler.

Then it was the Pred show. He smashed through the last 3 wickets to end up with 4 for 17 from his 8 overs. The last catch was taken at mid off by the Centurion, Mickey and I thought that was a special way for the innings to finish.

Japan all out 187 in the 40th over.

The other feature that I must mention is the awesome fielding performance that the Flanders displayed. Roles was the stand out in the gully. Despite his back pain he hurled himself all over the place and stopped at least half a dozen balls that he had no right to get near. They all would have gone to the fence. In the context of the match these were vital saves.

Crossie was tireless in the outfield and saved many runs with his dogged, never say die attitude in the field. His throwing was another great feature.

Daffy took off from where he left off in Vanuatu and saved bucket loads of runs with his skill and dedication and commitment.

At the outset of the day, Mickey and Stevie were joined as co vice captains by a third vice captain. Chookie took over the prestigious title for the first ever time and it really seemed to lift the big fella. He really busted his gut in the field today and took the extra responsibility to heart. It was an apt recognition for a bloke who was playing his 90th game as a Neddy.

After the third wicket partnership had prospered so handsomely, I thought 187 was a reasonable total for us to chase, especially when I looked at the batting line up. It would be tough. We had a number of factors to overcome. The pitch was entirely foreign to us and the 40 overs in the field had left many of us totally spent, especially the boys who had bowled. Add to this we were facing an international bowling line up and they had some pride about them.

All our supporters had come out for the match and their support in the horrendous conditions really lifted everyone on the field. It was great to look over to the assembled Neddies throng and see so many passionate faces just willing us all to succeed. Their cheering really lifted us. A huge thanks a lot goes out to all of them. They are true Flanders.

30 minutes wasn't a long time to rejuvenate after the long fielding innings. We smashed down the fluids and ate and tried to mentally prepare for what was to follow.

Sneaky, the consummate opener was to be joined by Stevie D. Stevie had put his hand up in the absence of Tommy and Frankie (our other openers) to join Sneaks against the new ball.

Stevie never shies away from a challenge and I know I can always count on his incredible support and passion for the club, no matter what the situation we are facing throws at us. He is the definitive team man. Sneaks has been focusing on this innings for three months. He was going to succeed no matter what they threw at him. I have never seen him so determined.

It was comforting to see these two men head out with the hopes of the whole club resting on their broad and capable shoulders.

Chico was in at three and he was to be followed by Chook. Meadie was shattered after his bowling heroics and so I took the number five spot ahead of him. Pooch at seven and Pred at eight would do the business if required and then Brett, Daffy and Mick would see us home if need be. Roles and Crossie would sit out the batting. They accepted this with immense team spirit. They had done their heroics in the field.

Stevie and Sneaks had a few throw downs for practice- even the girls got involved collecting balls and returning them to the fellas to bowl at Stevie and Sneaks. It really was the whole Flanders family that was involved.

As the two batsmen strode out, proud, resilient and square jawed, we all wished them the best luck and they knew we were all right behind them.

Sneaks took the first over and as usual was immovable in defence. He had been rehearsing that over in his mind for the last six months.

Then Stevie took over and got us away with a single. Each player hit an early boundary to settle the nerves and the partnership built solidly, slowly and assuredly.

Every time another ten run block was crossed off I felt relieved.

Stevie looked great. He brought up his 2000th run for the club today when he got to six and he is just the fourth man to do this.

He stroked a couple of boundaries and then rocked back on a short one from the opening bowler, Nakano and smashed it miles and miles over mid wicket for an enormous six.

That took us beyond 30. Then inexplicably, a couple of balls later, Stevie was gone. The only false shot he played caught the edge and the wicket keeper had him. Nakano had struck back. NF XI - 1 for 31. A solid start. Not just in terms of runs but also in terms of blunting the new ball and turning the psychological screws.

The other bonus of the impressive opening stand was that it gave all the following batsmen an extra half hour to recuperate after the exhausting session in the field. Both boys had done their club a remarkable service.

Meanwhile Sneaks looked like he had booked himself in for the duration. Every ball found the middle of the bat and he elegantly drove and pulled the balls that gave him the chance.

Chico headed in to join him. After his magnificent display behind the stumps I thought it might be his day. It wasn't just his two screaming catches but also his impeccable glove work all day in the most awful conditions that impressed me.

Tragically, Nakano produced the best first up pill that Chico had ever faced. It curved back from outside off stump, ripped even further inwards off the pitch from the perfect length and went straight past Chico's bat and cannoned into the stumps. Chico was devastated to be gone for zip. He didn't deserve that misfortune. This really seemed to lift the Japanese spirits. 2 for 31, as Chook strode out to join his miniature clone, Sneaky.

Chook's terrible fortune prediction from the previous day was certainly pumping through my mind and I got my gear on quick smart, just in case.

But the great big Chicken survived and was quickly off the mark with a spectacular straight drive for four. Maybe the Japanese gods were wrong this time.

Sneaky Pete realised the gravity of the situation if another quick wicket fell and proceeded to pour the concentration into his innings. He worked extremely hard. Every ball was watched all the way onto the bat and he picked off the runs with some cheeky and with some sneaky singles and he despatched the bad ball perfectly. He hit the gaps and found the fence often.

The score mounted. 40, 50, 60, 70, 80 and I started to feel a bit better.

Drinks came at 15 overs and the two fellas in the middle came off and guzzled down a well deserved beverage or two. Sneaks was still there, sweating but defiant. We urged to keep it going.

After drinks, Chook started really middling them and was carrying on his stellar form of last season. They raised their fifty partnership to rapturous applause from all the Flanders masses and kept going.

A constant feature of the day was the multitude of photos snapped off by all the personnel off the field. Ginge had the video rigged up and recorded almost the whole match. The video camera was making its debut and it was the one all the boys had chipped in to buy us for our wedding present. It could not have had a more conspicuous introduction than today's match.

The dedication of all the girls and especially Ginge on the camera duty was a real compliment to the club. Meanwhile Phil was doing a marvellous job keeping meticulous notes on the days play so that he could let Frankie know all the Flanders deeds in intricate detail.

Into the 90s and the score edged towards the big psychological milestone of 100, with Sneaks and Chook still looking great. They had weathered the opening bowlers and the first changers.

Giles-Jones, the Japanese skipper came on with his slow left arm orthodox spinners and put the brakes on a bit and Beddingfield at the other end was finding a perfect length and was getting plenty of assistance from the odd pitch. The ball seemed to skid at times and really ripped off the seam at others. The inconsistency was hard to play for.

But the boys kept focusing and concentrating and eking out the runs.

Another quick single and the three figures were on the board and still for just two wickets.

Just 88 to win and eight men in the sheds.

Then out of nowhere, Giles- Jones spun one past Sneaky's usually impenetrable front foot defence and hit his off stump. It was action stations for me and I grabbed my gear and strode out, reminding myself that I was the captain and it was my shift.

Pete's knock was one of his finest. It laid a tremendous foundation. He was out in the 21st over and so had batted through over half the innings. It was sterling stuff and a privilege to see it first hand.

I remember mentioning to Chook that I was quite nervous and that we had played out some great partnerships together in the past. We are indoor cricket batting partners and Chookie really is one of my favourite blokes to bat with. He's always so positive.

Chook had motored into the 40s and was looking odds on to add another International half century to the one he scored in his heroic innings against Vanuatu.

I was pushing and poking and I felt very confident that all I had to do was stick around and the great Chicken would do the business, but then all of a sudden, Beddington who had worked away with great line and length and just a bit of variety off the seam, snuck one through the big man's defence and bowled him for a magnificent 44. It was our top score and as good a 'Chicken 50' as ever I've seen. For those who don't know, Chook has a habit of getting out in the 40's, so we call a score of 40 odd, a 'Chicken 50'. Similarly, he has plenty of scores in the 80s and 90s and they of course are referred to as 'Chicken 100s'.

4 for 105, and that was a bit of a nuisance. I was only on one and I was joined by the Ned Flanders and Mark McDougall Medallist for the last season- the great Sean Mead.

He was fresher now after a break but still exhausted by his bowling heroics.

Meadie doesn't say much in the middle. He does all his talking with the bat. It is a funny combination- I love a chat and Meadie is just about as economical with his words as he is with his bowling.

After a couple of singles and some scatty calling between the wickets by me, Meadie settled in and decided he liked the look of the new bowler. Murata the leg spinner had a bit of a reputation. He had done well in Jersey in the ICC qualifiers and a few of the lads had noticed him warming up and giving the ball a real rip. Meadie didn't really care. After he used the first ball he received from the young leggie as a sighter, he got serious with the next ball.

It disappeared over long on for a huge six. A few of the ex pats on the Japanese side commented something along the lines of it being a lucky shot. Meadie isn't the sort of bloke you bait. Next ball went even further into the jungle for six more.

More goading and the invitation to try his luck for three sixes in row was hosed down by a very sensible defensive shot, but the fifth ball again went into orbit over long on.

The young spinner was broken and looking for somewhere to hide. It was a treat to be watching from the non strikers end.

Then showing all his discretion Meadie smashed one along the ground through mid off for another four runs. 22 off the over, all thanks to Meadie. And this was not some hack spinner; it was a bloke who had succeeded at International level. A few Japanese heads started looking down and whatever the Japanese equivalent of can kicking is, well they were doing it.

All we needed was another over or two of Meadie terrorising the leggie and we were home but I couldn't see their skipper giving the kid another over.

Into the 130s now and only 58 to win.

Beddingfield was proving a real miser and it was very hard to get him away.

Giles- Jones came back into the attack to replace Murata and he found his line and length straight away.

A couple of singles were all we could glean from the next two overs and when Meadie went to smash Beddingfield through the covers and was bowled things changed again. Again we had lost a wicket just when I thought the momentum was all with us. Enter Poochie at 5 for 131. The big man was away straight away with a single and was middling his defensive shots nicely. Giles- Jones was still landing the ball on the spot every ball and it was a real shock when he bowled an abject long hop. Pooch was onto it early and was about to put the ball high and wide over mid wicket for six, when instead of getting up to hip height where his bat was waiting, the ball ran along the ground and hit his pads about 10cm above the ground. The base of middle stump was the only place the ball was ever going to end up and Pooch was gone for one.

6 for 134 and again the momentum had swung towards the Japanese.

Batting at eight was Pred.

Pred had bowled his heart out and his face was burning with determination as he strode out to join me.

Drinks were to be had after the 30th over, so we had two overs to get through and the break would give us a chance to reconstruct a game plan and figure out how to knock off the remaining 54 runs.

Despite some awful running between the wickets, primarily because of my terrible calling, we safely negotiated our way to the drinks break. Another problem I was facing was trying to turn on the plastic pitch. It was very slippery and being 41 and having an ever increasingly wide turning circle I was really struggling to turn around. Having climbed Mt Fuji two days previous didn't help much either.

The equation was 52 off ten overs, four wickets intact.

I remember mentioning to Pred that we still held the club's highest ever partnership record with our 202 run effort. It was along time ago and a lot of water has passed under a lot of bridges for both of us since then, but at least we had some kind of precedent of batting well together.

Five runs per over wasn't easy with the dodgy pitch and the tight bowling but we decided that a few singles, some hard and decisive running and just maybe we'd put a scare or two into the Japanese camp. Maybe the odd loose ball would follow and we realised that every loose ball must be belted for four.

We kept our talk very positive between overs.

At the drinks break I off loaded the bat I'd been using and Chico handed me his pride and joy, 'The Fusion'.

He loves that bat and I was really honoured that he offered it to me to use.

I decided that until the big hitting Pred was seeing them well, the onus would have to fall onto me to take up the attack.

First over after drinks was from Turner. I vaguely remember that I used to like to play the lofted cover drive about a decade ago and I thought it is probably a bit like riding a bike. So when he slotted one up to me just full of a length and just outside off stump, I thought I'd scan through my memory banks and trust 'The Fusion'. Anyway, I played the best lofted cover drive since I was in my 20s and it careered away high over cover for four.

I dashed down the wicket a couple of balls later and drove wide of the newly positioned long off for two more. I respected the opposing captain for putting the man back for what he obviously saw as one of the most dangerous and threatening cover drivers that he had seen.

Seven off that over. 45 off nine now. Just five an over.

Pred got into the act as well and got a couple of fours away and I managed another big cover drive that bounced just inside the fence. A lofted cover drive for six would have been something to brag about. I was so close.

Never mind. Meanwhile, Pred started seeing the ball like a melon and with six overs to go we needed 32 more. It was still very tight. A misfield from a firm Pred drive turned a single into a boundary and the fielding team started getting tense. One bloke started sledging his team-mate and I felt he had them by the throat.

Pred smashed Giles-Jones, the captain over cow corner for six and that really had us on schedule.

22 off five overs was looking very 'do-able', but everything would change if a wicket fell. Brett would have to get accustomed to the conditions and the dodgy pitch and so we both realised the best plan was if we were in the middle when 188 ticked over.

Eight more from the 36th over and we were nearly home. Both of us were middling the ball well and finding the gaps. Ones and twos and the odd four would get us home.

Well that's what we talked about at the end of the over anyway.

Laidler the opening bowler came back and Pred murdered him with a four and a huge slog six over mid on. 11 off that one and we needed only four off three. During the over, Pred and I brought up our half century partnership and a better partnership I can't remember being part of.

I took a single from the first ball of the next over- number 38 and then Pred followed a wide ball and succeeded in getting a thick edge through to the keeper. What a tragedy and what a travesty. We only needed three more to win. He deserved to be there at the end. He had worked so hard.

Meanwhile the mood was getting frisky under the tent where the Flanders cheer squad were assembled.

I didn't want to take too much for granted and had visions of Brett getting a shooter like Poochie and then Daffy and Mickey having to see us home with a world of pressure on their shoulders.

I thought if Brett could just see out the rest of the over, I could have a dip in the 39th over.

Brett looked a trifle nervous but as usual the big bloke took everything in his stride.

We had a yarn about him getting onto the front foot and getting his pads outside the line. We talked about loud calling and running hard.

Cool heads and everything would be alright.

The first ball to Brettie reared up off a length and smashed into his gloves about 1 cm from his nose. It was one of those very occasional balls the kicked rather than skidded. It must have been a bit unsettling, but if it was, Brett didn't let it put him off.

Two balls left in the 38th and at least I knew that even given losing two wickets in those two balls, I'd have a shot at getting us home in the 39th.

I need not have worried. Brett, far from looking at mere defence, decided he would sort this game out. Next ball was a trifle full and Brett leaned that huge frame of his into a majestic front foot on drive. Bat and pad could not have been closer. It was a shot straight from the text book.

I was busy admiring the shot and feeling happy that Brett had survived, when all of a sudden I realised the ball was screaming towards me at the non strikers end. Despite being 41 and very tired I managed to get myself out of the way and get my bat back into the crease just in case the ball hit the stumps.

I remember looking up and seeing that there was no one at mid on and then I realised that I better start running. Down for one and I looked up to see no one anywhere near the ball and I charged back for two and like an epiphany I watched as the ball screamed across the boundary.

What a relief! What a feeling! What a win! What a team! What a way for Mickey to wrack up a century of games!

I charged down towards Brett as the rest of the team and all the supporters came sprinting onto the ground. I recall hugging the big fella and I had the very odd experience of dancing cheek to cheek for a second. The next time we do that Brettie I'd really prefer you had a shave mate.

But who cares when you've just achieved something phenomenal like beating an International cricket team. By this stage all the boys had made the middle. There was jumping up and down and lots of very masculine hugging. No queer stuff. Mind you.

Crossie and Pred lifted me up and I rode on their broad shoulders all the way off the field. It was a real honour. Thanks boys.

I saw Ginge and she looked so proud and Mum and Coll were off their trolleys with excitement.

All the boys shook my hand. It was such a privilege to be in the middle when the win was achieved and a real honour to be part of this team. All 13 men had done their bit and all deserved every accolade.

After the game we all shook hands and had a few good times with the Japanese team. The ex pats were having a laugh and the more reserved indigenous Japanese were a bit more reserved but the Flanders loved talking to them about cricket and how it works here in Japan. Nakano was very popular and anyone that can clean bowl Chico is a hell of a talent. We presented Flanders Club shirts to all the Japanese by birth players and handed out some Australian One Day shirts to their best players and to Mr Miyagi for all his efforts to help organise the tour. He did a awesome job and we really warmly appreciated him. I received a plaque to commemorate our tour and that will take pride of place at 25 Charmaine St. Each Japanese player then presented a traditional Japanese head band, complete with Japanese character writing on it, to each Flanders player. It was a touching and unique gift. None of the fellas took them off for the rest of the day and night. Pred was awarded Man of the Match by the Japanese captain and that was thoroughly deserved and unanimously agreed upon amongst our team. We gave them three very sincere cheers and they gave us their very unique and special equivalent that was delightfully Japanese. I gave a speech thanking their team and their captain for a magnificent game and gave a special thanks to Mr Miyagi. We in turn were very sincerely thanked for coming all the way over to Japan to play. The camaraderie was really grand and something that I'll always cherish. These are memories that can't be bought. A few beers were murdered. Apparently the Japanese Cricket Association rules on drinking a cheeky beer or two after a game aren't quite as stringent as the Churches Cricket Association of Queensland. I did deliberately seek clarification on that particular rule, seeing as that was what I scored my three week suspension for, last season. I didn't want to risk being rubbed out for the rest of the tour. They drove us in a convoy to the train station and from there we savoured every moment of the Flanders team spirit all the way back to our hotel. There were photos galore and every bloke savoured what we had achieved. You can't beat team sport. The wins are magnified 13 fold. Frankie and Roey both shot over congratulatory text messages and this went together nicely with Emma Whalley ringing Brett at lunch time during the game to pass on her positive sentiments. I really wish they all could have been part of the action in a more local way. The Flanders really is a family and it's not nice to have the family scattered. A Press Conference was hastily convened in the hotel corridor and as usual I fielded questions about my retirement. 'What a great time to retire after leading the team to another international victory' was the general theme. Lots of laughs were had and the mood in the camp was absolutely exhilarating. We peeled off for dinner and ended up having to split up so as accommodate our large numbers. This was a shame but unavoidable. Everyone was emotionally and physically exhausted. It was inevitably going to be an early night for most of us. I went to bed a very content and proud man. The humble cricket club called the Ned Flanders had now knocked over a second International Cricket team. Who would have dared to dream it?

The next day, we had to follow the same travel arrangements to head out to Sano again. So it was up at 7am for an early brekkie, before leaving the hotel at 8am. The convoluted array of trains and station hopping saw us at the Sano train station by about 10am and then the locals ferried us out to a new ground that was a sight to behold.

It wasn't so much a cricket ground, or even a baseball ground. It wasn't flat and it wasn't large. There were some flags at various locations and closer inspection revealed these to be golf flags nestled in holes. There were nine to be precise.

It started to dawn on us that we were about to play the Sano Prefecture representative team on a pitch and putt golf course.

There was no pitch as such or even anywhere that looked flat enough to be loosely called a pitch area. But the locals rolled out their green plastic pitch and nailed it into the ground and we found at least 10metres of flattish ground to act as the batting end. We suggested that we bowl just from the one end seeing as how what became known as the bowling end was on about 15 degrees of slope.

We mapped out some boundaries and I suppose all things considered the field and the pitch took reasonable shape. They certainly are very adaptable here in Japan.

It reminded me of being a kid, when any vacant area really could be fashioned into a cricket arena if you were sufficiently determined and keen for a game.

I felt pretty confident that if we could knock over the National team reinforced with five or six ex pat ringers, then defeating the all indigenous Sano team would probably be well within our reach.

We might even have slightly softened our usual ruthless stance on playing hard and it was a treat to spend half an hour doing fielding drills and catching practice with the Sano boys.

I must admit they seemed to be a little bit awestruck by the Flanders. At least six or seven of our team stand over 6 foot 2 inches tall and we well and truly dwarfed the locals. Then some of the lads took a few screamers at catching practice and I think the Sano team were ready to concede right there and then. But credit to them they lapped up the experience of practicing with the more experienced Aussies and everyone had plenty of laughs. The mateship between the Flanders and the Sano fellas was a real thrill to be part of. We genuinely applauded their catches and they seemed to gasp in awe at a few of ours.

Being brought up on baseball, all the Sano lads had tremendous throwing arms and it was fun to watch them mix it with some of the better arms in our team. Chico, Poochie, Stevie and Chook let fly with some huge throws and the locals managed to match them every time.

Today we were without the talents of Roles and Sneaky. Sneaky had some important duties to attend to and Roles was finally laid out by his sciatica. It just puts his effort the previous day into context. He threw himself around in the gully like a man possessed with absolutely no fear and without any consideration for his back pain. His was a noble and selfless performance.

I won the second toss of the tour. I gave the Sano skipper, Akino, an Australian 50 cent coin to toss with. It was emblazoned with a host of native animals. I gave it to him as a present afterwards and I hope he'll enjoy it as a memory of our game and of our country.

We had decided that a 20-20 over game was to be the format today. We were all mentally jaded after the international game and I think the Sano boys were happy to acquiesce and play a shortened game.

I told him his team could bat first and we strode out in a pretty relaxed mood to take up this new challenge. Given the fact that a few of the lads had given up their chance to bat and bowl yesterday, it was important that a few blokes got a fair go today.

Mickey and Daffy took the new pill.

Mickey's first over saw him get his first wicket in Asia as he slipped through the openers defence and rattled up his stumps. Inada was gone for a duck.

Daffy's first over was a maiden and then he chimed in with a wicket in his second over by despatching Nomura for a single.

So that meant that both Daffy and Mickey joined Brett as the only three men to have taken a wicket for the Flanders in three separate countries.

Crossie took over from Mickey and his first over was an over that that man will never forget.

After being cover driven for four from the second ball, he had Miyagi lofting another cover drive. He hit it pretty sweetly but he hit it high and to the right of me at silly mid off. I extended the right hand skywards and it smacked into my palm.

I must say I was quite stoked by that catch- not bad reflexes for an old bloke, I thought.

A couple of balls later and Sugawara edged one to the huge hands of Brettie Whalley at first slip and Crossie had two and then he cleaned bowled Teramura to have three for the over. One over, three for five.

A handy first up over for Crossie. I was so excited for him after he didn't bat or bowl yesterday. His dynamic and fanatical fielding the previous day well and truly made him deserve the rewards that came his way today.

Chook joined in the action and the local men really looked a bit scared of the big six foot eight giant. I think there was a huge sigh of relief when he marked out his run to bowl his leg spinners.

They were probably anticipating some great albino edition of Curtley Ambrose.

Their bodies may have been safe but the Chicken let rip with a delightful spell of huge spinning leggies that dropped and looped and tantalised the batsmen.

In quick succession he clean bowled three men. First to go was Akino, who had played doggedly at the top of the order. A real captain's knock of grit and determination. We thoroughly clapped him off and I shook his hand as he strode past me.

Mutsubara came in at number eight and started lining up to smash everything far over left field. His stance was all base ball and he smashed a couple of fours and one huge six. We were about as excited about it as his team-mates. He had a great eye and he really stuck it to us. Good luck to him. When he got to 20 odd though, I was a bit sick of him and I must say I was a bit relieved when Chook ripped one into his middle stump.

Chookie's third wicket was the number ten, Kanoh, who looked like he had never seen a leg spinner before. I suppose it's quite possible he hadn't.

While Chookie was dominating from one end, I came on to make my international bowling debut. I didn't get a bowl in Vanuatu and I admit I was a bit nervous.

My first ball wasn't one of my best and I think it bounced eight times as it stuck in my hand and then dribbled past the off stump. I had a big shout for LBW mid over and I felt very betrayed by the lack of support from my team mates. One up, all up is usually the call.

I reckon I had Kuboto, the number seven all at sea. Apparently in Japan he is known as the Japanese Gilchrist. They share the number seven position and this kid really looked the goods. It was me versus him. A battle of wits and skill.

I floated up a big loopy offie and he tried to hit me back to Tokyo but only succeeded in top edging it high into the air towards mid wicket, where stood poor Stevie D.

As the ball sailed into the air, I put myself in Stevie's head and realised he must have been a trifle apprehensive about the catch, seeing as how he knew I would not make life pleasant for anybody for the rest of the day if it went down. With great relief, for both Stevie and me, the catch stuck and I had my first international wicket. I was very pleased with myself.

Chico, Brett and Pred all bowled an over or two and finally the tenth wicket fell when Stevie came on and clean bowled Nakano.

I was thrilled for Stevie. He missed out on a wicket yesterday, although he bowled one his greatest ever spells, and it would have been a travesty for him not to collect a scalp on tour.

All out 68 in the 20th over. I was very comfortable with that total.

After lunch and a bit of socialising with the Sano team and their supporters, it was down to business. Daffy and the great B Whal strode out together to open the batting.

Our nemesis from the previous day, Nakano steamed in and poor old Daff bottom edged a square cut into his stumps. He hadn't scored.

In game number 101, Mickey Menagh ambled out with that distinctive gait. That gait that always looks like he's pulled a muscle or just run a marathon.

Brett decided he was going to have a ball and smashed Kanoh, the other opening bowler well into the distant rough adjacent to the pitch and putt course for six big ones.

Mick scored his first run in Asia before succumbing to a horrendous piece of running. Brett's square drive was easily worth one but Mickey couldn't find enough decisiveness and then couldn't find second gear and was run out by a superb throw from the bloke at point. Crossie came and left. He has more international wickets than runs. Not many can boast that sort of bowling record.

Poochie was in at five and top edged his first ball over the keeper for a huge six. He smashed another boundary and then another encore six over midwicket.

Brett meanwhile eased into the twenties before being caught by that man Nakano, off Kuboto.

This brought the Dillon brothers together. I'll long savour the memory of the two Dillon's annihilating an attack at Tingalpa a few years ago. Each scored a century and at least 90% of the runs came from fours and sixes.

Unfortunately, today was to be a bit different. Chico was still perched on 2997 career runs for the club. The 3000 run barrier has never been crossed by any Flanders man and immortality beckoned.

I was umpiring and it was confided to me by the Sano skipper that Sugawara, had never bowled before in a real game.

His first ball was worse than my first ball. I thought we might be embarking on the endless over as every ball seemed to get wider and wider. After a couple of tips, however, he started to land a few roughly on a line and length. For some unknown reason, Chico while still on nought, decided that he should hit a big square cut in the air and miraculously, it went straight to Miyagi who held a very firm catch, cleanly.

Poor old Chico couldn't believe it and I was shattered for the young man. He looked broken.

Anyway, at least we'll all be there first game next season to welcome in Chico's 3000th run. I can't wait.

5 for 42 was the score and I started getting a bit jumpy. Luckily one of the batting heroes of yesterday, Chookie sorted things out a bit by putting a ball into orbit for six and when he fell it was 6 for 64. Nomura took Chook's wicket and he was also making his official bowling debut. He was thrilled.

I made sure I told both Sugawara and Nomura that they had claimed two very prestigious wickets and that Chook and Chico were two of the very best batsmen in the whole competition back home. I hope they understood the magnitude of their achievements.

Pooch and Pred saw us over the line for a four wicket win and so the Ned Flanders XI had gone through the tour of Japan as the undefeated Invincibles that I had half joked about the previous month in an article for the website.

I had pointed out that it was the 60th anniversary of Bradman's 1948 Invincibles tour of England, and wouldn't it be something if the Neddies could emulate this by going through our Japan Tour undefeated.

All 13 players had some huge individual highlight to savour and all 13 will go to their graves with the memories of our epic win against the Japanese National XI.

I felt a bit numb. I suppose when you channel as much energy into something as this tour and then achieve everything you had ever dreamed of, things inevitably feel a bit strange.

We decided that seeing how things had finished a bit early, we could probably squeeze another 10-10 over game in. In the interests of international diplomacy, we'd split up.

The Laurie's boys would provide 6 players to go with 5 Sano lads and the Wide Bay fellas split a team with the rest of the locals.

But first we had a unique honour in store for us.

The Sano Mayor has a keen interest in cricket and Mr Miyagi had arranged for the Mayor to come out and meet the Flanders.

International cricket stars one day, international ambassadors the next!

The Mayor gave a speech that all seemed very formal and Mr Miyagi translated that he was thanking the Neddies for coming over to Japan and playing the noble game of cricket. Not needing much prompting to speak, I reciprocated with a speech and thanked all the Japanese Cricket association and especially Mr Miyagi. I explained that we all thought that there was some great talent in Japan and that we all hoped that the great game would prosper. On Mr Miyagi's advice I also pointed out that to play cricket at a higher level really requires top class playing fields and that I hoped that the Sano government could see its way clear to build a cricket facility for the cricketing men of Sano.

Mr Miyagi translated for me and everyone seemed quite happy.

Happy was an understatement to describe how the reserved and very formal Mayor looked when I presented him with an official Ned Flanders Cricket Club shirt. He beamed with pride and nearly broke down in tears. He tried it on immediately and was last seen climbing into his official government car still wearing it.

The ten over game was a riot. Things were very relaxed when the Sano boys were batting but when it was Flanders versus Flanders things really heated up.

The Laurie's boys batted first and hit up 60. Each batting pair- a Flanders and a Sano man- batted for two overs and lost five runs every time they got out.

I really enjoyed batting with my partner. He seemed to have mastered the front foot push and he really seemed very intent on not losing five runs. He successfully achieved this but he was let down by his Flanders partner, as I tried to hit Pooch into the Sea of Japan and had my off stump knocked over.

Some of the Flanders boys seemed quite happy about this.

I have no idea who scored runs for our team and who took the wickets for the Wide Bay squad, but everyone had a ball.

Being slightly competitive, the Laurie's boys really did want to win and I am sure the Wide Bay boys did too.

It came as a tremendous thrill that when the sums were done at the end of the game, it turned out that the Laurie's legends had done the job by six runs.

Much as it had been one of the tour highlights in Vanuatu when we split up and played touch footy on the beach with the Vanuatu blokes, this game was a real memory to cherish.

The Sano players were so polite and gentle natured and it was a testament to this that all the Neddies really softened and enjoyed playing cricket just for fun without too much attention to the score board and winning. I really thank them for that. I hadn't enjoyed playing cricket this much since I was a kid.

It really is very easy to get very caught up with winning.

Mind you winning is a lot of fun too.

At the end of the cricket playing, we again enjoyed the company of the Sano players. Quietly spoken to a man, they were all really nice young blokes. I presented two brand new 'Red King' balls to Sugawara and Nomura to commemorate their wicket taking exploits against Chook and Chico. They were over the moon with happiness.

All of our excess touring shirts and a few excess caps were placed in a pile and distributed to various Sano players. Everyone of them received a shirt and uniformly they all loved them.

Crossie donated his pads and batting gloves to the Sano club in a very altruistic gesture and Chico gave their keeper his favourite practice ball that bounces at all sorts of weird angles when it bounces. It will be superb practice for the young keeper. He was last seen taking balls at all sorts of bizarre angles as a bunch of his team mates threw the odd shaped ball at him enthusiastically.

All the two piece practice balls that we had brought over were also donated to their club.

To side track for a bit, Mum and Coll did a tremendous job all day as official scorers and Coll's immaculate hand writing will do the 'Dan Roe Score Book' proud. I don't think Mum has done the score book since I was at school. Well done both of them.

Phil came out and cheered us home again, too. He brought his sketch pad and peeled off a few more masterpieces between supporting the Flanders.

On the long trip home, there was a mellow feeling in the train. We had set ourselves some lofty and mighty ambitions and had the tenacity and skill and the overwhelming team spirit to achieve them. And now our focus was a bit hazy. There was excited talk about the next overseas tour. Maybe Africa will be our next continent, or maybe Bhutan or Nepal.

We all reminisced about the highlights of a week that none of us will forget.

Besides the obvious cricketing highlights, everyone rated Hiroshima, the baseball and Mt Fuji as the highlights. The other recurring theme however was that the whole touring party was absolutely overwhelmed by the hospitality and generosity of the Japanese people. Everyone had a story about how a local had gone way out of their way to help. They really are a wonderful race of people here in Japan.

Tonight's Press Conference was just a great excuse to relive the many highlights of the last two days of cricket and all the boys had plenty of laughs.

I don't even recall getting asked about retirement.

The girls had scoped out some possible dinner venues for our finale dinner. They had all kitted themselves out in the quintessential Japanese young ladies long socks. They all looked sensational. Ginge even did piggy tails for me. It was quite a treat.

A few stations away we travelled and found ourselves in the busiest part of Tokyo. In fact some one mentioned that one intersection that we crossed was the busiest pedestrian crossing on the planet.

Tokyo by night was exhilarating. So much neon and so much frenetic activity even though it was well into the evening.

We ended up at a Korean restaurant, after a number of the girls' first choice spots couldn't accommodate the big group. The food was OK and the atmosphere was a bit subdued. Exhaustion was well and truly setting in and things seemed to fold a bit prematurely. It was inevitable really.

And so to bed. I was one very tired 41 year old. Tired but incredibly proud and content.

God, I love being a Flandersman.

As we returned from the game and were preparing to head out for dinner we were told we had just missed Sneaks.

Sneaky Pete had peeled off to London just ten minutes before we arrived home. He was distraught at having to miss us apparently and I was gutted to miss him too.

All the boys were.

Monday was our last day on tour. Everyone went out on their separate missions in the humid, steamy drizzle of Tokyo. Freya and I wandered around town and saw some gardens and some shrines. We enjoyed our last sushi meal and it was sensational.

A few other people headed to the shops and especially the sporting shops.

Phil had ducked out to the airport at 7 am and we'll not see him again until we are all home.

The rest of us gathered at the hotel at 1 30 pm and started the long trip back to Osaka and hence the long flight home to Brisbane. Louise Menagh was flying out of Tokyo and so I won't see her again until I am back in Charmaine St.

After arriving at Osaka, we said farewell to Mum and Coll, and Meadie and Jac and Stevie and Taz who were all staying an extra day in Osaka. Chook and Mel were staying at Kyoto for another four days as well, so that was the end of them.

I was very emotional to see the team that had been everybody's everything for the last 11 days, all slowly disassembling.

So a core of Flanders- Freya and me, Chico and Poochie, Mickey, Brettie, Crossie and Preds, headed out to the Osaka international airport, called Kansai.

Chico and Pooch were very sad about saying goodbye to each other. It will be a while before those brothers see each other. I am so glad they managed to have this magnificent 11 days together though. These sorts of memories will be never forgotten for two brothers.

The overnight flight was far less eventful the trip into Osaka 11 days before.

Everyone managed a bit of a snooze and as we arrived in Brissie, things just unravelled quite quickly.

Before I knew it I was home again and it was just Ginge and me.

Just to finish off, I'll recall a few special highlights about each member of the team and the supporters that so loyally came along.

I'll start with Stevie D the VC, seeing as how he was so passionate and determined to make this tour a reality. He did an enormous amount of work for the club.

My favourite memory of Stevie from the tour occurred when we were on the train home from Sano after the International win.

I remember standing next to him for a photo with our Japanese head bands on and just laughing at absolutely nothing. That sort of high is rare. We were high on Flanders- the greatest high there is.

It just seemed to be a moment that symbolised all the work that had been done in the previous year or so.

Mickey's most outstanding contribution to my memory bank was not the 'using the Room Key as a rail pass' story, but rather the emotion that he showed when he was presented with his plaque to commemorate his century of games for the club. I realised how much the club means to that particular bloke. He loves it. Chook, sweating and gasping but still batting on and on during his heroic 44 will always be with me.

What a knock by the big man. It reminded me of his 53 in Vanuatu and his 80 odd in a Plunkett cup game. Both those knocks were scored in incredible heat and humidity. The tougher the conditions, the better the Chook goes.

Meadie's heroics on the field always seem to be standard fare but what I'll remember is the steely determination and resilience he showed to climb Mt Fuji. Well done mate. Everything he does, he does without fuss and bother. He just gets on and gets the job done.

I loved the look on Crossie's face when he came off after his first over against Sano with 3 for 5 after his name. What an over. He so deserved the success for all the tireless efforts he has put in not just on this tour but throughout his very long career with the Neddies. I was stoked for him. Crossie's army career takes him all over the place but what I admire is that if he is in Brissie on a Saturday and it's summer, there is only one place he'll be and that's playing for the mighty NF XI.

The cutting loose of Sneaky from his usual slightly shy and retiring ways and turning into an absolute party animal was hilarious to see and experience. He generated so much laughter. He had a blinder. Of course I was extremely thankful for his batting deeds. His opening effort in the International was the foundation on which we built the win. Of course hearing Sneaks tell me every day that he was on the wagon and it was going to be a dry trip so that he could really stay focussed for the cricket matches and then watching him cut loose on the grog nearly every night really was hilarious.

It's easy to remember Chico's two blinding catches but I was really stoked to see how much he enjoyed catching up with Pooch. The way he took the disappointment of his limited batting success was really impressive too. He certainly has plenty of fortitude and character.

What a treat it was to have the Pooch back on board. Always laughing and always running amok. He really does do a huge favour for team spirit, on and off the paddock. It was just great to have his incredibly contagious laughter back in the ranks. His key wicket in the Saturday game was so pivotal, too.

Daffy seems to shine in every overseas tour that we have. I had to laugh as we were on our way out to Sano for the first game and I was overhearing Daffy explaining a whole stack of nuclear physics to Sneaky. It wasn't really the standard pre match chit chat that I was expecting. I suppose if you wanted to learn about nuclear physics, he'd be the bloke to ask, after all he has got a Ph D in it. It made me proud that while the team really does play cricket well together, there are just so many other dimensions to each of the fellas. So many of the boys have outstanding accomplishments off the field as well as on the cricket field.

Roles effort of endurance under his rock way up high on Mt Fuji takes some beating. I know he was shattered at not summiting, but he achieved a lot more than any of the blokes that did. Then he came out on the International game and fielded like Ricky Ponting. He threw himself about despite all his aches and pains. His team spirit is something to be inspired by. He is such a worthy recipient of the Hall of Fame status.

The best memory of Brett is not that hard to predict. Brett's 'nose over the ball defence' as the first ball he faced spat up at him from just on a length and then the belligerence that he showed in playing the perfect on drive straight off the middle of the bat and straight to the fence to win us the game will be a two ball innings I will forever savour.

And lastly, of the players, I will always cherish the 50 odd run partnership that Pred and I shared. It was a real treat to put together a significant partnership in the match with the bloke who I have probably batted with more than any other Neddy.

And well done Pred on the Man of the Match award. It was well deserved and I reckon it might just make up for the disappointment of Mt Fuji. What a difference a day can make in a bloke's life.

Of the supporters, I better start with Mum and Coll and finish with Ginge.

It was tremendous to have Mum and Coll on board. It was a huge thrill for me to come off after the win and be able to share one of the greatest days of my life with them both. Mum has been there for my five best ever days. The two wins against Vanuatu, the win against Japan, my graduation day from Med school and most importantly, my wedding day. These five are in no particular order either.

Coll has four of the top five list covered. Coll's ability to sketch and capture a moment with his drawings always inspires and amazes me. His line drawing of the press conference was simply brilliant.

To see Mel bravely struggle up Mt Fuji, despite being handicapped by headaches was also inspiring. She never gave up. I respect that sort of tenacity in adversity. I was so excited to see her get to the top. It was an awesome achievement

So too, Jac. She's just like Meadie. She just gets on and does things with a no nonsense approach to life. It was also great to see her cut loose and run amok a few times. She certainly added plenty of hilarity to every occasion.

Taz was a dynamo. Her contribution with planning and logistics for the whole trip were paramount to the outstanding success of the tour. We all owe her, big time. The way she took over and single handedly sorted us all out after we had the disappointment of having our initial two games washed out was really marvellous. She had us down to Nara in no time and the whole day was a raging success all thanks to her. Phil's heart felt poem that he wrote and recited the night before the International was really moving.

It really impressed me that he came along despite the terrible disappointment of Frankie being trapped at Princess Alexandra Hospital by their unsympathetic rostering. He became an integral member of the party and really added a tremendous dimension to the event with his art work. His presence helped make up for the collective disappointment we all felt at not having Frankie with us.

Louise Menagh joined the tour late and came out and watched her brother play his 100th game. It seems really odd to have your parents, wife and two of your neighbours on a holiday with you. It really is funny where life takes you. If I hadn't have moved to Charmaine St all those years ago, all of this might never have eventuated.

And last and certainly not least, my wife, Freya.

I'll never forget running off after the Saturday game and seeing Freya there looking so proud. I was really moved. I was so glad that she could see me doing what I do best and that's play cricket with the Flanders.

The other thing that is important to me is that she loves the Flanders almost as much as I do and that sort of support is extremely pivotal to the club. Thanks Ginge.

So now that the Neddies have moved into the ICC's top 30 countries, who knows where the next International tour will take us. Africa looks good. Some of the boys could have a lash at Mt Kilimanjaro- why not do it at night for a laugh.

I am sure we'll find plenty of mischief to get up to in the deepest, darkest continent.

And I'm sure we'll play some pretty good cricket while we are there.

I can see the headlines now-

2010. The Flanders Conquer Africa.

Stay tuned.