

The Flanders Continue Their Quest for World Domination in Sporocco

A Captain's Journal of the Ned Flanders Cricket Club's Undefeated Tour of Spain, Morocco and Spain, 2010

By Matt Young

The legend of the Ned Flanders cricket club can no longer be contained within the realms of the Queensland Churches Cricket Association. Indeed it can no longer be contained within our nation's sea girt borders. The Flanders quest for world domination necessitated the club tour even more exotic locations. In 2006 the team had successfully toured and defeated Vanuatu in the Oceania region, before our all conquering undefeated run through Japan in 2008. With Oceania and Asia successfully ticked off, the team now looked towards Europe and Africa. Several options were looked at before settling on Spain, Morocco and Gibraltar. This would mean a third and fourth continent could be completed as the mighty men in maroon followed their dreams of playing international cricket in all six inhabited continents.

A tour embracing all these distant locations was to be a logistical nightmare. Just signing up enough personnel for the tour was to be a tough task. The financial barriers precluded a few of the team from joining up, but eventually we mustered up 15 players all keen to see Europe and North Africa. Five supporters were also deadly keen. A few heroes from past campaigns were not able to play. Of course we all understood that Big Bad Brett Whalley would have to sit out the trip, with Emma, his lovely wife having just done her part for the future of the club by bringing Hamish Mannix Whalley into the world just a few weeks before departure date. Meady and Jacinta are expecting too and so Meady thought discretion was the better part of valour and decided to stay in Brisbane. Veterans of our Vanuatu sojourn, Roey and Harry, both couldn't make it and Exelby planted his honey moon right smack bang in the middle of the Moroccan leg and so he wisely decided to head off to Thailand with Smaro rather than jump on the Flanders juggernaut. Nothing kills a marriage early like the groom missing the honey moon. Pranivan had study commitments, as did the great Tommy Dover. Tommy had recently smashed his physician's exam and has to do a viva in late July. While we were all very excited about his success, there was a tinge of disappointment because if he had failed he promised to get on board for Sporocco. The great rampaging Roland O'Regan, seasoned campaigner in Vanuatu and Japan, also had to sit out his first tour. He has just become engaged to the very beautiful Sammy and with buying a house and his own thriving Barrister's practice he just couldn't make it. This was a huge tragedy because where ever Roles goes there is always some kind of a story and oodles of excitement. Great club man that he is, Roey printed out a whole page of statistics that would be relevant to the tour, including impending milestones and club records. Of course he will be very eager to paw over the score books when we return and update everybody's career stats. He is a legendary club man.

A core of ten players had no hesitation and signed up almost immediately. Chico and Pooch would be in London and would easily slip down to Spain and hence Morocco and Gibraltar. Stevie would never miss this sort of chance to expound the virtues of Flanders life on the world stage. Naturally Chookie was always going to jump on to a band wagon of this magnitude and so

was Mel. From a personal point of view, I had a few quandaries. Of course the chance to tour with the team is always a dream come true. The chance to return to Morocco and Spain would be a thrill and the chance to add a new country to my passport, in the name of Gibraltar would be a great opportunity. But, just as the lovely Emma had just added to the next Flanders generation, so had my very lovely wife, Freya. Andrew was going to be just three months old when the tour departed and of course it was going to be very tough to leave the both of them behind. I had no doubts that Ginge would handle things at home, alone, magnificently well, but I was very concerned about how I would deal with such a long absence at such a pivotal stage of Andy's life. In the end Ginge convinced me it was the right thing to do, to join the team. After all we both want Andy to live a life of adventure and to follow his dreams and indulge his sporting ambitions. I would be a role model for him. At least they were the mental tricks I used to justify leaving him behind. Mum and Coll had made the previous two tours and would have been certain starters for this one, but they decided to stay behind and help Ginge with Andy as needed. It is a noble family that supports me.

As the youngster of the team, Ramjam would be a tremendous asset to the squad. He is still at university, studying commerce. He acquits himself brilliantly at uni, and this semester pulled out four sevens. A remarkable achievement by the young bloke. I thought finances might kill his hopes, but he worked really hard in his part time job and with his parents' blessings, he put his money down and joined the team to tour. Of course being the junior meant that he would have several pivotal duties to perform. Some of the senior fellas suggested that it was one of his chores to carry our bags, but the young bloke would have none of that. However he was very happy to be the sole custodian of the team mascot. Camel Toe the camel would follow the team and need to be present at all key Official Flanders Functions on tour. Ramjam's mum sewed a lovely little saddle for Camel Toe with NF XI embroidered. He looked very dashing.

After missing Japan because of the Draconian attitudes of the Princess Alexandra Hospital administration, Adam 'Frankie' Frankel was absolutely champing at the bit to make the trip. So much so that he also signed up his wife, the very charming and very pregnant Agi. As usual Phil Frankel could see the glories to be had. He had been to Japan with the Flanders in 2008 and was keen to make his second tour with the team. So the three Frankels laid their money down.

Preds form in Japan, on and off the field, meant that he was sure to back up for his second tour. He had had a ball in Asia and couldn't wait to unleash in Africa and Europe. Benny had never toured with the team before. I think he secretly was getting a bit tired of hearing all the great yarns that have evolved from previous tours and I reckon he desperately wanted to be part of the new chapters as they unfolded. Being the reigning Ned Flanders Medalist might have just sealed the deal for Benny, too. Daffy has only played three or four games for the club in Brisbane, but back in 2006, the young bloke saw the merit in the concept and jumped into things boots and all. He played a starring role in several games in Vanuatu. By a bit of a fluke or perhaps cricketing destiny, he was in Japan when we headed there two years later, and again he enjoyed a hugely successful tour. When the idea of the Sporocco tour was spawned, Daffy was one of the first blokes to pay his money and sign up. It was a great treat to have the young bloke in the team again. He never lets us down and is always tremendous company off the paddock. He adds a bit more to the medical contingent too, having just squared away his first year of medical school down in Melbourne.

So we had ten cricketers signed up from an early stage. Of course to play cricket we needed at least one or two more able bodies. Sneaky Pete had expressed some hesitation from a financial point of view. Obviously, he is a key member of the club. He is a Hall of Famer and an icon at

the top of the order. Throw in the famous ‘Club Sneeps’ from Japan and his presence was vital to the success of the trip. ‘Club Sneeps’ is the name of Sneaky’s room on tour. When a few drinks start flowing, Sneaky’s far more liberal and party animal persona comes out. The original idea for Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was probably spawned by Robert Louis Stevenson after a night in ‘Club Sneeps’. Eventually, in the drunken aftermath of our outstanding grand final victory, Sneaky held out his hand and I shook it to seal his fate. He would become a triple tourist. I was very relieved to have him aboard. When it comes to icons within the club, none stands taller than the great Michael James Menagh. He is the second most capped Neddy, the first man to take 100 wickets, the long term vice captain and occasional skipper and of course the man about whom more folk lore stories exist than any other. Everyone has a favorite Menagh story and a favourite Menagh moment. Just the mention of his name makes every Flanders man stand a bit taller and play a bit harder. He is and possibly belongs in, an institution. Mickey took a bit of persuading. He had toured twice before and was keen to come but after a few overseas bashes in recent months, Mick’s cash supply was a bit compromised. Coll has provided me with the wise words “you only regret things you don’t spend money on” before and these words seemed to be just the ticket to get the great Menag to commit. So we had a twelve.

Any other players would be a bonus. Leo and Roy both played their first seasons with the Flanders this year and were so impressed that they signed up with very little cajoling. Roy even knocked back tickets to the Soccer World Cup final just to make the trip. That is amazing commitment from a young bloke in his first season. Leo’s girlfriend, the very lovely Sally also jumped at the chance to travel with the Flanders. Pete Dunne the man who first played for the team 11 years before and came back this season and tried his guts out in the field also shelled out his money. I am sure he had well and truly become sick of hearing about all the ripping yarns that have unfolded on Flanders trips, and he wanted to see them occur first hand. The last person to sign up was Chook’s sister CJ. Her real name is Nat but as it is in the club culture, a nickname is vital and Chook Junior was abridged to CJ.

So there it was. Fifteen players and five supporters all keen to make the grandest Flanders trip yet. Twenty days of excitement and hard cricket was promised and while all these recruiting dilemmas were proceeding, Chico and Stevie were hard at work putting every detail of the itinerary under the microscope. Chico was in charge of the Spanish leg and worked tirelessly liaising with the Sporting Alphas provincial team. They are the most powerful team in Spain and supply nine players for the national team. The original aim was to play the Spanish National XI but for a variety of reasons that fell through and the Sporting Alphas were a very fine substitute. We would play them at the Mediterranean coastal town of Albir. Chico even took a trip down there from London to scope out the facilities and ensure the Flanders visit would be a smooth one. Meantime, Stevie D was working hard with the Moroccan Cricket Board. We came up with a schedule that saw us visit most of the key tourist spots, as well as a playing schedule that pitted us against their national team in series of four matches. After 11 days in Morocco, we would then head across the Straits of Gibraltar and play their national team in the shadows of the famous Rock. So we had six games spanned over three countries and over two more continents. We also penciled ourselves in to have a little bit of time in London at either end of the trip for some sightseeing and fun. All these logistical details were attended to over several months and occupied Chico and Stevie’s daily lives all this time. The club and every member of the touring party owed them an enormous debt of gratitude. Well done those two men and thanks.

So we had a team, we had some supporters, and we had a detailed traveling itinerary. The next step was of course what the Ned Flanders Cricket team does best and that is ‘BIG NOTE’!

The tour received plenty of media coverage and there was no end to the official well wishers. Our old mate Bernie Pramberg did a delightful story on the tour in his Sunday Mail column. He confided in me that it was the first time anyone had been covered for a second time. He had written a similar piece about our Japan tour back two years ago. The local papers ran a syndicated story on us as well. The photo shoots for each story were tremendous fun, with a fair section of the club getting involved and getting their faces in the paper. The flashiest story though was featured in the very prestigious Brisbane Indian Times. Ramjam successfully lobbied the editor in chief to run an interview and photo shoot. The resulting article really made us look great and the photos were yet again something to be enjoyed. The day even finished up with the editor offering me a column every month during summer to keep their readers up to date with the Flanders' season's progress. Of course I said I'd love to and I reckon it will be a dream medium through which to channel Flanders propaganda.

The media coverage helped pave the way for the possibility of a few sponsors helping us out. Our sponsors from previous tours, like MAP, QDI, QML, Queensland Churches Cricket and Beez Kneez were all thrilled to support us again. Commonwealth Bank, Buranda also were extremely generous. My employer, Medeco also threw in some team shirts and so did Exact Radiology. A few sunscreen companies and even Gatorade donated some products. Our mates at Kookaburra donated a smorgasbord of equipment that will be useful for many seasons to come. Queensland Cricket donated some batting and 'keeping pads. This meant that we could look even more professional with maroon kit to go with our maroon playing outfits. Everyone I spoke to really seemed engrossed and enthusiastic about what we were doing. I think that deep down anyone that has ever held a bat or bowled a ball has fantasized about going on an overseas cricket tour. It is not a hard dream to sell to prospective sponsors. They all loved it.

Ramjam deserves all the credit for the last piece of the jigsaw that fell into place. He suggested that we write to a few politicians and see if we could receive some official support. He peeled off a letter to Lord Mayor Campbell Newman and received a lovely letter of support back. He didn't have as much luck with the Premier or the Prime Minister though. Fortunately I did have better luck and I was very excited to tell the team that the Premier of Queensland, Anna Bligh and also the Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd had both written quite long and very personal letters of support for the mighty Flanders club. I have to admit that I was a bit overwhelmed at having the PM waving the Flanders flag. He wrote the letter on his last full day in Office. Obviously he decided that writing to the Neddies was the last thing that was needed to be tick off in his career ambitions list and now that it was done he could move over for Julia Gillard. She duly replaced him in the PM's Office the very day after he wrote to us.

Of course this was a cricket tour and fundamental to the whole concept was that we had better play some good cricket and hopefully win a few games. So in the weeks leading up to the tour we trained hard. Pooch and Chico were in London and were playing in a local competition. Their form was pretty slick they told me. The rest of us in Brisbane were working hard at the nets on the weekends and also at the bowling machine once a week. We had played our last game in late March but the break had done us good in terms of reinvigorating our enthusiasm and recharging our mental reserves. Obviously the huge mental high we all experienced in winning the Grand Final had held us all in good stead and had kept team morale at an all time high.

The form of all the lads was looking good. I had every reason to believe that we could achieve something very special and dare I say it go through the tour undefeated. The idea of emulating our Japan tour and Bradman's 1948 Tour of England by remaining unbeaten was very appealing. While I wasn't that keen on expressing such aspirations out loud, for fear of putting the mocker

on things, the never say die Stevie was telling everyone that would listen that we were a lay down misere to win every game. I have always loved his unbridled positivity.

We did plenty of home work on the internet and found out as much as we could about the pitches and the local conditions. The ICC told us that Morocco was ranked well into the 70's and that Gibraltar was in the 40's in the world rankings. In other words well below Japan and Vanuatu. This was encouraging. We also scanned the Morocco, Gibraltar and Spain Cricket websites for notions of their best players. We did the best home work that we could. Interestingly while doing this, Stevie found an extensive write up about the Flanders in the Sporting Alphas site and also a huge essay about us on the Morocco edition of the Lonely Planet. We just love a headline.

With all the lead up work done, it was fun to count the work days down until the departure date. Finally on Tuesday night, the 22nd June, we all headed out to the airport. A few of the lads had left early. Frankie and Agi had spent a week in London before the tour commenced. Leo and Sally had also availed themselves of the opportunity and headed over a few days early. Roybie had caught up with some mates in London too. Sneaky was to just sneak off on his own on the following day. That left six blokes to convene at the Brisbane International airport and head out as a pack. Pete Dunne was there and all the Dunnettes came out to see their hero off. Ramjam and of course Camel Toe were itching to get started. Ramjam's parents proudly saw him off. Preds and Benny were doing their best Bash Brothers behavior while Delia contemplated a few weeks without Benny for the first time since they've been together. Nic Ford and the two Mini Preds seemed to take it in their stride. It was just another international cricket tour for their family member. The Menagh family all came out to make sure the big vice captain got away safely. Ginge and Andy came out to see me off and my Mum as usual was there to wave me off on another epic adventure, as she has done dozens of times before. I must admit it was very sad to have to say goodbye to my lovely ginger haired wife and my equally much loved baby boy. It certainly gave me plenty of incentive to do well. If I was going to leave them behind for three weeks then I might as well make sure it was worth it by winning everything in sight. To keep me going, Ginge made up a lovely little photo album with a few favourite snaps of Andy, Ginge and Mum and Coll and even a few bonus snaps of other mates and favourite Flanders moments. She's very thoughtful.

Stevie D and Chookie (and hence Mel and CJ) were both off to Liam's wedding the following Saturday and so with very sorrowful hearts they decided to miss the first few days of the tour. Specifically they would miss the Spain leg of the tour. Despite their disappointment, they came out to see the team off and I know that meant a lot to everyone boarding. Liam's wedding to Smaro turned out to be bigger than Ben Hur and a lovely day all round. Stevie had a blinder as groomsman and did a marvelous job as MC by all accounts. With me getting on the plane, I had to delegate to Ginge to wave our family's flag on the joyous day. My one regret of the whole tour was that I had to miss Liam's wedding. It would have meant a lot to me to go. We have plenty of great memories together and it would have been a real treat to witness his big day with Smaro. I know they'll have great life together.

The plane took off at 1 am. A long sleepless slog saw us arrive at Honk Kong. Poor old Pete Dunne sat between the Bash Brothers all the way. Luckily he must've tamed them and there were no shenanigans. One positive was that we could get off and stretch out for a couple of hours, but the big bonus was that Daffy's flight from Melbourne would catch up with us in Honkers. It was exciting to the extreme to catch up with Daffy after not seeing him for many

months. He is now in Melbourne and is one year into his medical degree down there. This is on top of his Ph D in Nuclear Physics. The kid is a dead set genius.

Back on the plane we climbed for the second leg into London. Again the flight seemed to take forever but a few movies and perhaps a few moments of shut eye saw us arrive at Heathrow in the mid afternoon. Queuing at customs at Heathrow is always a circus and the horrendously long line on this occasion was in keeping with every other experience I have had at this airport. The only interesting point was seeing Ossie Osbourne scamper past us in a bizarre drug haze. On a different day and with more sleep under the belt I am sure one of us would have sorted out getting a photo of the team with him. Collecting the bags was completed successfully and we bade farewell to Ramjam as he peeled off for a couple of days with some family friends. The rest of us loaded up on the Heathrow express and headed for Paddington Station. After a short trip we disembarked and were thrilled to see two very familiar faces. Poochie and Chico had come out to meet us at the platform. It was a real relief to see the two boys. Pip arrived soon after and it was as though the beads of mercury were beginning to join together. Chico had lined us up a lovely hotel that the three pseudo locals walked us to and then after a bit of a freshen up we all headed out for a pub feed right near Hyde Park. By this stage Roybie and the Frankels had arrived at the hotel and the team was gradually coming together in London. Every time a familiar face walked into the Hotel foyer everyone felt relieved and excited. It really was amazing to think that a bunch of mates from Brisbane were catching up in a hotel foyer on the other side of the planet. Traditional pub food was eaten by one and all and a few Pimms were sipped. Apparently this is the drink of summer here in London. After dinner we headed back to the hotel and crowded into the room of Daffy, Menag and Roybie to watch the Australian soccer team play against Ghana in the Soccer World Cup in South Africa. They won the game but didn't score enough goals to advance to the next round. Still a win is a win and we took that as a good omen for our sporting endeavors in Africa. Bed was a welcome sight after an awfully long day and a half. Pete and I were set to room together. No one else could handle rooming with either of the old fellas so we thought we'd stick with each other. During the night Menag got the ball rolling on the count of tour stories. He apparently was sleep talking during the night. There was something about using someone else's email account and we thought it was great that Mick was even trying to save a buck in his sleep. Mickey also managed to fall asleep on a tea bag which managed to stay attached to his back until morning time and so the new nickname of "Tetley" stuck with the big VC for the rest of the day.

After a bit of a sleep in which was tempered by the overwhelming excitement of being on a Flanders tour in London, we made our way out to Wimbledon. The second and third round matches were being played and most of us decided it was too good an opportunity to miss. With the current state of Aussie tennis it is wise to try and get to the early rounds of a tournament. The queue at Wimbledon made the Heathrow line look pathetic. We sat and stood for about three hours but the Poms do the queue very well. Everyone was very refined and polite and there was plenty of chit chat between all the punters. Pete and Pred managed to find a soccer ball. The story was a bit hazy but it sounded like they found it in someone's front yard and one of them had had to climb a fence to get at it. Either way we didn't ask too many questions and hence didn't hear too many lies and we enjoyed kicking the round ball around the park while everyone stood around. Ice creams were enjoyed as well and of course the media became involved when they saw a large bunch of Flanders boys. Roybie directed the camera my way and I was asked about the state of Australian tennis and the pleasantries of sitting in such an abysmally long

queue. Tragically I didn't think quickly enough to mention the team and this is something I will have to feel dreadfully guilty about for a long time. Later in the queue Pete and I got involved in some promo work. We ended up with a free T shirt and some water bottles that were soon confiscated when we arrived at the gate. Easy come, easy go I suppose. Another huge coincidence today was catching up with Leo and Sally who were standing in the queue about five kilometers closer to the gate than us. They'd had a ball so far and it was great to hear their news. It also meant that every player and tourist was now accounted for. Earlier in the day Sneaky had arrived at the hotel fresh from Heathrow. He was keen to have a snooze and so we left him in his room.

We enjoyed matches involving Ball and Guccione from Australia. They were playing a men's doubles match and they managed to do the business and record a win. The Aussie player of the moment, fresh from her Final appearance in the French Open, Sammy Stosur came out to play women's doubles and again her team got up. As she left the courts she did yell out "thanks boys" to the Flanders men. Naturally we assumed that we had been a significant source of inspiration for young Sammy and we were just glad to have helped out another Australian sporting superstar. In between times we met a few big wigs. Aussie Davis Cup Captain, John Fitzgerald was watching the men's doubles and was very happy to meet us all and give us a photo opportunity. He was very interested in the Flanders tour and wished us well. I asked him how his batting was presently and he replied that he "was a bit of a cross bat slogger". I reckon he'd have a pretty good eye and even if he was slogging he would have gone alright in the lower order. Then with all the pomp and pageantry that only England can provide, The Queen herself came out onto a verandah from the centre court complex and waved at us. I presume she saw the maroon shirts and took the chance to welcome the Flanders boys to England and hope for our success on the field in Spain, Morocco and Gibraltar.

A few of us enjoyed that quintessential Wimbledon repast of strawberries and cream. I must say they were the best strawberries I have ever had and I really felt it was a definitive experience. On one of the outside courts history was being made. Two no name players called Mahut and Isner were battling out history's longest ever match. They ended up playing for 11 hours and the fifth set went to 70-68. There was a huge crowd taking up every vantage point possible and I could only just get a glimpse of about a quarter of the court. Neither player looked healthy and I reckon the happiest bloke at the tournament was the bloke set to play the winner in the third round. Anyway it was a treat to witness such a auspicious match on our day trip to Wimbledon. It certainly had some amazing atmosphere and a real sense of history. The statue of Fred Perry was special and the score boards and match roster board was updated with precision on a minute to minute basis. It was easy to blur my eyes a bit and drift off into fantasy land and see Laver and Borg and Newk all playing on these outside courts. It had that same magical feeling as Lords.

After we left the tennis a few of the wannabe cultural types, namely Pete, Daffy, Preds and me headed out to the theatre end of London. The West End is awash with shows and musicals and it was a tough choice but on my recommendation we procured tickets for "Billy Elliot". I had loved the movie and I convinced the lads that the stage show would be a pearler. Poor old Daffy was knackered from jet lag and I think he dozed off a couple of times during the show. Pete pretty much hated it, so I was 0 from 2 when it came to people appreciating my suggestion. Luckily the ever theatrical Preds enjoyed the whole experience and I must say I really loved the whole concept of a stage show live in London. The West End really is the most famous place on the globe for these sorts of things and it was a treat to be able to enjoy it with mates. It took me back a bit because it was actually doing Mark Sherry's musical back in 1998 that Preds and I

met. It's funny how life pans out and that 12 years later we would be on a cricket tour together and taking in a show at the West End of London.

So after just one full day in London we were already ripping the marrow out of life, with a traditional English pub dinner, some Pimms, strawberries and cream at Wimbledon and of course a show at West End. We were living large and indulging in all the definitive London experiences.

Next day all the mental cob webs of jet lag had passed and I woke up full of life's zest. Pete was up at about 5am and headed out for a jog in nearby Hyde Park. He invited me too but 5am is never my most active time so I rolled over in my bed. Then the 'guilts' got me and I thought about what I was missing out on and so by 5 30 am I was on my way to Hyde Park for a walk. The proposed one hour walk ended up expanding to a two hour walk thanks to my inability to pay attention to where I was going. Naturally I thought that wandering around Hyde Park blindly would be perfectly safe. Unfortunately I ended up completely lost and then had to do a huge lap around the enormous perimeter of the Park in order to find my street. In between times though I was amazed and entertained by the frenetic activity of the squirrels and the enchanting dappled morning light as it made its way through the trees. The Diana monument was interesting and I remembered seeing it on the news many years ago. The Victoria and Albert Hall was also exciting to be reacquainted with. The swans on the lakes were so elegant and charming and even the joggers seemed to add to the serenity of the place. I silently thanked Pete Dunne's inspiration to get out of bed and enjoy this gorgeous park. Later in the morning, the whole team returned to Hyde Park for a kick of the soccer ball and some catching practice. We all had a ball.

Friday was to be a historic day. We had penciled in an Official Flanders Function. All the boys and the supporters were to attend Lords. We had planned a trip to the marvelous old ground, culminating in a tour through the museum to see the legendary urn and even more goose bump inspiring, a trip to the famous Long Room. The day started in remarkable fashion. As we lined up on the Tube platform, Mickey recognized Mike Atherton, the former England captain. Naturally he was a trifle disorientated and failed to recognize us straight away, but in no time with a few reminders about who the Neddies were, he was very happy to have a yarn. I reminded him of his highest Test score of 185 in South Africa and all of a sudden he seemed a lot more at ease. He was enthralled with the concept of the Flanders and our quest to play in all six continents. He didn't know much about the state of cricket in Morocco but he was sure we would do very well when we played them. He posed for a photo with us and we all left with smiles. I am sure he will get a real thrill out of the autographed team photo that I promised to send him.

When we finally made it to the ground and made our way through the Grace Gates, we caught up with Ramjam who had made his way to Lords independently. Ramjam looked like he had won lotto as we sat in the Members pavilion and listened to our guide. Here was the young 21 year old from Brisbane, who is as obsessed about cricket as any of us and he is sitting in the seats that have been occupied by some of history's greats. With the rest of us he peered out as Father Time pulled stumps on the beautiful old weather vane. He could look up into the pavilion and as we stood in the Long Room I am sure he could imagine Bradman, Grace, Trumper and Border walking past us all and down through the door and onto the hallowed turf in their batting gear. We could all sense the nerves that a batsman would feel as he strode out to bat here at the home of cricket. I sat there and pondered where the Ned Flanders Cricket team had taken me in life. Not just the geographical locations but also where it had taken me as a person. The mates and the great times. The on and off field experiences that had all enriched my life so positively. Lords

had promised and Lords had delivered. It was an experience none of us will forget. The team photo with the famous pavilion in the back ground will be one to cherish forever. We also delved into a room used to play Royal Tennis. It's an obscure sport played by obscure people. It was a funny blend of tennis and squash and this was the only court that I had ever seen. A pair of old blokes came out and played a few points for our benefit. I have to admit that compared with seeing the Ashes and the Long Room, the Royal Tennis Court wasn't quite as impressive.

As we wandered around the ground we came upon the W.G. Grace statue and posed for a team photo and then the medical members of the team had a special shot with the great cricketing doctor. The finale of the trip was a visit to the Media quarters. The building is so architecturally incongruous compared to the regal old pavilion but the views of the ground were spectacular and it wasn't hard to picture Richie Benaud taking up his spot behind the microphone. As we came down stairs we stood around the Nursery Ground. It is here that Chico and Poochie will play their Grand Final if their London team makes it all the way. It would be a rare thrill to have two Flanders boys play on such a venue. We'll have to have a good look at the possibilities of having the team play there on any future tours to Europe.

From Lords, Pete and I were joined by Daffy on a trip to the British National Museum. Pete and I were very keen to see some of their Archaeological exhibits, especially the Egyptology and Mesopotamian sections. Daffy being a genius took an interest and we were soon meeting up with Daffy's Dad and his mate who happened to be in London for a while. The mummies were special and the artifacts from Babylon were outstanding. The real gold medal item however was the Rosetta Stone. After having read so much about it, it was a real treat to see it in the flesh. The real bonus exhibit for Pete and I was the Maya frieze depicting a blood sacrifice ceremony. It was the exact frieze that we had both used last semester for a bloodletting presentation that we had had to give to our class at the Archaeology department at University of Queensland. Pete and I couldn't contain our excitement. What a coincidence and I can only imagine that they knew the Flanders were coming and so the Museum staff decided to turn on something a bit special.

We lobbed back to base to pack up our kits and hence make our way out to a hotel near Gatwick Airport where we would be catching a flight the next day to Alicante in Spain. As we assembled back at head quarters all sorts of news was breaking. Mickey said he had met Brian Charles Lara as he left Lords. Some people speculated that Mickey might have had a few beverages at lunch and in fact had run into Roybie. Roybie is a dead ringer for Lara, especially when he puts his dark shades on and even more so when he bats. He is left handed and has the same huge back lift as the West Indian superstar. Of course Roybie also has the same outstanding tan as Brian Charles and the same lay back attitude to life. Anyway, I reckon Mickey really did meet the great man, even if he didn't think quick enough to get a photo. I am sure Lara was equally excited about meeting the legendary Menag and I am sure he must be ruing the fact that he didn't take a photo either. What a moment it would have been to record. The greatest left handed batsman meeting the greatest left handed bowler.

Earlier in the day there had been reports that a Japanese Ned Flanders had been sighted in our hotel. There was plenty of doubting going on but just as we assembled outside to make our way to the taxis, there he stood. Six feet tall, skinny as a rake and with that trade mark Ned Flanders moustache. The poor fella really didn't have a clue what we were all on about but he was happy enough to jump in a photo with the team and there were smiles all round as we parted company. I showed him the badge on my shirt but I am not really sure he made the connection. Anyway we were all thrilled to meet the man and the legend.

After a few dramas with the agreed price of the taxis we ended up bailing out of both the cabs. The agreed 78 pound fare had been magnified to 88 pounds. I despise that sort of rorting and so I convinced the lads to bail out and we headed to the train station. We lobbed into our hotel at the other end and enjoyed a great feed. I had the ribs and I pondered that this could well be the last proper meal I was going to enjoy until we had returned from Spain and Morocco. Tragically I was right. After dinner, the Soccer World Cup was the best show to watch on TV and we all settled for a pretty early and sedate night.

Next morning we all met Chico and Pooch at the airport. This was not the original plan, as the Dillon boys and Pip were supposed to be in Spain by the previous night. EasyJet managed to butcher that arrangement though and in the end Pip decided that her weekend had been too savagely truncated and that she would catch up with the team in London at the end of the tour. It was disappointing for everyone because it would have been great to have Pippy on board even if it was just for a couple of days. She always adds to the atmosphere in the team and always has a smile on her face. And it would have been nice if just by some rough chance she could have seen her way clear to bringing the team out a few of her legendary brownies. She was very disappointed too. Thanks a lot EasyJet. It was something like the sixth time in a row that Chico had been shafted by EasyJet. Cheap on price, cheap on service.

The flight to Alicante was a lot more palatable than the previous flight we had shared. After just an hour or two we found ourselves at Alicante airport. Chico's logistical wizardry saw us picked up by our own private coach, complete with a "Ned Flanders" sign to welcome us as we passed out of customs. The road trip down to Albir took about an hour and provided a great chance to catch up with Poochie and Chico. They had both been working while we were in London and they were reveling in the first day of their holidays. A few house work things were sorted out. Leo was made skipper of the Julio's and Pete Dunne was elected the Nerd equivalent. Chico was to mentor Leo, as the immediate past captain but poor old Pete had to make do without the wise counsel of the previous Nerds leader, the great Brett Whalley. The two skippers gave a few inspirational words to their teams as we drove down the spectacular Mediterranean coast line of the south of Spain. The rugged mountain ranges followed our progress to the north and the sparkling blue of the Mediterranean called to us invitingly from the south. Our hotel in Albir was spectacular, again courtesy of Chico's fine work. The resort had a huge pool and was clearly a favourite holiday spot for plenty of Eurotrash and their families. The team took a bit of a reconnaissance trip down to the Sporting Alphas Cricket ground and we discovered a delightful little field with a lush outfield and a pretty standard synthetic wicket in the middle. A soothing sea breeze blew off the sparkling blue and the mountains in the back ground all made for an enchanting spot to open the playing part of the tour the next day. Palms trees adorned the perimeter much like Hippique Park where we had played in Vanuatu. There were lots of good omens for the Flanders.

After surveying the scene of our next cricketing challenge we all headed down to the beach. Not only was there no sand, but there wasn't even gravely shells. In fact the "beach" was an assortment of very large pebbles and stones. The water, although as enticing as any siren's song, was freezing cold and only the better insulated members of the team ventured in for a dip. The skinnier blokes were content to sit on the sideline, with the exception of Sneaky who stripped down to his togs and put on his very best "Daniel Craig 007" show. The dapper little fellow looked like he had just been carved out of granite as he strutted his stuff in the shallows. The only other entertainment to be had was looking at the vast array of breasts on show, and deciding

which ones had been augmented surgically and which ones had been reduced surgically. Some breasts could be seen peeking out from below several old women's skirts. There was not much to write home about. The only other funny event at the beach was the start of the legend about "Helmut". Helmut was a skinny as a rake, German looking sissy boy who had a snow white tan and the impoverished state of his tan was over exceeded by the impoverished state of his muscle definition. Brazenly he strutted down the beach to the shore line, showing off the wonder of his puny little body in his very abbreviated togs. As he hit the break, his insipid little body was barreled by the smallest wave of the day. Preds and Sneaks took great delight at yelling out their warnings to him "Look out for the waves Helmut!" It was very funny. Aussies One: Eurotrash Nil. .

Consensus for dinner was that the team should head out for tapas. We roved around Albir in search of an appropriate venue. We finally settled at a place that was devoid of any other patrons. The proprietor seemed completely overwhelmed by the size of our group and seemed to struggle for the rest of the night. Tapas just seems to be a never ending stream of very small dishes of food that never really fills you up. Some were nice and some were putrid. The most putrid of all was a dish of pickled fish. Even my cat, Hubert, would have knocked it back. It was decided that the pickled fish would be the theme for the first Julios versus Nerds Challenge. Roybie put his hand up for the mighty Nerds and managed to eat three whole plates of the cat food without even belching. He picked up ten points for the team and we all cheered him on as he digested the most disgusting thing any one of us had ever seen. Poor old Roybie reckoned those fish slid down his oesophagus pretty smoothly and it was discovered the next morning that they slid out the other end of his gastro intestinal tract with just as much ease.

Next morning we were greeted by an overcast sky, rain clouds and even some thunder and lightning. The concierge reckoned that it would be fine by lunch time when we were scheduled to commence our match. She was dead right.

After a good brekky and a spot of catching practice on the side of the pool, we ambled down to the ground and introduced ourselves to the locals. They showed us to our own dressing room, complete with showers, toilets and benches. We already felt pretty special. It was with a large degree of excitement that I hung my Ned Flanders playing shirt up on my own hook and set out my playing gear on my own seating area. I felt like I really was playing international cricket. The stunning maroon playing strips that Stevie had lined up looked sensational as we made our way out of the sheds and onto the paddock. NFXI was emblazoned across the front of our shirts and each man had his number and name across his back. I reckon we won the game right there and then as the Sporting Alphas boys looked most intimidated. The field was lush and the nets facilities were most admirable. We each had a bowl and a bat and tested out the pitch which seemed to trampoline a little bit but otherwise it was just the same as any synthetic pitch we play on at home. A quaint little white picket fence sat in front of the club house and we set up our goods and chattels just there. Just as was predicted, the clouds started clearing and the sunshine broke on through. Frankie handed out the sensational flags that he had made up with the club symbol underlined by the new team motto "Ex Amiticia Victoria" which is Latin for "Through Mateship, Victory". Coll, the Latin scholar, had helped out with translation. It really adds that little bit of class to the club I reckon. I met their skipper and as he tossed the coin, I called heads and naturally it came down tails and so Frankie and Sneaks found themselves strapping on their pads. Sneaks put his hand up to face the first ball of the tour, as he has done on both previous tours and does just about every week at home in summer. Just as the bowler released the

delivery, a huge clap of thunder resonated around Albir and I thought to myself that had to be a huge omen for us. The Forces of Nature and God were signally their pleasure at what the Flanders were doing. Sneaky got the score board moving with a lovely pull for four and soon Frankie and Sneaky were looking impregnable. They each settled in and started scoring freely. They established a new International opening batting record as they posted 50 without loss. Each of them was scoring all round the ground and the rest of us cheered every run as they approached their century stand. The bowlers' heads were dropping and the Spanish skipper was ringing the changes. The quicks were replaced by some spinners and they bowled a very tight line and length but the Neddie boys kept playing smart cricket. The bad balls were dispatched ruthlessly to the fence and the good balls were pushed into gaps for ones and twos. The neat little score board on the far side of the ground was rattling along at about five to six per over. Sneaky was more the aggressor and the assembly erupted as the century stand was posted in rapid time in the 19th over. Sneaky was on 47 and was looking the safest of bets for a half century, and even more so when he belted a majestic pull shot high and handsome to deep square leg. The boundary rider got under the ball and caught it a good few meters beyond where we all thought the boundary was positioned but unfortunately for Sneaky he claimed the catch and the umpire concurred and off poor Sneaky strode with a magnificent 47 under his belt. I felt outraged on his behalf. I reckon he had a half century stolen from his grasp. At least his attitude was stoic and I reckon it hardened his resolve to make sure he posted a half century before the end of the tour. And as captain that is exactly what you need from your players. Chico headed out to the middle to replace Pete and he very quickly dispelled the nightmares of Nakano and Japan. His opening scoring shot was a delightful boundary and in doing so he outscored his entire Japanese batting exploits by precisely four runs. I know it was a pretty big monkey off the great man's back. We were all hugely relieved for him too. Chico celebrated his first runs with another beautiful boundary and then smashed the first six of the tour, before he was stumped for 17. Meanwhile at the other end, Frankie had turned aggressor and was striking the ball beautifully. The real feature of his knock was the way he found the gaps. He made sure he got full value for his shots by bisecting the fielders. With his eighth boundary, he brought up a devastating 50 and in doing so joined a very short list of Flanders men who have scored international half centuries. Chico and Chookie are the only other members of this elite club. Just as we had all sat down after cheering the young man's fifty we were back on our feet to clap him off. With his first false shot of the day, Frankie was caught for 51 glorious runs. Besides his memorable 132 this was his only other score over 50 for the club. The man has more 40's than Chookie and we may have to revise the nomenclature and start calling a score in the 40's a Frankie 50 rather than the conventional Chicken 50. He left with the scoreboard looking very healthy at 3 for 171 in the 31st over. Where the openers left off, Leo Yin took over. He was promoted up to number four and in no time was driving powerfully off the front foot. When Leo gets on a roll nothing stands in his way. He took 18 off one over with a pair of monstrous sixes and just as we stood and applauded Frankie's 50, we were all very soon on our feet again to celebrate with Leo as he passed a similar milestone. Leo ended up with a blistering 65 with three brutal sixes and seven belligerent fours. It was a tremendous knock and he just fell short of breaking Chico's club record score in an international match. Chico's magical 74 in Vanuatu survived for another day. With the solid foundation set up by the openers, the rest of the Flanders tally was being built in scintillating fashion. Pooch chipped in with 3, before the Bash Brothers helped seal things off with 17 to Benny and 13 not out to Preds. Benny hit one of his characteristic monster sixes, before Preds played very sensibly in the dying overs to take us to 7 for 250 off our 40 overs. In between times I had been stumped

for the first time in my entire Flanders career for a single. Coming out to bat in the final couple of overs is not quite my forte but at least I registered my first run in Europe. Poor old Daffy got left stranded on 0 not out, but he was to have plenty of glories later in the tour. Many records had been set. It was our highest ever score in an international fixture. It was the first time two men had scored half centuries in the one international game and the openers broke the club record for the highest ever international partnership before going on to record our inaugural century stand on foreign soil. Chook and I were just a trifle miffed that our 95 run stand in Vanuatu had been consigned to history. The other noteworthy point was that Taylor, one of their spinners, who incidentally took 3 for, was a former county bowler for Northhamptonshire. Despite being 72 years old he still landed every ball on the money and in fact their team called him “Penny” in reference to his accuracy.

With 250 in the bank I felt confident. If we could keep the screws on early we’d have them. Of course as we have found in previous international matches, the lower orders are often fragile, so if we could jag a couple of poles early we’d be home and hosed. Pred had the honour of the first ball in Europe, just as he had the privilege in Japan. The first over was tight and Ramjam followed up with a similarly frugal over for his first one on tour. Even though the two bowlers bowled well, their opening batsmen looked the goods. Boundaries were coming a bit too frequently and the only sniff we managed was when Chico ran from mid off all the way back to deep mid on and dived full length to grasp a blinding catch, only to have the ball bounce out as he landed on the ground. It would have been the greatest catch in Flanders history. He must have run a good 30 or 40 meters. No one else would have got near it. The bloke at mid on just stared in disbelief. As you’d expect from Chico he was devastated to drop it even though the rest of us all stood in awe at his amazing effort. Not long after this Preds managed to con their opener, Ali into lofting one to Benny at cover. Benny held a smart catch and they were 1 for 64. This became 2 for 73 soon after as Preds completed his job by removing, Spencer, the second dangerous opener. Pooch took the catch at the wicket. The big fella came off with 2 for 38 from his spell of eight overs. At the other end, Ramjam came off after five sturdy overs and Benny replaced him and this is where the game was won. Benny absolutely pounded their middle order to take four wickets for just 13 runs in six brilliant overs. He bowled three blokes and Pooch hung on to another hot one. At one stage Benny was on a hat trick and was pretty unlucky that his quick straight one was just kept out by a less than convincing lower order batsman. Ramjam returned to the crease and ended up with eight overs for just 38. He was unlucky not to take a wicket. Roybie bowled splendidly and recorded the most economical spell of the day with seven overs for 16. Menag was accurate and did his job as did Daffy with five over spells each. After we had them 5 for 87 at drinks and 6 for 87 immediately afterwards, the Spanish boys gave up the hunt. They seemed intent on batting out the overs. While it would have been nice to snaffle all ten wickets, their defensive attitude did give us an opportunity to savor our time in the middle, free of any threats from them. The sky was blue and the sea breeze was soothing and the mountains in the background were enchanting. Life was good and it was even better if you were a Flanders man here at Albir. When their innings meandered on and petered out after 40 overs they had scored just 6 for 156. So with a comprehensive winning margin of 94 emphatic runs, our tour was off to an amazing start. Thankfully we didn’t have to award 3-2-1 points for the Flanders medal, because with stellar efforts from Sneaky, Frankie, Leo, Preds and of course Benny, it would have been an agonizing process.

At game’s end we had a few beers with the locals and talked about cricket in this exotic location. I handed over a couple of Ned Flanders shirts and some Kookaburra caps to their skipper and

Phil. Phil had been the main conduit into Spanish cricket that had liaised with Chico for many months. It was lovely to yarn to these blokes, playing the game that we all love here in a remote cricketing outpost. It was interesting to chat to the old bloke who had played county cricket and to the other blokes who just love the game. Sporting Alphas have a huge amount of touring traffic that they accommodate with matches. I wasn't sure but I am sure I did hear one of them say we were the greatest team ever to come to their picturesque little ground. As the sun set behind the mountains to the west and the silhouettes of the mountains dominated the background, life felt good. The team spirit was thumping and the mood of our camp was very upbeat. It was tremendous to have played cricket with Pooch and Chico again after a fair break. I must admit we all missed Chico hugely this season. His presence on and off the park is always so uplifting. I was also really relieved he got a few runs today. There'll be no more Nakano curse here in Europe and Africa. The team photos at the end of the game with the mountainous backdrop and the huge winners' smiles on everyone's faces will be ones to savour for a long time.

After dinner the boys had earned the right to cut loose a bit. We all lobbed down to a bar that the local team had suggested and the grog flowed, the laughter bubbled and the joi de vie was sensational. Menag was breaking hearts all over the place. He is big in Spain. Sneaky was cutting loose and running amok. Preds and Benny were having a ball. The Dillon boys were in their element. Ramjam had Camel Toe in tow and was reveling in the afterglow of his first international match. The couples peeled off a bit early but the single boys were having a big night. Pete and I peeled off with Daffy at what we thought was a very late time but I am sure the party kept cracking for plenty of hours after we left.

Next morning was supposed to be an early start to catch the train from Albir to Alicante and hence the 10 30 train to Madrid. An early morning start after a huge international win and the necessary celebrations was eternally optimistic in retrospect. Arrival at the foyer was sluggish and as the taxis started arriving to take us to the train station there were several non starters. After some frantic searching of the rooms all the punters were mustered and we made the train by a whisker. During the fracas Poochie managed to leave his bat behind, Benny lost his mobile phone and Ramjam's AFL ball went MIA. At least all 13 players and three supporters were accounted for and of course I was most relieved to see Ramjam holding on to Camel Toe as he clambered onto the train.

Even though we miraculously made the train to Alicante, we were very dismayed to find that our 10 30 connection to Madrid was fully booked. The next train wasn't available till 6 pm. Our afternoon in Madrid was rapidly evaporating. The bus terminal was no help and despite Agi's best efforts with her Spanish lingo we were doomed to spend another seven and half hours in Alicante. Pete and I were happy enough with the pronouncement. Frankie and Ags were too. Phil and Leo and Sally were also happy enough to hang around the beautiful coastal city but other folks had other ideas. I am not sure where the idea germinated but soon the other nine tourists had committed themselves to a rental car and a four or five hour drive into Madrid. The threat of peak hour traffic in Madrid, the danger of driving on the wrong side of the road with hang overs and the mysteries of insurance and speed cameras could not deter the intrepid nine. The more I heard about the project, the more it reminded me of the ill fated night time climb up Mt Fuji on the previous tour to Japan. But the boys are all big and ugly enough to look after themselves and so I was happy enough to farewell them at the Alicante train station and as I walked towards the centre of town I had visions of telling the fellas' families that they had really loved the tour and

that it really was a tragedy that they were never seen again as they drove off into the centre of Spain in their rental cars. While the seven of us who stayed in Alicante may not quite fit the mantle of the “magnificent seven”, I am happy enough to claim to be the “sensible seven”. After a lovely feed of seafood piala we proceeded to see the many splendid sights of the town. Paella is the quintessential Spanish dish and the sea food variety had to be a great option here on the Mediterranean coast. Expectation did not lead to disappointment and we all thoroughly enjoyed the cuisine. From lunch we strolled around the old part of town and eventually made our way up to the castle and fort, set majestically and imposingly high on the mountain top with sheer cliffs providing an impregnable defensive vantage point. The views of the coast line and the inviting deep blue sea were marvelous and the sense of invincibility that I felt high on the cliff face felt quite symbolic of how the team was traveling on the paddock on tour. (If not in the rental cars). We boarded the train on time and set out on the four or five hour trip into Madrid. It was very relaxing. Trains are my favourite way to travel. The gentle rocking and the whir of the wheels on the tracks are so peaceful. I sat and peeled off a few poems and enjoyed the country side with the vast plains and the distant mountains of Spain’s interior. All the way I had recurring worries about the rental car crew and how they were faring. I had all sorts of terrible visions but I trusted that they’d find their way to the hotel eventually. I am sure the more I chatted about the perils of their idea, the more their resolve to prove me wrong hardened. It really was Mt Fuji all over again.

We lobbed into Madrid well after sundown and after a few stuff ups with finding the correct station we all arrived back at the hotel roughly simultaneously. At the booking in area it was a tremendous relief to learn that nine Flanders men had already checked in successfully. The rental car boys had made it and in fact had even managed to get out and about and see a bit of Madrid. I might have to admit to being a bit disappointed that they at least didn’t have a bit of trouble finding the place. But I was happy to have seen a bit more of Alicante and I had really loved the relaxing train trip through the middle of Spain and I knew the lads were going to love telling me about their highly frenetic scramble into Madrid. Breakfast time would make for some great stories.

Breakfast time conversation did not fail to disappoint. The boys had had a ball in the cars. Racing across the country side on the super highways and winging the directions once they’d arrived in Madrid. There had been no dramas at all and then they had the thrill of heading out and seeing a few sights. Preds and Daffy had done all the driving and had covered themselves in glory by managing to navigate their way into the centre of Madrid and successfully find our abode. And I am sure there was a little bit of smugness about telling me about their success. Which is only fair I suppose because I was somewhat hoping they’d get a bit lost, at least for a little while.

The only real story to emerge from their mission involved Benny and the great Menagh. Apparently just as the two hire cars were being finalized, eight of the recalcitrant nine realised that Fieldie had gone missing in the fairly large Alicante train station. With hope seven members of this eight turned to the senior man, the vice captain, the great Michael James Menagh. When Mick realised Benny was missing in action, perhaps lost forever, he stamped his authority on the situation. He stepped up to sort out the crisis. He stood. He pondered. He looked to the right and murmured “Fieldie” and then to the centre and to the left, mumbling “Fieldie” for a second and third time. Seeing that he had done his best and that the situation was undoubtedly hopeless, the VC exclaimed “F... it!” and sat back down. No man could have done more. He had done his best

and clearly the predicament was unsolvable. Thankfully Fieldie turned back up and everyone drove off together to Madrid.

After brekky in Madrid we had a few problems to sort out. We had to be out at the airport for our flight to Casablanca but unfortunately for us the public transport system was on strike. Despite leaving what seemed like a very reasonable time to line up taxis and make our way out to the check in desk, the taxis seemed to take forever to arrive and in the end a few of us had to usurp the bloke on the hotel door and try and wave a cab down ourselves. At this stage the car rental boys were feeling more than smug because they had lined up to drop their cars out at the airport and so they were last seen embarking on a leisurely ride out the airport. Eventually the planets aligned and we scored a ride. It had been a very stressful 40 odd minutes. The drive through Madrid was really my only chance to see a bit of the city. Certainly the architecture is grand and it certainly looks like the kind of place I will have to come back and see. I reckon a few days to a week would be needed to do the place justice. I was very sad to miss the chance to see the Prado gallery. Still that's part of traveling. It is always nice to have a few things on the list to do next time and it's always nice to leave a place wanting more time there rather than spending a bit too long and regretting things.

EasyJet had once again won our business and as I looked at Chico I had some trepidation about the upcoming flight. He was on a roll of six bad EasyJet experiences in a row. This trip was not going to let any of us down. There was also sorts of clowning around with our departure gate. We had three changes of gates which meant lining up three times. EasyJet don't allot any individual seat numbers. It is first on, first served. The Eurotrash love to rush to the gates and run out onto the tarmac to jockey for positions. It is very undignified but somehow in keeping with their continent's persona. Eventually we climbed aboard and though we retained our dignity by not rushing we did end up crammed up the back of the plane with nowhere to stow our overhead luggage. After this, everything was going well until about one hour out of Madrid, when the captain piped up that we had had a bird strike and that we'd be turning around. Three birds had hit the right wing, the fuselage and the windscreen he said and because Morocco could not provide the right sort of maintenance crews, we'd be swinging back to Madrid. My wife loves "Air Crash Investigation". It is almost her favourite TV show. Consequently I end up watching plenty of episodes too. Bird strikes seem to be recurring theme in many of the crash scenarios. This was a trifle unnerving. Then my imagination started getting a bit carried away. Why would we not keep on going to Casablanca? Maybe they didn't have the right rescue facilities, maybe their fire officers weren't experienced enough or maybe they didn't have enough fire trucks. Maybe their hospitals couldn't handle a huge disaster like an A320 crashing. Maybe the captain was euphemizing and maybe the rudders were busted or the landing gear. In the space of a few minutes I had convinced myself that Ginge would be raising Andy on her own and that the Flanders were about to follow in the infamous footsteps of Manchester United's tragic Busby Babes. I started getting sweaty and clammy. My breathing got a bit rapid and I wasn't traveling too well at all. Then about fifteen minutes out of Madrid we hit some heavy turbulence. Thermals and storms were combining to throw us around. Of course I knew better. It wasn't turbulence, it was the fact that a whole stack of equipment wasn't functional. The rudder must be busted and the landing gear was stuck. Poor Andy. I hope Ginge would tell him how much I loved him and how much the Flanders had meant to me. At least I was about to meet my demise with my team mates. Flandermen 'til the end. Pete Dunne was beside me and he was a tower of strength. Every time I'd grab his arm he'd reassure me. What a good bloke. As landing time got

nearer, the anxiety level escalated. Chico says he saw a fleet of fire trucks making their way out onto the tarmac. I am very relieved I didn't see that. I could tell poor old Ramjam, the young gun, was looking my way. I pondered that he was a young bloke and hadn't done a huge amount of travel and that perhaps he was looking at my reaction to decide if he should be worried or not. Unfortunately for Ramjam, I wasn't providing too much of a positive role model. Sorry mate. As we approached the strip, Pete joked that we were probably low enough that we could safely jump from here. Before I even had time to laugh, we were on the ground and braking successfully. There was no fiery end to the Flanders juggernaut and no tough road ahead for Ginge and Andy. All the lads looked relieved. A few seemed very carefree and I am not sure if it was just bravado or lack of insight or that they really are tough fellas. I didn't mind clapping the pilot with all the other scared punters. I might not have had much dignity left but I was mightily relieved.

So after a very happy hour or so (the first hour of the rest of my life), we reclaimed our seats as the ground crew gave us the all clear to restart our journey. High above the Mediterranean, life was great again. The European coastline disappeared and the northern coast line of my favourite continent, Africa, came into view. We even glimpsed the Rock of Gibraltar and it was fun to contemplate what adventures and cracking yarns would unfold before we set foot into Gibraltar in a fortnight's time. We made Casablanca a few hours late but it was better than being an aviation statistic. Our guide, Leila, met us with a great big sign saying "Matt Young Cricket". I must say I was very flattered. She led us out to our coach. I had very little expectation about our mode of transport through Morocco and as with all the fellas I was absolutely amazed when she strode up to a huge luxury coach and proclaimed that this was to be our official team coach for the entirety of tour time in Morocco. Didn't we just feel like international cricketing superstars. Sneaky and Pete quickly strapped up our huge team flag in the back window. Everyone had at least two or three seats each to stretch out and relax. In the space of just a few hours life's sinusoidal mysteries were delivering the very worst and the very best that existence can offer. The next couple of hours saw us head off to Rabat, the nation's capital. Past the distinctive North African architecture we traveled, with the minarets and arches of all the mosques distinctively silhouetted against the setting sun. The horses and goats and pastures punctuated the dry landscape. The local people were all kitted out in their traditional garb. Burqas and head scarves were everywhere. The setting sun made for a hazy sort of feel to the landscape and it was easy to feel that all was good in the world. We had survived the flight, we had landed on our feet with the luxury coach and we were a bunch of mates about to embark on an amazing adventure in an exotic country. We pulled into Rabat just on dusk. I was very excited because as I spoke to reception it transpired that Chookie and Mel, CJ and the great Stevie D had already arrived and were in their rooms as we spoke. I scoped out their room numbers and ran up the stairs to meet Stevie and CJ and then scooted down to Chookie and Mel's room. It was a tremendous thrill to see them all. Finally the team was all together. Stevie was knackered. He'd had a huge few months. All the organizing of the tour, the purchase of his new house and of course the stressful pleasure of teeing up Liam's Buck's Day and of course all the responsibilities of being Liam's groomsman and the MC at the reception. The poor bugger looked totally drained. Still, he mustered plenty of smiles when all the boys caught up with him. Chookie was his usual self. He's such an affable bloke. It was nice to meet CJ and of course it was tremendous to see Mel again as she embarked on her second Flanders tour.

The President of the Moroccan Cricket Board and his two Vice Presidents came out to the hotel to meet with Stevie D and me. They gave the heads up on all the details of the tour and the four match series we were about to play. They said that security was all taken care of, with the

Australian Embassy in France having been notified about all our venues and itinerary. They had done plenty of publicity and arranged plenty of media coverage. In Marrakech there would be a large press conference and plenty of dignitaries would be on hand to cheer us on. There were to be a number of receptions held in our honour and several fancy dinners with us as the guests of honor. I even got asked if there were any players in our team from the Australian XI. I said “no, but Chico did make the Australian Churches team”. They seemed mightily impressed. Stevie suggested to me that he was sure he had told them we were a team from Australia and not actually the Australian team. But we both wondered if perhaps they had managed to get the wrong end of the stick. Anyway, the Flanders are used to the hurdy gurdy of top flight international cricket and God knows we excel at shameless self promotion and Big Noting, and so we agreed that if they wanted to treat us as a bit more than what we really were, then we would happily play that role for them. It would be rude and ungracious not to do so. They had really gone way above and beyond their duty to us, we felt very privileged to be their guests. We had a quick team meeting in the foyer and I explained to the lads that we were receiving the royal treatment. I suggested that we probably had to be on our best behavior on and off the field during our time in North Africa. The boys all nodded in agreement as it dawned on the assembled throng that we really were ambassadors for our club, our sport and our country. A few of the boys also suggested that I was probably the biggest risk to decorum on the field. I couldn't really argue.

After a basic dinner a few of the team headed out for a stroll around Rabat. Because of our delayed flight arrival, the proposed tour of Rabat had been cancelled. It was dark and there was no point in looking at the Mosque and Palace without daylight. The fellas that did head out had some very exciting news to report at breakfast the next day. There were posters all round the town advertising the big international cricket match in Rabat the following day between “Maroc and Ned Flanders XI (Australie)”. I couldn't help myself and with Pete and Chookie and Stevie we all headed out before the bus trip to the ground, to scope out the posters. I have to say I had goose bumps when Stevie found a poster on the wall in one of the main squares of town. There we were “Maroc vs. Ned Flanders XI (Australie)”. There were even some photos of Gilchrist, Hayden and Ponting on the poster. Obviously they couldn't afford the copyright fees to score any of our photos for their poster. All the dates and venues for our four matches were set out. The Flanders had truly arrived on the world stage.

Back to base and we loaded up our coach and set a compass for the cricket ground. It was on the other side of Rabat in a place called Sale. Sight screens and a big grandstand greeted us as the coach pulled in. The boundary was fenced and a luxurious club house facility adjoined the ground. The dressing rooms were plush and spacious, even though we did have to share the room with the local boys. The pool out the back was very inviting, given the sweltering North African sun and humidity. A huge traditional Arabic tent had been set up for our team to watch the game from and all the seats were set out for our comfort. We met the Moroccan team and their coach Younis, and some junior players and then set out onto the field to inspect the conditions. A concrete pitch awaited us and the grounds man rolled out a piece of green carpet over half the pitch. I ascertained that we'd just be bowling from the one end and there was nothing that could be done about the 15 cm by 10 cm gap in the carpet which sat directly in front of the stumps, and on a good length. It was used when the juniors played and needed to play on a shorter pitch I was told. So it looked like the plan was to stick the front foot as far down the pitch as possible and hope for the best, when you were batting.

I lost the toss again and we all strutted onto the field as the local boys chose to bat. We were pumped and the “knees on tracheas talk” was humming around the team. Ramjam bowled the first ball and started with a tight over. Preds came on (at the same end- the batsman just changed ends) and immediately the Flanders struck. A fiercely hit cover drive eluded Leo but the little dynamo chased hard and hurled a perfect return back to Poochie who took the ball on the bounce and whipped off the bails in a flash to see the opener, Soji, short by a few centimeters. It was pure genius by Leo who is fast becoming the run out king in the team. I don't think the locals had ever seen such fielding. I am sure in the locals' games, there was an easy two, but Leo is something out of the box with his fielding. In Preds third over he induced a false shot and bowled the other opener, Brahim. In his next over Preds did the business again. A lofted drive saw the ball sail out to a fairly straight mid on. Chico had been at a fairly wide mid off but he set off like a gazelle and just as he had done in Spain, he made incredible ground to get to the ball. This time though, he didn't need to dive, but instead he threw out his right hand and took a brilliant catch in his fingertips. It was a catch that was from the very top shelf. He really is an amazing athlete and that was the end of Salah. Soon after this, Ramjam took his first wicket for the tour. The ball was clipped down leg side and Poochie made good ground to take the ball. The umpire agreed with us but the batsman didn't like the decision and started firing up to the square leg umpire. The two umpires conferred and I stuck my nose in just as they were deciding that the bloke hadn't hit at all. I was a bit compromised. Diplomacy dictated that I had to cop it sweet. I wouldn't have been so accommodating in Brisbane. It was hard to have to remind the boys that we were guests in this country and that we all had to tow the diplomatic line. We all had a few laughs at the batsman's new nickname. Stevie started calling him “two bats”, in reference to an old story about a trial game that saw an opposition player get a second chance despite being dismissed cheaply. Funnily enough he was subsequently selected for the Queensland Churches team at a time when the four Flanders players in the trial game all missed out on the 15 man squad. And just to make it all a bit more personal, I was the other opening batsman vying for the State spot. Not that I hold any grudges or bitter memories! I was shattered for Ramjam. The kid had been unlucky in Spain and ended up wicketless and here he was having just taken his first international wicket and now it had all disappeared. To the immense credit of the young man, he focused even harder and kept his resolve and in the following over we were all absolutely delighted when he dismissed the Moroccan captain, Mohamed, with Poochie taking a screamer up at the stumps. As usual whenever one Dillon does something special, the other one can't help himself and has to do something equally brilliant if not better. 4 for 43 in the ninth over was a pretty good position for us and things just kept getting better. Preds just kept bowling in the oppressive heat. The big bloke had the sniff of blood and just wanted to keep ripping the ball in. Preds convinced the dangerous looking Soufian to drive one within 10 meters of Chico at mid off and as we had all seen on the tour so far, Chico is unstoppable, and he ran the required meters to take another extremely well judged catch. 5 for 47. A couple of overs later and Benny cleaned up. This time the big hitting Ismail slogged once too often. He had tapped a few balls out through midwicket and looked like he could hit a ball. The umpire told me they all called him the Moroccan Afridi. That made me think we had to get him early or he'd give us all some grief. Anyway the ball skied out between Pete Dunne at point and me at cover. Pete seemed to be a long way from it and so I presumed it was my catch and I have to admit I didn't even bother calling. I ran around and positioned myself under it and just as the ball was about to plonk into my outstretched hands, I felt the earth shake as my shoulder smashed into Pete's throat. Knees on tracheas and shoulders in tracheas are supposed to be for the opposition. As I fell in a

crumpled agitated mess on the ground and yelled out my predictable tirade of expletives for having missed the catch, Pete was asking me if I was alright. I was facing the boundary and had my back to the play and I replied that I was OK but expressed my chagrin at having missed the catch, all for the want of calling. No one else seemed to be saying anything, until I heard someone yell out "Pete Dunne caught it!" I turned around to look at Pete and bugger me there was the ball nestled in his hands. I still couldn't believe it and had to ask him a few times to verify that he really had hung on to the catch despite having to run 15 meters and then contend with my shoulder in his airway. It was a remarkable catch and I was absolutely thrilled for my old mate Pete. I had been away and had missed his only other catch earlier in the year when he had run some astonishing distance and at full stretch managed to pull in blinder, and now I had to admit to him that I hadn't seen anything of his latest screamer. I was never the less stoked for him. I think it really made him feel like an integral member of the squad. Well done Pete. Pete's stunner left Morocco at 6 for 70. Benny cleaned up Azhar for 1 thanks to a magnificent diving catch at second slip by Stevie D. The ball had flown low and hard, well wide of the lanky icon. He flung himself to his right and collected the ball millimeters off the deck. Even the batsman walked over and congratulated him. It was a great introduction into the game for the club legend. That made it 7 for 72. Soon after Chico and Pred were at it again as Mehdi skied one out in Chico's general vicinity and the inevitable successful grab was held. 8 for 81 and I thought we were all going home early. But Redowan and Nawi provided some stern lower order resistance. They ran well and pushed plenty of quick singles. They rode their luck with a few balls careering off through the slips for boundaries. Mickey couldn't buy a wicket despite bowling well and even Benny and Preds couldn't break through. I felt sorry for Preds he had 4 for at this stage and had three more overs to try and wrap up an international 5 for. Despite all his great efforts such an honour would have to wait a bit longer. Still it wasn't a bad effort for a bloke who was designated as being "not a wicket taker" a few years ago at a Churches State selection meeting. Eventually, the great Stevie D, fresh from his sensational catch at slip, was convinced that now was the time to relaunch his bowling career for the Neddies. He'd had almost a year out of the bowling line up as he had worked very hard since the surgery on his right shoulder to be in the position he now found himself in. He marked out that familiar run up and with that metronomic run into the wicket and that devilish bounce from just short of a length he made all our hearts beat just that little bit faster and happier. In no time at all he trapped Nawi LBW for a stoic knock of 19 and in his next over he dispatched the luckless number eleven, Anass for a duck. Redowan had played his heart out for his nation and finished unbeaten on 29. The locals, together with the Flanders gave him a rousing clap off the field. There were a couple of unusual incidents during his innings. At one stage I was standing at short cover and had under armed the ball back in the direction of the stumps. The ball had very gently smacked Redowan on the forearm but anyone would have thought he'd been shot. There were all sorts of gesticulations. He sauntered off to the square leg umpire to show him the evolving hematoma and I reckon the ambulance was put on standby. After about five or six minutes play could resume. I apologized most insincerely and we got on with the game. A few minutes later, he was down again and the trainer ran out to attend to yet another dire emergency. This time it turned out he'd suffered from an ant bite on the foot. It looked like a runner would be needed but after about ten or fifteen minutes he was able to bravely resume. It's certainly funny how the great game is played in different countries. I think a bit of the soccer culture has infiltrated into the Moroccan cricket ethos.

So we finished off the Moroccan innings at 126 in the 30th of their 40 overs. All in all it had been a highly successful outing but on the unusual pitch and with locals holding the home ground advantage and apparently some ability to make the umpires change their minds I wasn't all that happy to share a few of the boys' estimations that the game was over. Lunch was laid on in what was to become known as the typical Moroccan way. The sumptuous feed was distributed and we were treated like royalty. While some of the antics on the field could be talked about in many different ways, there was absolutely no doubting the incredible hospitality that the Moroccan Cricket Board was laying on for us all. The local TV crew peeled off plenty of footage and then asked for an interview with Stevie and me. I gave Moroccan cricket a wrap and expressed our gratitude for their welcoming ways and then Stevie was asked what he did for a job. They seemed impressed that he was a physio and then proceeded to ask him about his views on Moroccan cricket. That was a trifle odd. And so with lunch and the media commitments safely squared away, Sneaky and Frankie, our two in form and much trusted openers strapped on their pads and set out to face the music. The fielders were helped out by the TV camera man who proceeded to set up shop at mid off for the first ten or so overs. You never know what's going to happen on the cricket field. As my Grandad used to say, "It's a funny game, cricket!"

In pursuit of the 127 runs needed for our inaugural African victory, the Flanders started incredibly well. Frankie and Sneaky Pete, fresh from their Albion heroics rattled away at a brisk pace. The opening bowlers for Morocco bowled straight and found some pace. Sneaky copped a couple of harsh blows to the chest but resolutely stood his ground. He is a hard little fellow and has some awesome pride in both his own performance and in his baggy maroon cap or maroon helmet as the case may be. The fifty came up in the ninth over, with Frankie dominating proceedings. It came as a complete surprise when Nawi cleaned up Pete. Pete moved too far across to the off side and lost his middle and leg stumps- bowled around his legs. In retrospect, Pete reckoned that the pitch had moved in relation to the stumps. It sounded like crap until I went out to bat and found that the green carpet that had been laid across the concrete pitch did indeed move about considerably. So while Pete thought he was taking block in front of middle stump, he was probably well outside off peg. A trap for the Moroccan novice! 1 for 51 was still healthy, but disaster soon struck. Chico played slightly uncertainly at a ball on leg stump from Nawi and only managed to glove it through to the keeper and he was on his way for a duck. The great Stevie D in his maiden innings for the tour slashed at one and luckily the fielder misjudged the catch and instead of joining Chico with a first up African duck, Stevie was away with three runs. The lucky break didn't benefit him too much because in the next over he was trapped LBW to Soufian for that same three runs. I came out to bat at 3 for 54. Chico had joined me as the club record holder for the most career ducks with his globe a few overs before. He didn't have to wait too long to be relieved of that particularly ugly record, because I managed to play a far too ambitious and inappropriate shot and found myself pushing one duck ahead of the young gun. I tried to push one into the gap between mid wicket and square leg and inside edged it into my pad and bizarrely it recoiled all the way to second slip. You'd have to be unlucky. So Mehdi had my wicket and we had the staggers at 4 for 54. We'd lost 4 for 3 and the local lads had some blood to sniff and had really lifted several cogs in their intensity. Frankie and Chookie launched the lifeboats and Frankie particularly hit some sweet shots off his legs and found the boundary a few times. The score started looking a bit healthier until Frankie played his first false shot and was caught at slip off Azhar for what would eventually be recognized as a match winning 41. 5 for 74 was soon 6 for 79 as Leo was caught off Medhi for a duck and then Pooch tried to hit the same bowler into the Mediterranean and was caught right on the fence at long off. He made the fourth

duck of the innings and the third through to the seventh batsmen had mustered a single scoring shot between the five of them. Preds joined Chookie at a precarious 7 for 79. Still 48 short of victory- a victory that was in the bag just 20 minutes before. The Moroccans were off their heads with excitement. They were now favourites and they were on the brink of a famous victory over what they perceived as a vastly superior team. But Preds is not a man to let such odds daunt him. He had been there in the trenches in Japan when victory looked a distant dream and he had broken his back in toiling for four wickets earlier in the day. This was a match that he would not allow to slip away. Not on his shift anyway. At the other end was the 100 game veteran. The great Chook who has been involved in all of our greatest achievements stood there in the middle with Preds. There was still hope. Benny and Mickey were still in the sheds, so all was not lost. Benny is probably the best number ten batsman in club cricket history and Mickey has never failed in a crisis. But it would be tough. Every run was greeted with raucous cheers and slowly the tally edged its way towards the 127 run target. Chook played his drives with conviction as front foot play was the order of the day on the unusual pitch. Preds was strong off his pads and played some enchanting glances. They ran hard and talked to each other. Together they held their nerve. The fielders' heads started dropping. One big appeal for a leg side catch was greeted with the negative by the umpire. All sorts of pandemonium then broke loose. A couple of blokes were gesticulating wildly and arguing the point with the man in the black pants. This all culminated in the umpire walking off. Mohamed the captain, who was an exceptionally nice bloke came running over to the umpire and put out the fire just as he reached the boundary rope. Meanwhile we all stood transfixed by the way things happen here in Morocco. Order was restored and everyone just got on with things. It was almost as if nothing had happened. They are obviously a bit hot blooded here but the positive thing was that once things settled everyone was best mates again. The century was raised and soon the target fell below 20. Morale was improving but even so no one was allowed to change seats and no one was allowed to speak about anything that might put the mocker on the boys in the middle. Roybie had already disgraced himself earlier in the day as Frankie pushed into the 40's and Roybie piped up that he was looking good for back to back half centuries. No sooner had the words left his lips, than Frankie was making the long walk back to the sheds for 41. Each of the boys in the middle squeezed a couple of boundaries away but mostly they played conservatively and sensibly with ones and twos. A few wides helped us out and a couple of lots of byes really killed the locals. Ramjam was the designated score keeper and the young fella took great delight in yelling out the runs needed with every scoring shot and sometimes after each ball. Ramjam and Camel Toe were really working hard. With the target below ten we all relaxed slightly. But only slightly. Chookie and Preds were in control. With four needed Chookie seemed to be doing a bit of glory seeking and was beaten outside off stump by several balls in a row, as he looked to play one last huge front drive to seal the match. Bravado settled in the next over and the two men in maroon picked off the singles and ran some byes to get the scores level. Then, almost anti climactically a wide saw us through to 127 and another international victory. We made sure of things by allowing Preds to hit one through mid wicket for a single just to seal the deal and perhaps add a bit more class to the winning shot. As I turned back to look at the boys sitting so mentally exhausted in the Arabian tent, I was stunned by the silence and by the lack of emotion. I think that perhaps the team felt relief rather than exultation. It was a game that we had controlled from the start but because of 20 minutes of batting carnage we had had to work a lot harder to get over the line. It was an unusual feeling. I think the middle order batsmen, including myself, felt a bit guilty and embarrassed that we had left Chookie and Preds with such a large job to do. Thankfully they

were up for the challenge and showed some enormous mental toughness and plenty of batting skill to get the job done. Preds reveled in the responsibility. He loves the big moments and thrives on the pressure. It was a bit of a throwback to the not so illustrious days of Flanders cricket, when Preds had had to shoulder a lot more responsibility in the late 90's. Chookie thrives on pressure and the big stage. He has played enough cricket to know what was needed and the two of them forged a proud new chapter into the annals of Flanders history.

After the game and shaking of hands and the three cheers for the umpires and the Moroccans, we savored some relaxation time. Beneath the huge banner advertising the Ned Flanders XI vs. Maroc XI series, a whole horde of helpers were setting up some delectable sweets and pastries. The French legacy here in Morocco was a winner on this occasion and the pastries went down splendidly. Traditional Moroccan mint tea was served and I developed a new addiction. Speeches were made, including welcoming and congratulatory speeches from the Mayor of Rabat and the President of the Moroccan Cricket Board. I peeled off a few words about the local lads playing hard and with pride and gave some presentations as well. I gifted an NF XI touring shirt to Mohamed the Moroccan skipper and some Kookaburra caps to Medhi for his fine bowling and to Redowan for his stoic batting. The local junior cricket captain also scored himself a NFXI flag and an Aussie one to boot. All of these folk were extremely excited recipients. We enjoyed their company and their hospitality for about an hour before we headed back onto the arena with a few dozen school kids. They had watched us all day, cheering very exuberantly for their local heroes and politely all be it less enthusiastically for the men in maroon from Australia. We did a few catching drills and throwing classes and they universally loved us for it. There was the happy chorus of laughter from every happy smiling face and when we were called away to make our coach, by Leila, we were all as disappointed as the kids. Just as we were set to board, Mohamed, the Moroccan captain ran up to me and presented me with his Moroccan National track suit top. He was most insistent that I have it. It was a remarkable gesture. I know how much my baggy maroon cap means to me and here was a man giving away his own National jacket. I was very moved and humbled by his gesture. That jacket will be well cherished and will always be a symbol of the generosity of the Moroccan people and particularly one noble man.

From the ground, we set out on our NF XI luxury coach on the long drive to Fes. It must've taken about four or five hours. I can't really recall. The trip seems a bit of a blur. Here we were, a small team of mates from Brisbane and we had just beaten yet another international cricket team. It was a trifle surreal to contemplate. As the sun slowly sank, the hazy skies of dusk enveloped us we arrived in Fes. I had fond memories of Fes from my trip here in 2002 with another club legend, Dave Overlack. I remembered the incredible frenetic spectacle of the souk and the staggering pungent aroma of the leather tannery. Arriving in the hotel late, we dined and then would have sedately hit our beds, if not for another bizarre incident. Just as the remains of my main course were being taken away and I was setting myself for the pleasure of dessert, Leila approached me. She was quite insistent that I come with her and despite my ambitions for dessert, I was forced to acquiesce. She proceeded to explain to me in quite animated tones that she had just been sacked and was mid way through asking me to sign a letter of recommendation for her, when Hayat arrived on the scene. Hayat as it turns out was the director of the travel business that had been employed by the Moroccan Cricket Board to entertain us in our Moroccan sojourn. More to the point she was the 'villain' who had just fired Leila. For the next 60 minutes, I sat between the two of them. They hollered at each other in some kind of Arabic lingo, Leila would speak to me in broken English and Hayat would try and communicate with me in her

French or Spanish (but never English). Yelling and heated gesticulations were the order of the day, while I sat there mute but transfixed. I rued my luck that I had never been seated in the middle of two women as they argued over me before. Each of them had a turn at speaking to me in private. Agi was involved as translator for Hayat at one stage. It was hard to follow what the fight was about but seeing as how Hayat was the director of the touring company, I reckoned that she was going to win the blue and that whatever she was saying was going to be the way things were. So I explained to Leila that I was happy enough to sign a letter saying that we'd been happy with her performance as a tour guide and then on behalf of the team I saluted the new regime and went with Hayat. The complicating factor was that Leila had taken all our washing, including our playing gear, off to her mate's laundry company and was to collect it all on our behalf the next morning. Thankfully, she was professional and made sure all our kits came back to us. It was all clean and folded but crazily everyone's gear was mixed together in several large piles. It made for some interesting diplomacy at the next stop as the lads picked out their cricket strips from between the girls' undies.

As a new day dawned, we were away early and headed out on a tour of Fes with a local guide. I suppose his name was Hassan. The guide's name was generally Hassan. He took us to a mountain top so as to peer down over the World Heritage Listed medina. He told us a lot of facts and figures but all we were really interested in was scoring some red Fezzes for everybody. We clambered through the souk for a few hours. We were hassled and harangued by merchants and Hassan took us to lots of his mates' places. We were then offered lots of bargain prices for rugs, pottery, tea pots, leather bags, belts and wallets, all bartered for over the obligatory complementary mint tea. The leather goods were popular with our crew. A few blokes bought belts and Pete Dunne bought some hideous wallets for the bargain basement price of seven for a couple of bucks. They all stunk and disintegrated pretty soon after purchase. Tragically for Pete, I think the warranty period expired after six minutes. Between the shops we saw some mosques and some very auspicious and authentic local architecture. The tile work was masterly and the arches were special. The mosaic shop we headed into was fascinating in that we were privy to the techniques of making the tiles. Each individual piece is made by hand. They are very talented at what they do. They earn their money too, with the furnaces being extremely unpleasant to be near in the North African summer's heat. The carpet shop almost had a sale. Chookie and Mel vanished into the upstairs office for some hard core bartering and selling. They emerged twenty minutes later, miraculously with their wallets intact. The rugs were gorgeous but I couldn't really see where I'd put one at home. Maybe when the Flanders Club house is built we can have a few Moroccan tiles and rugs on the floor. The tannery was amazing. The photos of the vats is one of those quintessential Moroccan images that seems to adorn every guide book ever written about the country. The photos would never be so appealing if they were accompanied by the smell that the hides that are being processed, generate. The salesmen even give out mint leaves to hold under your nose to help disguise the stench. Our last stops were a couple of clothes shops. Mel and Preds were the stars of the show, as they modeled a few Moroccan garments. Preds was in his element in his 'Preds of Arabia' role while Mel maintained an air of mystery, as her blue eyes sparkled from between her veil and head gear. We all picked up a Fez and modeled them with tremendous enthusiasm for about eight minutes before they became another one of those banal souvenirs that gets relegated to the bin because it's just too much hassle to carry home. Preds finished off proceedings by winning an arm wrestle against the local strongman who had

been wheeled out to take on the dirty infidel dogs. It was just another Flanders international triumph.

Leaving the souk, we headed over to one of many palaces that the King frequents. Hassan VII is well loved and has plenty of photos of himself adorning most public places. His granddad was a great man and he worked energetically for the nation's independence. He is commemorated in every town. Mohammed V Avenue is the main drag in every major city. The palace was spectacular- at least from the front doors anyway. That's all we got to see. Apparently we hadn't been invited in for mint tea and pastries. The King was obviously not home or didn't know the Flanders were in town. His people really need to get more organized.

Next morning, we headed off for what I had felt would be one of the highlights of the trip. We set a course for Merzouga in the Sahara Desert, via Erfoud. But before this, one of the important orders of business was an extremely prestigious award had to be made. For a few weeks, Stevie and Mickey and I had mulled over the possibility of inducting a new man to the Ned Flanders Hall of Fame, for the first new induction in almost three years. There was really only one candidate. This man had been there for many famous Flanders moments. He had the prerequisite century- a slashing 132 against the Mormons at Yeronga. It was an innings that defied belief. The kid had batted at ten the previous week and only scored himself a promotion because Exelby was unavailable to open. He had been there for two Two Day premierships and was an integral part of the One Day hat trick that was completed this year. He loves the club and lives and breathes Flanders every day. So it was with great pride that Adam Frankel was made the 17th member of the Flanders Hall of Fame. Phil and Ags were very proud, as was I. He deserved the honour and really only reinforced his case by the two stellar knocks he had peeled off in recent days. Well done Frankie. Welcome to the Hall.

The drive out to Erfoud and hence our oasis was a fascinating drive through the High Atlas and the Mid Atlas Mountains. The terrain was amazing. The stark beauty of the rocky mountains of the Atlas ranges was something to behold. Very occasionally a river valley would present itself and there in the harsh, barren landscape, lush green foliage would emerge along the river banks. These thin corridors of green provided such a stark contrast with the red and yellow hues of the rest of the terrain. We stopped for a few photo shoots and soaked up the mysteries of nature. After a solid day in the bus we pulled into a service station to collect our new English speaking guide. His name was naturally Hassan. He seemed to be pretty good mates with Hayat and she introduced him and he was duly welcomed into the Flanders family. By mid afternoon we turned up at Erfoud, right on the edge of the mighty Sahara. We farewelled our loyal coach and driver to climb aboard a fleet of 4 wheel drives. 45 minutes of sand dune fun saw us arrive at the Palmira de Dunes. Our hotel was very up market and nestled in the foot hills of an enormous dune that dwarfed everything else in sight. The red sand created a staggering contrast against the blue sky. The sun slunk off to the west and as it kissed the dunes it made for some inspiring photographic opportunities. A local musical group sang a few songs as we arrived and welcomed us with some bizarre instruments. They had plenty of rhythm and some crazy lyrics that naturally enough we translated into something about "Menagh". They seemed to love that we knew all the words, but really all we were singing was the word "Menagh" a few dozen times. It's amazing how the name and the concept of "Menagh" transcends all languages, cultures and continents. I spent a few exquisite moments on my own up on the roof of the hotel. The dunes were awe inspiring, the sunset was a treat and as the stars emerged, led out by Venus, I found myself contemplating the wonders of creation. This was a special place and I was incredibly privileged

to be here. It's amazing how a youngish bloke from Moorooka can find himself in such a unique spot on the globe. I felt very lucky.

While I was philosophizing about life and existence, my poor old mate Pete was brewing up some gastro intestinal badness. Like a few of the boys, Pete had started feeling decidedly average. While it really is a must when it comes to Third World travel, gastro is not that pleasant at the time. The headaches kicked in for Pete too and the great man was down for the count. Tragically he was unable to get up early the next morning when the rest of us loaded ourselves onto camels to traverse the dunes and watch the sunrise over Algeria. The 5am start was well worth the effort as the ships of the desert plodded their way up the sand, despite the brewing sand storm. They didn't seem remotely flustered as we cowered, covering our eyes and mouths as the sands of the Sahara found their way into every nook and cranny of our bodies. It was relief to be a bloke. The girls had far more nooks and crannies to be violated than we did. A few fossil souvenirs were being flogged by the camel herders and I shelled out for a few. I have always fondly remembered my childhood, when one of my great ambitions was to dig up dinosaurs in the Sahara. It's funny how life pans out. A few of the boys made some very rude references about me being the only fossil in the Sahara on this particular day. They weren't funny at all. The photos of sunrise over the Sahara were special but I really loved the snaps of the camels' shadows as their long languid bodies cast their mystical shapes onto the dunes. The camel safari in the Sahara was about the most definitive activity to be done in Morocco. It was great to tick it off. I was shattered for Pete and Stevie too. Stevie had joined Pete on the sick list. Funnily enough, last time I came out to the Sahara in 2002, I missed the camel ride and the sunrise. My gastro intestinal affliction was far more self induced on that occasion though. Maybe the scotch was off or past its use by date.

By the time breakfast was downed and the 4 wheel drives reloaded, we were well ready to head back to Erfoud. Our coach welcomed us back aboard and we cast off for Todra Gorge for lunch. Again the scenery was spectacular. Desert landscapes with just the occasional splash of green oasis in the river valleys. Todra Gorge was one of my favorite places in 2002 and again it impressed me. Its sheer rock faces and stark red hues were magical. Mountains really are the best thing that Nature has created. I love them. By lunch time the gastro epidemic was really taking hold. The menu was of secondary concern. Most people were more interested in the hygiene standards of the loos. Sadly we had no time for any hikes. Given our collective state of health, I doubt any of us would have been keen for a hike anyway. After lunch we said goodbye to Todra Gorge and set out for Ouarzazate. This is the world's most difficult place to spell and pronounce. I reckon its main role for us was to act as a bit of a half way stop on our way to Marrakech.

Next day we toured down the Road of a Thousand Kasbahs. That translates into a road with plenty of old mud and daub structures. We stopped at a few of them for photos. The best one was an enormous confluence of buildings. All built of mud and sticks and straw. It was set high up a barren mountain and the views were majestic. Storks love to build their nests on the uppermost prominences. They especially love to set up house atop the minarets. Perhaps they just want to be that much closer to their God. We wandered around the rooms of the many homes and enjoyed the epic views down the waterless river valley. It was as dry as the rest of the desert. A few trees splashed the only green colour along each of the river banks. A long day on the bus culminated in our arrival at Marrakech. This was my favourite town back in 2002. It is alive and frenetic and very cosmopolitan. Western tourism meets the traditions of this moderate Moslem

country most enthusiastically here in Marrakech. Hassan led us out for a walking tour to a palace and some water features. We also saw an old mosque and with a huge minaret. The whole town was buzzing with activity but the real epicenter for this vibe is the main Djema'a al Fna Square. After dinner this was the place to head towards. We all headed out in small groups. I have to admit I forgot to wait for poor old Roy downstairs. He was one of the great majority of us who had copped a dose of gastro and had to have a quick pit stop before heading out. When the taxis all arrived I have to admit I forgot the poor bloke. Just to add more insult to his gastro intestinal injury. Sorry mate. Daffy, Pete and I grabbed a cab together. I remember telling the boys about the snake charmers and how the cobras have had all their fangs pulled out, so they really are harmless despite their menacing appearance. No sooner had we arrived at the Square than one of the notorious charmers approached Daffy and before Daffy knew what was going on, he had a highly venomous brown snake draped around his neck. While I am sure Daffy wanted to believe what I had told him, minutes before, I am not all together convinced that he didn't have a few doubts. The local snake man took great delight in taking a few photos on Daff's camera and herding a few cobras into the fore ground of the happy snap. Daffy was doing it tough. He was sweating a bit more and looked a funny sort of pale colour. He wasn't talking much and had that doomed look in his eyes. The look that said "Mattie, tell Mel that I love her". Finally Daff had had enough and motioned for Ram Chandra to call off his serpent. Then the real fun and games started. Of course there'd have to be some of kind of remuneration for the local charlatan. Daffy suggested 10 dirhams but the bloke assured us that at least 100 dirhams was the going rate. Despite the snake still wrapping itself around his neck and flickering its tongue in his ear, Daffy tried to stick to his guns. Pete Dunne added his staunch and resolute support to Daffy's case with a few well chosen words, and eventually we managed to break the bloke down to 30 dirhams, Daffy looked mightily relieved to part with the money and receive his freedom back again. 30 dirhams might not be a fair price for what had transpired, but 30 dirhams is a great price to pay to have such an outstanding story in the repertoire. From the snake pit we met the monkeys and Daffy managed to avoid shelling out any more coin for a 'monkey on the head' photo. From the zoo, we made our way up some steps to a tea house and this was a wonderful vantage point from which to survey the hurdy gurdy of the Square. The lights were spectacular and the smells of all the little eating shops wafted up our nostrils. The noise was staggering and the minaret in the background just capped off a unique Moroccan scene. Of course we had to have a mint tea each, just to cap off the moment. As we made our way through the narrow alley ways, through all the pokey little shops and past all the enthusiastic vendors, we were delighted if not wracked by guilt, to run into Roybie. With some profuse apologies, all was set right I think and the newly formed quartet enjoyed the sensory saturation of Marrakech together before heading home. An early night was the order of the day, because our next match was penciled in for the following afternoon. While we four intrepid herpetologists battled snakes and serpents and assorted wildlife exhibits some of the other boys and girls headed off to what they saw as some kind of Mecca. There was a hajj pilgrimage with an entirely gastronomical theme. As we drove through Marrakech earlier in the day, the young fellas had spotted a Pizza Hut. Despite all the profuse watery diarrhea of the previous few days, the more valiant members of the Flanders crew answered the call of the pepperoni and onions. Courageous but perhaps a trifle fool hardy I thought but good luck to them as they set their gastro recovery back a few steps. They all raved about the pizzas and perhaps a few extra doses of diarrhea were well worth the huge boost in morale that the Pizza Hut served up.

Every cricket day is a day to savour and enjoy. Today however was potentially going to be a tough one. The morning was dominated by fiscal dramas. The Moroccan Cricket Board needed to be paid and the local ATMs and the Australian credit cards weren't really making sweet music together for a few of the squad. In the main part these dramas resolved but there were plenty of anxious moments before the dust settled. A quick tour of some more palace buildings, the purchase of some more hideous team hats and an interesting stop off at the naturopath shop were all amongst the morning's highlights. The naturopath shop offered massages and few punters indulged themselves. I was feeling a bit too tense for such pleasures. Stevie and I had a huge press conference to head to. Mohamed the Cricket Board's President met us, with a very glamorous Hayat in tow and took us to a very flash looking official building. Hayat had dressed up to the nines and looked very chic. She certainly had the edge over all the other women in town in their burqas and veils. Stevie and I pulled on the long pants and wore our NF XI touring shirts and of course our maroon caps. All the other delegates were in suits and ties. The interviewees were set up along a very austere desk and each of us had our own microphone to use. Drinks were distributed to the speakers and various documents were given out. The assemble throng of journos eventually numbered 51. I counted them, just for the story. The number 51 would again become significant later in the day. But more of that later. Mohamed gave a long speech in Arabic. I gather it was all about the launch of the Board's new project to promote cricket in the schools and to set up an infrastructure that would see Moroccan cricket thrive. The guide book seemed to suggest that there was a schedule for the National team over the next few months. The centre piece of the whole program involved the Moroccan team playing THE Australian team that afternoon, right here in Marrakech. It's funny how something as trivial as an article can change a sentence's meaning so drastically. Stevie and I smirked when we saw that in fact we were the Australian team they were alluding to. I was introduced and Fatima, the Board's Vice President did the translating for me. I mentioned that we were thrilled to be touring Morocco and that it was easily our favorite destination compared to every other tour we'd embarked upon. I suggested that the local cricketing talent was excellent and that we had been impressed thoroughly in Rabat with the fight of the opposition. Of course the Board's direction for cricket in this country was excellent and the coaching staff were doing a grand job. I gave the people of Morocco a wrap and some compliments for the landscapes too. Then Stevie got the conch and expressed our collective pleasure at being able to be part of this auspicious occasion. He thanked all the journos for coming along to meet us and then finished off by telling the media scrum that in Australia we have a saying that we like to use in order to wish both teams an enjoyable day of cricket. It translates roughly into "Play well!" He said that at the start of play and perhaps at the end the match Aussie players will express these sentiments with the word "Menagh! Menagh!" The media masses all murmured and mumbled the word to themselves in a guttural sort of way, as a chorus of "Menagh" echoed around the press conference. It was fairly tough to keep straight faced in front of all the cameras and all the officials. The only tragedy was that none of the other boys were there to observe Stevie's comedic genius. Afterwards we scored a few of the now familiar pastries and cups of mint tea. Then Hayat escorted us back to the rest of the team as we met up for lunch. The Moroccan lads joined us at a very swish venue. It must've been the poshest restaurant in Marrakech. It was all set up in the traditional Moroccan décor and the food was exquisite. Even if most of us were still battling the gastro, we still forced the food in. Sometimes you've just got to push through the pain barrier. After lunch we headed down to Marrakech's main Soccer Stadium. It was huge. As we strolled in the rock and roll was pumping as the DJ was whipping the crowd into a bit of a

frenzy. The grandstand was pretty chockas with kids and all sorts of smartly dressed folk who were obviously dignitaries. We later found out that the Mayor of Marrakech, the South African Ambassador to Morocco and the Pakistani Ambassador to Morocco were in attendance to watch us play. Of course the President and the two Vice Presidents of the Moroccan Cricket Board were there too. We got changed in our huge dressing rooms before heading back out to the middle. The familiar green carpet pitch was rolled out onto the huge astro turf arena. Little sprigs of loose rubber covered the green plastic grass. It was soft and springy to run on. It was superb. We faced a few balls on the pitch to get used to the odd bounce. The ball really stopped on you as you readied yourself to hit the ball. Next thing we knew, 300 school kids spilled onto the ground and we were invited to do some coaching. The savage heat sucked the sweat out of all of us as the kids ran us ragged. It was a real highlight to share our love of cricket with so many fresh faced kids. They all seemed to love the game. Frankie and I took a group of about 25 and took them through bowling, batting and fielding. 1G, as Frankie is called because he rarely gets out of first gear, was in his element. The kids loved his laid back demeanor and he reveled in their excitement. Menagh had a group and I saw a great photo of Mickey demonstrating bowling right handed. Maybe there is something in that, Mick. Lots of kids wanted photos with their favorite Flanders man. Of course the big fella, Chookie was a cult figure. Preds had them all eating out of his hand and Roybie was a big hit too. They all seemed to love calling out our names. It was one of the best experiences of the entire tour. All the while the music was blaring and the carnival atmosphere was infectious. You couldn't help but have fun.

After about two hours of training, the fifteen Neddies were starting to feel the heat. The gastro epidemic had already washed a few of us out and the severe sun wasn't doing us any extra favours. Despite all the great memories we were storing away with the coaching clinic, we had to be mindful of the fact that we still had a game to play against Morocco's finest and we badly wanted to win.

I caught up with the Moroccan coach and suggested that we needed a few minutes to collect a few thoughts and recuperate. We agreed to start the match in about 30 minutes. The lads gulped down plenty of fluids, courtesy of Pete Dunne's smart thinking. He raced off and picked up a few dozen bottles of water. Once we were rehydrated, the two teams assembled on the field in single file. The Moroccan Cricket Board had decided to do something very special for us. They had lined up a recorded rendition of Australia's national anthem for us. We stood in a line and with fierce Australian pride sang Advance Australia Fair, arms linked. It was a superb moment. It will not easily be forgotten by all 15 of us. And our singing voices were pretty reasonable to, I reckon. It must have been that Karaoke practice we had in Japan a couple of years ago. The Moroccan boys sang their anthem after us and they sang with pride in their faces and commitment. They were just as thrilled as we were to have the anthems played.

As usual on this tour, I lost the toss and the athletic figures of Poochie and Leo were soon on their way out to the middle. Sneaky and Frankie were both rotated out of this game but we had two tremendous openers in their stead. The game was to be a ten over a side fixture. Having never played in a 10-10 match, it didn't take a lot of brains to work out that slogging from the start was the objective. No one does this better than the two lads who strode out for the team at the start of the innings. On a dodgy pitch and with just 60 balls to face, I thought 80 would be a good score. Poochie decided that would be about half of what we should expect. With Leo striking the ball sweetly and running hard between the wickets, Poochie went berserk. The boundaries were nowhere near big enough as he smashed an assortment of fours into the leg side fence. Three balls cleared the fence and one of these actually cleared the grand stand and hurtled

out of the ground. Leo left at 1 for 26, in the third over. By the time Chico had got off the mark, for his first runs on Africa, Pooch was busy with his one man demolition program that the poor Moroccan's had very little idea how to combat. When he left at 2 for 57, his personal tally was 45. He really deserved 50. The rest of the team were all far more disappointed than the big fella. He really doesn't care too much for those sorts of landmarks. Personal glory doesn't interest him, only the team does. Now the famous Dillon sibling rivalry or perhaps it is really sibling inspiration, really kicked in. Chico, with his first African run safely in the bank, now proceeded to play a beautifully paced knock. He scored just a pair of singles off his first six balls. But his next six balls realized 30 runs. Each four was hit harder and each of the three sixes in this little sequence went further. He matched Poochie's effort of hitting the ball out of the ground. The ball returned several minutes later courtesy of a little kid who had been prowling round the alley way outside the ground. He cruised into the 40's and then smashed consecutive sixes in the final over to take him to 49 before a single took him to the Flanders very first African 50. In the meantime Stevie and Chookie had rallied around the cause with six and 12 not out respectively. Chookie also blasted a huge six in the final over, but he didn't clear the grandstand. 3 for 127 off ten overs was way more than I thought we needed, but in ten over cricket it only takes one bloke to get away from you and you can be in trouble. The boys took nothing for granted and we were buzzing from the days proceedings. The exploits of the Dillon boys, the big crowd, all the media hype and of course the thrill of the coaching had all really put us on a high. This was all trumped by the half time ceremony. A huge assortment of trophies had been laid out under three tents on the side line of the field. A plethora of men in suits were then assembled behind the tables. Mohamed the President spoke and everyone clapped. The South African Ambassador and his Pakistani equivalent both received beautiful brass plates encased in regal looking presentation frames. A few other important people also cleaned up. Anyone that was anyone spoke solemnly and universally there were raptures of applause. After every child had won a prize, they called for the President of the Ned Flanders Cricket club. Stevie has been ordained with the fancy title since we touched down in Casablanca. Stevie received a very ornate trophy in recognition of his extraordinary efforts in arranging the tour. Then the Australian Captain was called for. Seeing as how Ricky Ponting wasn't anywhere to be seen, I decided that I was probably the next most qualified to be called such a thing and I stepped forward. Then it started raining trophies. The team scored a similar brass plate to the Ambassadors, and then there was a trophy for winning the game. I had to remind myself that even though we had batted well, they were perhaps being a bit premature or perhaps a bit defeatist in awarding the winning trophy at half time and then another trophy was awarded for God knows what and then finally I scored a trophy just like Stevie's one. It was incredible.

After lots of hand shaking and back slapping we were then ushered back to the pitch with the official photographer and all the dignitaries. All the men in suits had to have a bat. They all faced enough balls until they successfully played some kind of a decent shot. Of course photos had to be taken to commemorate the batting expertise of several men who looked like they'd never even seen a bat before. I was recruited to show a few blokes how to hold the bat and how to stand at the crease. It was all good fun I must say. They all seemed to having a ball, with laughter echoing around the vast stadium with every dignitaries' turn.

After the half time circus, we had to get our heads back on to finish off the game. The body language of the Moroccans was very encouraging for us. They all looked broken. I think the game in Rabat had given them a little bit of hope, but the Dillon brothers had extinguished all their pre match optimism.

By this time the lights had been turned on and we were about to embark on the very first Ned Flanders Cricket team under lights spectacular. I had never played a day night match. The white ball was a novelty and the cool night air was a tangible relief from the oppressive heat that we had endured earlier in the day. Ramjam had the honours with the shiny new white pill. He steamed in with menacing intent and soon had his first wicket of the night. He clean bowled Ibrahim for a duck. 1 for none! Derksen had similar success in his first over, as Medhi played all around a straight one. Ramajm's second over was even better than his first and he smashed through Azhar's defensive push and rattled the stumps again, before finishing off his two over spell by having Nawi bunting one to the safe crocodile hands of the great Mick Menagh at mid wicket. Ramjam took the figures for the day with an incredible 3 for 8. I'd almost have to say he'd been unlucky. He could easily have had a few more wickets. His enthusiasm for cricket and his unbridled passion for the club have made the young kid very popular with the rest of the team. I was so proud of him. We all were. He really is the future of the club. By the end of the tour, icons like Stevie and Chookie admitted him into the select band of men to be nominated the 'heart and soul' of the team. This is a phenomenal accolade for such a young performer. When you throw in the fact that he has just wrapped up his semester at University with four sevens, you have to say the club's future is in secure hands.

By the end of the third over, Morocco were 4 for 17 and I felt pretty relaxed. Stevie wouldn't let Ramjam have all the limelight and in his second over he nearly pulled in a blinding caught and bowled before he successfully completed the same mode of dismissal later in his over. Medhi Raj was his victim. This made it 5 for 18 in just four overs. Menagh got involved in his only over, with Stevie taking a well judged catch at long off to remove Soji. Poor old Roybie probably bowled the best spell of the night but still managed to be completely devoid of luck. Daffy chimed in with a pole as he went straight through their skipper's defense. Salah was their top scorer with 13. Daffy was over the crescent moon, having claimed his first wicket on tour. What a thrill to clean up their national captain. I was ecstatic for the young man. Of course Preds can't help himself. He had two wickets in his only over. Soufian skied one out to long on and Daffy ran 20 meters before he dived full length to snaffle the ball a few millimeters off the astro turf. It was arguably the best catch of the tour, and certainly the best catch by anyone other than Chico the catching machine. Next ball, Mountagin drove on the up and didn't get all of the ball. I ran in from deep cover and took my first catch of the tour at grass roots level. I was stoked to finally have done something useful for the team in Africa. Preds steamed in on the hat trick ball and put it on the spot. The ball would have hit the top of off peg, but the batsman pushed forwards in hope and managed to deprive Preds. At 9 for 48 and with just one over to go the game was somewhat safe, even to the fatalists in the squad. Pete Dunne had nagged me incessantly back at home about the possibility of him getting a bowl on tour. I thought if ever the time was ripe, it was now. The only way we could lose was if Pete froze up and bowled about 30 or 40 wides and was smashed for a few sixes. Pete reassured me that he reckoned he could pretty much guarantee that he'd land the ball roughly on the green carpet and so I threw him the shiny white pill. Ball one bounced only once and landed somewhere near the off stump. A single was taken. The next two balls enjoyed similar results. The old man was on song. The fourth ball was not Pete's best. It bounced more than once and slowly meandered its way down the pitch a fair way outside off stump. The number eleven wound up and planted his front foot down the wicket and right at the pitch of the ball. He wound up with a big back lift and hit the ball sweetly high over extra cover. Tragically for Abdoni, though, I was standing right on the boundary line on the deep extra cover fence and I was able to follow the beautiful white ball all the way into my

hands, high above my head. I had time to peek around and position my feet just inside the line and it was with relish that I held on to the catch. It was more than just any catch though, because this one was to complete Pete's first ever wicket for the club and of course it wrapped up the game. I will long remember this catch. Morocco had been bowled out in 9.4 overs for just 51 runs. That number 51 had flashed up again, just like the number of journos at the press release. Even by our cocky attitudes this was something remarkable. Our humble Churches team had just bowled out an international team for 51 in just 58 balls. It was thrilling. The mixed feelings I'd had about the previous victory at Rabat were nowhere to be seen and all of the squad were off their heads with excitement. Of course all the other stuff that had transpired during this awesome day had certainly built things up into something to day dream about for many years to come.

We shook hands and cheered our opposition as we always do and then we started the arduous process of packing up the spoils of victory. It wasn't just the cricket clothes, the bats, the gloves and the pads. This time we had to lug five trophies as well. It was a sweet inconvenience. The coach was the place to be on this pleasant summer's night in Marrakech. Hayat and the Cricket Board had invited us to be their guests at a show. The spectacle was called 'Fantasia' and it was quite the gala event. There were horsemen and guns and spears and all sorts of exotic performers. The theme seemed to be about the glory days of the merchants' caravans and their travels through the northern parts of Africa and across the deserts. The costumes were magical and the story really transported me and I presume most of the team back to a different world of genies, magic lamps and vast fortunes. Of course a few harems also captured the imagination. We dined at a very plush tent and the food came out in a very traditional mode. A half a lamb was served up. Leo was especially thrilled about this. It certainly had a bit of a Yum Cha feel about it. Dancing girls and bands paraded through our tent and plenty of our mob ended up dancing the night away with the local harem girls. My initial thoughts were that such a monumental victory should be celebrated in house, say back in Club Sneeps with just our people, but I have to admit the show really augmented the feeling of the whole day's proceedings. We had had palaces, naturopaths, press conferences, coaching, presentations and a magical victory and now there was even more marrow to be sucked out of the great game of life. Life was good, as usual if you wear the Flanders badge over heart. Life was intoxicating without even a sniff of grog and it was with overwhelming pride that I went to bed after a short stint at Club Sneeps.

Next day, Essaouira beckoned and we set out through more Atlas Mountains and onwards to the northern coast. Essaouira is almost as hard to spell as Ouarzazate and sits on the Atlantic coast. Its shallow sloping beaches and gentle waves make it a favourite holiday spot for all Moroccans. It has that coastal feel about it. The sea breeze seems to leach away everyone's stress and angst and a mellow attitude pervades. Jimi Hendrix spent a bit of time here and he penned 'All Along the Watchtower' while he was here. We set up in our hotel just near the said 'watchtower' and we could stroll across the road and straight onto the beach. Again, Hayat and the Moroccan Cricket Board had done us a great turn with the accommodation. Pete Dunne and I decided we needed a trial separation and while Pete shacked up with Mickey, I roomed with the embodiment of all things youthful, Ramjam. I think Ramjam might have been a bit shocked while I explained that as the junior in the room he would have a few tasks and duties to carry out. Of course my bags would need carrying, my shoes would need shining and obviously my clothes for tomorrow would need to be laid out the night before. It was a given that I would have the choice of beds and that I would have first shower. After I had gone to great lengths to set all these rules out, I

realised that the impertinent young buck had actually left the room ten minutes previously and was heading to the beach. No respect!

A dip in the chilly Atlantic was something that had to be done and it was brisk but very refreshing after a long day in the bus. In direct competition with the Flanders European and African tour, the Soccer World Cup was being staged at exactly the same time, down in South Africa. Obviously Roy had made his choice about which one he wanted to be part of but still the soccer held some appeal to some of the boys. We'd often find ourselves crowded into someone's room, or huddled around a TV in some obscure venue, to watch the soccer. Tonight's game provided a great way of reintroducing some normality back into our lives. The frantic pace of the international cricket tourist could be slowed down and we could get back to doing our normal everyday things. We gathered around the TV in the hotel bar and relaxed over a few drinks as Uruguay played Spain. It was a pulsating game and Spain just edged out the dual world champions 3-2. While the result was almost an irrelevance to most of us, it was still a lovely way to spend the evening. Just as he had done on most nights on tour, Sneaky opened up as the proprietor of Club Sneeps and the grog flowed and the laughter bubbled for many hours, long into the night. I peeled off at a time that I thought was late, but Ramjam came home at about 2 am. I lamented my lost youth as I stumbled out of bed to let him in.

A late start on the bus for Casablanca meant that the next morning could be used to have a good look at the charming coastal town. The old forts and the famous watch tower made an impressive accessory to the coast line's rugged rocks. The thriving market places were fascinating. Frankie, Pete, Leo, Daffy and I headed out for a bit of a wander. Frankie had a haircut in a traditional barber's seat. He got his money's worth with a blade two or three. Pete and I bought some wooden gifts for various family members and mates. Now I've got even more crap to carry home. My backpack is rapidly running out of room. A few stray moggies were out and about and trying to coax the local fishermen to throw them a few morsels. Overall I would have loved to spend a bit more time relaxing in Essaouira. It would have done my head the world of good. Returning home by mid morning, we met up with rest of the team. Hassan was about to take everyone out on a walking tour of his various cousins' shops. Pete and I declined and did a few emails. Back at the computer, Ramjam managed to weave his electronics magic and had successfully found a transmission of the Third State of Origin game. We could get updates every few seconds. It was late in the game and we were up by a point, until Tonga crashed over to seal the game and the clean sweep for Queensland. There was one maroon team going gang busters and we were another. Quietly, I thought to myself that a maroon clean sweep would be a very, very good thing to be involved in.

The drive up to Casablanca seemed to take for ever. The only real highlights were a few Philthy Phil Frankel jokes. Phil always references his jokes and takes great delight in explaining when, where and from whom he heard the original. Sometimes he likes to retell a few bits that he may have mixed up. There are always plenty of details in every yarn. You can almost feel that you were there involved in the actual joke. Eventually the punch line comes and Phil usually delivers the goods. What goods they are, I am not really sure. I have to admire his enthusiasm and his keenness to entertain. Phil with a microphone is quite an entity. The other main entertainer on the long bus rides was Chico. He loved to say 'Shalom, my friends'. He did the accent very authentically. He even wrote a little song. The tune was fairly bland but the lyrics were easy to remember. He just kept singing 'Shalom, my friends'. Not content just to be a singer, Chico even developed some dance moves. He'd wave his hands above his head. He really

was born for the stage. Sometimes he'd change genres and do the documentary stuff. He'd tell us we were just heading into Rome or Paris and point out all the fascinating features of these famed cities, like the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triumph. One day he even saw the Tower of Pisa. I didn't even know these places were in Morocco. A few pretenders would try and steal the spot light between Chico and Phil's acts. Frankie would tell his conversation stopping jokes and Preds would give his more theatrical renditions of a few old standards. It was great to see the boys all doing their bit to maintain morale on the long bus trips. The fiscal dramas of a few days previous overflowed a bit into this afternoon. We detoured out to the Casablanca airport to see if a few of the tourists could access money from the ATM's at the airport. Some had luck and Preds, Roybie and the three Frankels all came up trumps. Poor old Leo had his card eaten by the machine and Sally sensibly decided not to risk hers. It was a tough few minutes for those two as the awful possibility of being in a different continent, a long way from home and being financially impotent struck them. Luckily, all's well that ends well and the situation was soon sorted out. Poor old Sally was pretty drained by the ordeal but she bravely fought on and kept contributing her heart and soul to the tour. By the time we hit our hotel, the sun had almost disappeared. The docklands area of Casablanca was just near our hotel and the sights of the shipping life made for some interesting views from our windows. My idea of finding a 'Rick's Cafe' will have to be put on hold until my next Moroccan trip. We were lucky that the chef at the hotel was an awfully nice bloke. By the time we made the dining room, he had gone home but he gladly returned to cook us dinner. The pumpkin soup that he created was perhaps the greatest ever bowl of soup I have eaten. Maybe it was because the bland diet that the gastro had enforced on us all was taking its toll, but this bloke was a culinary genius.

5am came far too early for me. We had a huge day ahead of us. Our next games were penciled in for Tangiers, this afternoon. We were lined up for two 20-20 games. Tangiers is about five hours drive from Casa and so we had the painfully early start. The estimates about the duration of the many drives that we embarked upon were notoriously dodgy. Hassan seemed to delight in teasing us. Four hours would turn into six. Six hours would turn into eight. On one occasion the bus broke down with gear box problems and we crept around the country side in second gear for an hour before the driver managed to bash something into place to rectify the problem. Naturally, some of the lads- Chico, Frankie, Stevie and Ramjam, predominantly, decided that we should have a sweeps stakes competition. Everyone put in 10 dirhams and gave their estimate on the time of our arrival at our next destination. As each guess was overshoot the remaining punters cheered and clapped. It certainly broke up the monotony of the long tortuous drives. Stevie won one drive and Sneaky was absolutely robbed on one occasion by some narrow streets around Tangiers. Toilet stops were a great source of sabotage. People claimed their gastro was playing up and that then necessitated extra toilet breaks. This helped their cause if the bus was making too good a time for their time estimates. On the subject of toilet stops, I have to mention another great Pete Dunne incident. Pete was hammered by the gastro as badly as anyone. Roybie might have topped scored for gastro but Pete was right up there. We had stopped at one of our many toilet breaks and Pete had scurried off with plenty of pace and purpose to his favourite room. A few other Flanders had set up residence in the adjoining cubicles and were awoken from their contemplative states of mind by a loud outburst. A loud verbal outburst, courtesy of Pete. The previous occupant of Pete's cubicle had failed to lift the seat when he had urinated and the resulting urine spray had soiled Pete's seat. This was the straw that broke the Camel Toe's back. Pete exploded at the bloke and suggested that he was somewhat filthy, disgusting and of doubtful

intellect. Pete put it in a slightly more colloquial vernacular. The local bloke cowered away, unsure of what Pete was trying to suggest to him. It was lucky that he did just skulk off, because no man likes to be held up when the call of nature is as loud and as urgent as it was for Pete on this occasion. War could have erupted right there in the cubicle.

Once all the toilets needs were met and the sweep stakes had been won and lost, we emerged from our coach in the narrow streets of the northern most city in Africa. Tangiers is set on some mountainous ground and overlooks the Straits of Gibraltar. On a clear day you can see Europe and the sea breezes give the place a more inviting feel than some of the sweltering places we had visited in recent days. We had a quick check in and we quickly got our cricket gear sorted out. We were soon back in the coach. We set out with a new driver, in search of the cricket ground. He unfortunately took us to the Tangiers International Cricket Ground. This was a shame from two points of view. Firstly we weren't playing there and secondly, it was magnificent and just teased us a bit more to know that up until two or three months ago, this was to be where we played. The international ground has been used for fully fledged One Day Internationals between Sri Lanka and South Africa. In fact Herschelle Gibbs holds the ground record with a century. Tragically for us, the ground is undergoing renovations and we were relegated to a soccer field. After a multitude of animated phone calls, Hassan and Hayat and hence the driver reset the compass and after about an hour we arrived at the Merchane Ground in Tangiers. It was indeed a soccer stadium. The grand stands were large and imposing. The outer seats were spacious but empty. We had a flash dressing room, with showers and toilets and plenty of benches. Again we felt like real international cricketers. We entered the stadium through a tunnel and we were met by the now customary pitch atrocity. This time the green carpet was rolled out over the turf. It was just like a back yard game. The ball seethed and bucked and skidded through as we had a few practice balls. Batting would be a matter of thrusting the front foot out and hoping for the best. Bad balls would have to be harshly dealt with and good balls would be handled on a wing and a prayer.

We were scheduled to play the Moroccan national XI again but most of the players wore their Tangiers provincial shirts. The banners all read Maroc vs. Ned Flanders and that is what we had agreed to many months before. I wondered if the pride of Maroc cricket dictated that they call themselves Tangiers, so as to avoid the possibility of a 4-0 drubbing by a Brisbane club side.

For the first time on tour, my call of heads was successful. We batted. Sneaky and Frankie were reinstated at the top of the order and strode out with conviction and purpose. Sneaks was stumped for three. He was taking block a few centimeters out of his ground and didn't notice the keeper had moved up to the stumps for that very ball. It was a waste of a wicket. Sneaky was very frustrated but I could see that he was stealing himself for a big one in one of the final two games. Frankie was bowled for six and Stevie joined plenty of other Neddies with a duck in Africa. I came in at 3 for 31 in the fifth over. I was set to sit out the second game today and having not batted in the last match and having scored zero in the first Moroccan game, I was still yet to score in the great, deep, dark continent. This was to be my last chance. I started to have a few thoughts about Chico in Japan- scoreless in Asia. Scoreless in Africa didn't sound much better. After an eternity I finally pulled a short one on leg stump for two. I was hugely relieved. I didn't want my little boy, Andy, to have to have a Dad who couldn't score a run in a whole continent. As I was agonizing over my own miniscule endeavors, Chico was continuing on from where he left off in Marrakech. I had great incentive to stay out there with him. First of all I wanted to score a few, second the team needed a partnership and lastly it was just a real treat to be able to watch Chico go nuts at such close quarters. Chico watched every ball with vigilance.

Straight balls resulted in him getting his nose right over the ball and defending stoutly. Loose balls were dispatched with vigor. He drove through the off side with immaculate precision. He bisected fielders. Every loose ball was hit hard, but, more significantly it hit the gaps and raced to the fence. He notched up eight boundaries and another couple disappeared over the fence. One of these cleared the grandstand on the far side of the ground and for the second match in a row, Chico had hit the ball clean out of the ground. It was the playing highlight of my tour just to be out there with the young champion. Chico raised our 50 partnership and then passed his second consecutive international fifty. My contribution to our 59 run association was just three. I left centre stage in a very odd fashion. I went to leg glance a ball that was hurrying down the leg side. I missed as the ball jagged even further down leg side. The ball hit the top flap of my pad and my quads and rebounded out to leg slip where the keeper dived and made a very neat piece of fielding. He appealed and the umpire stuck his finger up. I think the keeper was embarrassed or felt guilty because no sooner had the finger been raised but a couple fielders were telling the umpire that I went nowhere near hitting it. His curt reply was that in that case I was out LBW. We had had a few shockers on tour and this was probably the dodgiest LBW of my entire career. I was really shattered. I was having the time of my life batting with Chico and the team was now in a strong position at 4 for 90. A couple of balls later, Chico also received a terrible LBW decision and he walked off to his team mates' rapturous applause for a magnificent 58. Given that we were playing on a pitch that was no better than playing in my back yard, he had played one of his finest knocks for the Neddies. I reckon he was a fair show for a ton too, because he would have had eight more overs to face. It was funny having our end of over chats. I told Chico that I had a new buzz word to help me concentrate. I'd say "Andy" to myself and try and make my little boy proud. He just said, he says "Flanders". You've got to love that sort of club spirit. Leo made 7, Benny scored 2 and Daff made a globe. Welcome to the club mate. Again the innings was teetering a little bit at 8 for 108. It was at this stage the great Menagh joined Roybie. Roybie had only ever had one innings for the club. On that occasion he made a very attractive duck. I know it's odd to call a duck attractive but he was in the middle for ages and played some glorious strokes but kept finding the field. It was the best looking duck that anyone of us had seen. His nets form is always grand and it is very obvious that Roybie shares more with Brian Charles Lara than just the tan, the shades and the huge back lift. He has plenty of nous with the willow. Roybie pushed the ball around and picked up the singles and he ran hard for the generous amount of sundries that we seemed to be accruing. He is a team player, there is no doubt. Menagh rose to the occasion, as he usually does. He picked off his first runs for the tour and the two of them took us to safety. The absolute highlight though was a pearler of a pull shot from Roy. He had that front knee up high and just slapped the ball flat and hard over square leg. It was vintage Gordon Greenidge. When Mickey left for 3, Pete Dunne entered the stage for just the second time in his whole Neddies career. He had made 2 runs over a decade previously. He had not scored a run in this current millennium. He still had the same bat and the same gloves but had lashed out for a new box. He successfully negated his one and only ball and then Roy was out in the final over trying to peel off a few bonus runs. We were all out for 128 in the final over. Given the pitch and the state of minds of the Moroccans I felt we had enough. If all of us struggled, they would too. For the locals, Soufian bowled brilliantly to capture 3 for 16. He really was the best bowler we encountered in Morocco. Pete's heroic 0 not out was no doubt another century nipped in the bud. He was left stranded. Pete had now taken a catch, taken a wicket and remained unbeaten in his African cricketing adventure. I was really stoked for Roy. He had missed out on the wickets that he richly deserved in previous matches but his effort of 13

in a really tough conditions was the second top score and of course his glorious six is a memory for ever. So far in Africa we had made 7 for 128, 3 for 127 and 128 all out. There was a strange sense of déjà vu. If we could repeat our bowling efforts of the night in Marrakech and bowl them out for 51 again I'd be very happy. But that would be just too much to ask, wouldn't it?

The new white pill was taken by that dashing young Indian kid who was fast becoming a club icon. Ramjam steamed in and as is his African habit captured a wicket in his first over. Soussi was plumb LBW for naught and Ramjam smelled blood. The legend himself took the new ball from the other end- which was really the same end because as we do in Morocco we weren't changing ends at the end of the over. Stevie D the holder of so many club bowling records loped in and bowled a wicket maiden. Amine couldn't keep his stumps intact and Stevie had 1 for none. Ramjam kicked in another pole in his fourth over when he cleaned up Bkouri's middle stump. 3 for 22 was the score when the big bad Bash Brother Benny Field came into the attack. He soon had three poles but he didn't start his carnage until Leo threw a perfect return back to the sprinting Ramjam at the bowlers end. This was one of the plays of the tour for my money. The tap and run tactic had worked at various times for the locals. This time Leo was awake to them and he tore in from his keeping spot and hurled the ball in the vicinity of the bowler's stumps. Ramjam at this stage was haring in from his spot at deep mid off to be at the stumps to receive the throw. It is these little "one percenters" that really inspire a team and really impress a captain. Soufian won't try that again. Then Benny removed Medhi by rattling his stumps, then Naoui LBW and finally Bouchre when Leo took the snick at keeper. He ended up with a destructive 3 for 6 over just 3 overs. Seven men had been and gone and then Sneaky ran hard, turned, and threw straight and fast from fine leg. Nokron was just a young bloke and he had to learn the hard way that there is never two to Sneaky. Leo did the neat finishing touches to the run out and the eighth wicket was ours. Ahmed drove hard and true but uppishly to me at short cover in Menagh's third over and he was removed. Daffy almost cleaned up again in his over and then the boys convinced me at the end of the 19th over and the score at 9 for 47, that I should pull out some of those magical dipping, ripping, kicking, snorting offies that I bowl at will in the nets in Thursday afternoon training sessions. I accepted the mob rule and it was with quite a lot of nerves that I marked out my run and handed my maroon cap to the umpire. My first ball in Africa was a lot like most of my balls in Asia and Australia. It went down leg side for two wides. Next ball landed where it was supposed to. So I was back to 50%. Ball three was a replay of ball one and vanished down the leg side for two more wides. But just as the great Pete Dunne had taken three warm up balls to get things right, back in Marrakech a few nights ago, so I was ready by the time my fourth ball was due. I tossed it up and it spun or hit a bump or whatever and either way it deviated and caught the edge of the Ghoni's bat from where it spooned to the ever reliable Chico at gully who held the catch for my first and probably only African wicket. If the scores by the Flanders had some recurring nightmares for the Moroccans, so should their own scores make for poor sleep. Again they had been bowled out for just 51. The exact score they had made in Marrakech. That number 51 was certainly getting a work out. With this emphatic win, we had wrapped up the four match series. We held a 3-0 lead and with just one 10-10 over game to go, we were on the brink of something very special. We had all the momentum and the local boys' body language revealed that they knew they had no hope. They were broken but at least they kept trying and they played with passion and pride. I had to admire that. My turn to sit a game out was up. Stevie and Chico and I sat there in the stands as Mickey led the team. Their skipper had very benevolently allowed us the choice of batting or bowling in this final game and given that I had lost every toss on tour except the last one, I gleefully accepted on Mick's behalf.

The original format of a second 20-20 bash was abbreviated to a 10-10 encounter by consensus. Again we batted first. Again a Dillon went berserk. This time Pooch cut loose and peeled off fours and sixes with effortless ease. He matched Chico's performance of hitting the ball out of the ground. Sneaky was very focused and it was a bit of a shock when Nokron went through his gate and bowled him for 5. Leo joined Pooch and got off the mark with a brutal cover driven six. He matched Poochie for power and runs until Poochie departed for a fine 30. Preds jumped on the duck band wagon and was replaced by Chook. Chookie pushed the ball around and Leo continued on his merry way before being caught off Soufian for his third wicket. Ramjam went first ball and Soufian had four and was on a hat trick. Chook only just managed to make the ball evade the man at mid wicket on the hat trick ball and I dare say a few of our boys might have snared the hat trick for Soufian if they had been fielding there. Soufian wrapped up his two overs with the staggering stats of 4 for 8. He really is a jet and all the boys rated him highly. Benny smashed one huge six before getting caught on the final ball of our innings for 9. Chookie marched off with characteristic red ink for a useful 6 not out. Even though some of the scores were low today, the conditions were extremely tough and every run had to be cherished and worked hard for. So in ten overs, the Flanders boys had 6 for 83. In a ten over game it doesn't take much to lose. It only takes one bloke to pull out something special. We would need early wickets to keep the local warriors from getting any sort of sniff of victory. The great Menagh led the lads out into the field for our final hour of cricket in Africa. The aim was to have nothing left in the tank at the end of this hour and that we should leave the field with absolutely no regrets about what might have been. The boys were fired up and the idea of leaving these shores undefeated was an idea that everyone was warming to. Amine took block to Preds, who charged in with vigor and plenty of malicious intent. Preds as usual achieved a breakthrough early. Amine gone for just 2. His stumps were splayed in all directions. Preds followed this effort up with another key wicket in his second over. Soussi also lost his stumps and Preds finished up with 2 for 7. A hard working effort that I have come to expect and love from the big fella. For the first time in ages, Ramjam went wicketless. His two overs only leaked seven runs though, so he certainly did himself and his club proud. Daffy came on first change and straight away had success as he shattered Said's stumps with his first ball. Then he combined with Pooch in his second over to have Milla brilliantly stumped by a dose of Dillon wicket keeping magic. Poochie's hand speed was remarkable. It gets a bit embarrassing when you think about how many keepers we have at the club. Exelby and Chico are geniuses. Stevie D is more than capable and Pooch has done an incredible job all tour as did Leo as his stand in. And the bloke that they all stand behind in the queue is the great man Dan Roe. What a line up. In the meantime Fieldie nipped in by dismissing Redowan with a successful LBW shout. So at 5 for 26, the undefeated tour was looking pretty safe. But you never know. Cricket is a funny game. Sitting on the side line was absolutely agonizing. Not being able to do anything about the match was incredibly disempowering. I hate watching. I know Choc and Stevie felt exactly the same as we sat and did the scoring. It was very hard not to run out onto the paddock whenever wickets fell. Of course we could yell and cheer, but it wasn't nearly the same. I don't want to do this sitting out business too many more times. Anyway, as the game lay in its death throes, the club legend stepped up. The captain for the match, the man of the moment, the hero of millions, Michael James Menagh took the ball. With his second ball Benbella slogged one low and hard to Leo at short cover and the little genius took his first catch for the club. Mickey 1 for none. He finished the over as a wicket maiden. Next over he struck with his first ball, as he trapped Naoui in front. The dogged innings of Naoui had ended in the final over of the innings. He had opened and placed a high

price on his wicket. He had made a determined 14 which was by far and away their top score. Mickey 2 for none. Next ball, saw Sneaky into the action. Bkouri had smashed one high and long to out where Sneaks was at long on. The little muscle man ran and hurled himself at the ball and held up a marvelous running, diving, tumbling catch. He was thrilled and even reenacted the famous egg laying episode from a few years ago. It seems like a hell of a long time ago since Sneaky's catching was a trifle uncertain. Mickey 3 for none and on a hat trick. Nokron came out to face the Menagh music. Mickey set his field. He didn't quite have Roybie on the fence at deep mid wicket and that was to soon be a problem, as Nokron wound up and smashed the ball straight to where a deep mid wicket would have been. Mickey's heart and all our hearts were in our mouths as Roybie ran fast and valiantly but couldn't quite get near the vital catch. It went for four. Mickey 3 for 4. Nokron's luck couldn't hold and he soon spooned a high ball to Ramjam at mid off where as per everything he has done this tour, the young dasher held the catch safely. Mickey 4 for four. Last ball of the innings and Mickey's only chance for a 5 for, was tapped for a couple of runs and Mickey finished the day with the figures of 4 for 6. It was a club record for an international match. The locals had mustered 45 for 9 and we had won by 38 runs. The young Moorookan looked mightily proud of himself as he led his team off the park. All the lads were stoked for him and I was very, very proud and pleased for Mick. He deserved the success. So there it was the humble team from Brisbane had triumphed 4-0 over the international might of Morocco. The dreams had been dreamed to get us here and now the even bigger dreams of success had also been fulfilled. The post match function was the usual gala affair. All sorts of presentations were made. Some of the local men scored some nice trophies. We received yet another giant shiny trophy. I invited Mickey to accept it. He had captained his first international victory today and his bowling was staggering. It was Mickey's late afternoon, just as it had been Chico's early afternoon. The usual speeches were made and the drinks and pastries were pulled out for the final time. The late afternoon sun was mild on my face, as the calls to prayer rang out from the minarets. The mosques cast their distinctive outlines against the western sun. The mood of the Flanders was relaxed. We were to face no more challenges here in Africa. We had beaten a national team 4-0 and for the rest of lives no one could ever take that away. We were a group of ordinary men doing extra ordinary things. There'd be stories and legends that would evolve out of the tour that would keep us entertained as we grew old. This was a special time. We had no more deeds to do in Africa and no promises to keep. A few of the lads kicked the soccer ball around with the Tangiers fellas. The teams were so similar. Young blokes that love sport and love competing and love a laugh. The camaraderie this afternoon was magical. Handshakes and gesticulating made up for any language barriers. There was laughter and mateship between all of the men who had played today. The officials and the umpires all joined in. It was very special. As I finished up an interview with the local sports journo, Mohamed, I felt that this was a moment to really store away forever. I strolled across the field, with Daffy. The other boys and girls had already headed for the coach. Daff swapped his shirt with one of their men and then Naoui ran up to me with his national jersey and presented it to me. It meant a lot to me. It was a very generous gesture. I couldn't reciprocate because I needed my shirt for our last match in Gibraltar, but I consoled myself with the fact that he already had a NF XI shirt that his brother, Mohamed had given to him. Mohamed had led Morocco in the first game in Rabat. I thought about Ginge and Andy and how much I wished they could have seen this event and shared the treasured moments with me first hand. I hope Andy plays cricket and finds himself in a team like this one, with mates like these. He'll be a lucky boy if he does and geez I'd be proud of him.

Who knows maybe there'll be Flanders team in a decade's time and all our kids will line up against the world just as this band of brothers has done over the last 13 years. I hope so.

It was with a fair bit of trepidation that I stepped onto the bus. It felt like as soon as I left the ground the African cricket tour would be over. It was the closing of a phenomenal chapter in all our lives. The trip back to the hotel was upbeat and dinner was dusted off quickly. Most of us headed down to the shore line. The sandy beach was a relaxing place to be as the night life passed along the board walk. The hilly streets had an interesting feel about them. The Pizza Hut attracted a few of the less sentimental blokes. I thought that it being our last night in Morocco, that I should at least have one last tagine and risk gastro for one final time. By this stage everyone was taking ciproxin and the gastro outbreak was drawing to a close. Back at the home base, I had a couple of quiet drinks at Club Sneeps and that saw me ready for bed and so I thanked the boys for what they had done for the club and went to bed.

Next day we enjoyed a relaxed brekky, we loaded up our kits and all our trophies and jumped on our coach for the final day of our Moroccan odyssey. We headed out to the most northern point of the African continent. We caught glimpses of Europe from near the lighthouse and the palm trees gave a really tropical feel to the spot. A bit further around the coast line we wandered down to the rocky shore line at a place that seemed to be named after Hercules. Apparently Hercules' Pillars sit either side of the Straits of Gibraltar. Then we climbed up a hill to look down over Tangiers. The Spanish influence was evident with a huge bull ring taking up some prominent real estate in the middle of town. Apparently it isn't used anymore. The call of Pizza Hut once again enticed the lads and this time the whole touring party sat together for a final African meal together. Hayat and Hassan joined us. After the lunch time value meal went down, Frankie and Sneakie led an expedition to the barbers. Benny and Chico both went along with them and when they all returned they all looked ten years younger. I wished I had have joined them. They had received the sort of shave that you can only get in the Third World. They were all raving about it. Everyone had to have a feel of their faces. It was a bit poofy but it seemed like a reasonable thing to do. After lunch we were to make our way to the Ferry Terminal to catch our next link to Gibraltar. All of a sudden Hayat announced she was leaving us. We didn't even have time to tee up a tip but at least I had the chance to thank her on behalf of the team and present her with a NFXI shirt. She tried it on and looked very pretty indeed. She had been a lovely person and had gone enormously out of her way for us. Of course the language barriers were a bit of a problem, but she was a good hearted girl and had really looked after us well. She had shouted us to a number of events, like the 'Fantasia' night and a few meals along the way that had not been pre paid. I hope she'll have happy memories of her tour with the Ned Flanders Cricket Club. Her English was a bit limited but she used to love to ask me "Happy? Nice?" Of course it was essential to answer "Yes. Happy. Nice". Hassan took us all the way to the wharf. He had warmed in our hearts. He ended up doing a pretty slick job and we handed him a tip and a NFXI shirt as well. It was the final shirt. He deserved it, though. He had put up with plenty of mischief and plenty of Hassan impressions on the microphone. The ferry terminal was an interesting place. Our 7pm boat became a 4 30 pm boat. This was a bit of a hassle because we arrived at the terminal at about 4 25pm. We flashed through customs and procured our tickets in a hurry and scampered onto the floating path to freedom and the First World. 11 days in Africa had just about seen us all to the point of just a tiny bit of yearning for the sorts of things we take for granted. Like safe water from the taps, hassle free shopping, food that doesn't involve spinning the barrel of the Russian roulette gun and of course people that all speak English. As the boat

drifted away from the quay, we all felt a pang of guilty relief and we started looking forwards to the next chapter of our incredible tour. The Straits of Gibraltar are less than 20km across. It seemed odd to be able to see two continents at once. It reminded me of Istanbul, where a causeway links Asia to Europe across the Bosphorus River. The dominant Rock of Gibraltar came into sight immediately. It pulled us towards itself with a certain gravitational pull. The boat trip was relaxing for everyone except Pete, who despite having almost conquered his gastro, was again at the mercy of sea sickness. The clean wind in the hair and the promise of English speaking restaurants where the food is safe and the tap water drinkable made for a sense of excitement for everyone else. In about an hour we were pulling into the First World again. It was exciting. Frankie lined up taxis and we loaded up for our hotel. It was clean, cool, and fairly plush. Mind you our hotels in Morocco were universally sensational, too. After check in, Obi, arrived as a representative of the Gibraltar Cricket team. The locals abbreviate their home's name to Gib and Obi took us on a lovely stroll around his Gib. In fact we just about strolled across the entire country in about 40 minutes. The main street pretty much runs the length of the nation. Apparently people head out on foot to Spain for a few drinks on a Saturday night. The huge Rock dominates the landscape and casts its ominous and protective presence over the whole nation. The shops were all closed, despite it being Friday evening. As the sun went down though, the party life started up and there were hundreds of young girls in short skirts and plenty of skin on show. They all seemed to be stunners. In fact the 2009 Miss Universe was from Gib. They may in fact all be gorgeous but I am sure they looked even better seeing as how we'd just come from Morocco, where the girls may well be pretty but their attire certainly doesn't present them in any sort of sexy light. The street scape of Gib was quaint. Lovely little shops and immaculately presented shop fronts. The people were friendly and polite. A few Bobbies patrolled the proceedings and it felt like we'd landed in 1950's rural England. It was a delightful place. Obi took us to his usual haunts and we ended up at a pub. The large sign said "Official Pub of Gibraltar Cricket". I smelt a bit of a rat. He had already spoken about the fact that a few of their best players were unavailable for our match the following day and he wouldn't stop talking us up and them down. I thought he might just be trying to lull us into a false sense of security. Then the next step would be to ply us with grog. This looked even more like the case when half a dozen "on the house" jugs of beer arrived for the team. Naturally the boys were very excited. I was never going to win by trying to map out this fiendish plot to them all, and so I turned to Menagh. Menagh was sitting the game out on the roster. I suggested that this could be his finest hour and his job was to drink as many of the jugs as he could, to protect his team mates and his club. Menagh said he was the man for the job and got stuck into his task manfully. It was a noble act of selflessness and an act of bravery that will never be forgotten. By the time stumps were pulled on the night, all the boys were heading home in a pretty tidy manner, and even Mickey looked pretty good despite his Herculean efforts.

Fog greeted us next morning. As the taxis pulled away from the hotel to take us to the ground, the fog seemed to get thicker as we approached the ground. Luckily I wasn't to know this for quite a while because the boys managed to pull away in the last taxi without either me or Pete. Pete had gone to grab some drinks for the team and I had to do a loo run. Thanks a lot fellas. Clearly it is the oldest bulls that get culled from the herd first. Luckily for Pete and me an emergency cab was arranged and we joined the team at the Europe Point cricket ground a few minutes later. The ground was cloaked in the thickest mist I've seen in many years. I couldn't even clearly see the other side of the ground, let alone the Rock that was supposedly right next to

us. The Gib men said the mist would clear soon and we held off the start of play for about half an hour. But then just as they predicted things lightened a bit. Enough at least to start playing cricket. I lost the toss as usual and we found ourselves batting. With the lousy light and the moisture in the air, I would have liked to unleash our quicks on their opening batsmen but it was not to be and as it turned out we were lucky that we batted first. For the final time on tour, Sneaky Peter Simmons and Adam 1G Frankel bravely and proudly strode out to the middle in their maroon helmets. With them they carried all our support and best wishes for success. We had to pull hard together for just 80 more overs. There had been a few blow ups in recent days. I reckon these sorts of things are almost inevitable after three weeks of hard travel. The gastro and the Third World conditions and the living in each other's pockets nonstop for a long tour were all significant stressors. But all the boys have the ability to see those sorts of things for what they are and certainly no one was going to let a few fracas spoil what we do best together and that's play cricket. The pitch was what we love and what we are familiar with. It was a proper synthetic pitch just like our beloved Yeronga State High wicket. The outfield was a bit different though. It was gravel. More like kitty litter. I had visions of my black cat Hubert falling in love with this place. The ball seemed to carry well over the surface and it wasn't as hard under foot as I first expected. In fact it wasn't too bad at all. As Frankie made light of the bowlers the sun lightened the fog and the awesome landscape came into our view. There was a light house just to the right of us, right on the coast line. We were in quite an elevated position with a rocky, craggy precipice falling down to the Straits just behind the car park of the ground. Tourist buses kept arriving for photo opportunities as our match was played. I presumed that they were peeling off snaps of their favourite Flanders players but someone else suggested they liked the views off the cliffs. The light house kept sending out a droning sound warning for ships. As more mist rolled away a mosque came into view just behind the ground. It was a bit odd to still be seeing mosques even though we'd left Morocco the previous day. Then as the fog really cleared the awe inspiring sight of the Rock of Gibraltar filled our view, behind the mosque. Sea birds circled around us in the thermals and swooped down now and again when they thought they saw some tasty morsel.

Meanwhile Frankie was on his way to another solid score. He hit nine boundaries on his way to 45, before the mocker was thrust upon him. Everyone looked at Roy, but Roybie protested his innocence. Frankie just missed a straight one and was bowled. The openers had put on 72. This was following on from the 101 they combined for in Spain and their 51 in Rabat. In the three longer games on tour they had set us up magnificently. They had had a lot to do with the fact that we were one game away from duplicating Bradman's 1948 Invincibles with an undefeated tour of Europe and Africa. Chico missed out with five. He had done his work already on this tour. His form had been freakish. Based on his form in the last game in Tangiers, I thought Poochie would be worth an elevation to bat at number four. I was wrong. I should have elevated him even higher. Pooch set about rewriting all sorts of club records today. He met Sneaky Pete in the middle at 2 for 80 in the 12th over and the two of them complimented each other beautifully to the tune of a 109 run partnership. It was the second and the highest century stand of the tour. Pooch drove in the air and pulled brutishly. He cut and used plenty of finesse too. He smashed Stagnell for four sixes in two overs. Sneaky went about his work with his usual diligence and brains. He hit the singles to put the Pooch back on strike. It was smart but more than that it was great team batting by Sneaky. When a bloke is on fire his batting partner needs to farm him the strike. Pete played his role superbly. With his singles and his own array of drives and pulls that found the boundary, Pete approached his own fifty. In view of what had happened in Spain, we

were all desperate for him to get over the line. He rushed through the 40's with a flurry of boundaries and then on 49 he drove one through mid on for four to bring up a famous landmark in front of another famous landmark. Pooch also reached fifty with a series of boundaries and sixes. The two men raised their century stand before Pete was bowled by Perez for a sterling 54. He raised his bat proudly and we all clapped him triumphantly. Stevie joined Poochie at 3 for 189 in the 28th over. He played one beautiful drive for four before playing a trifle indecisively to be caught at cover. He looked like he was about to belt it over the top and then second guessed himself and ended up bunting it rather meekly. Stevie hadn't had a great run of luck with the bat on this tour. All the extracurricular activities of organizing so many details for the tour, being Liam's groomsman, and then of course buying his house must've sapped the mental reserves of the club legend. Thankfully his form with the ball has been brilliant and of course no one is ever going to forget his blinder of a catch at slip in Rabat. Chook joined Pooch who was still going crazy. Chook hadn't been dismissed yet on tour and he had been talking about the possibility of making it through the entire mission without being out. The big man looked great. The man they had christened "Big Shiny" in Morocco was solid. Chook saw Poochie through to the nineties. I can't imagine that he had any good advice for Pooch at this stage about how to turn 90 odd into a hundred. Poor Chook has a habit of self destructing in the 90's. But whatever he said to Pooch did the job because after being dropped on 95, the oldest Dillon drove through the covers for another four and brought up not just his second ton for the club but even more importantly, he had brought up our first ever international century. In doing so he had sailed past his brother's record of 74 against Vanuatu that had stood as the club's highest against an international XI. Chico reacted with more excitement than Poochie. He was off his nut and very excited for his brother. After posting the three figures, Pooch decided that his score would only climb in multiples of four or six. All up he collared six sixes and fifteen fours. Chookie's great support act and his impregnable effort for the tour finally came to an end as he was caught in the hunt for quick runs. He made 20 and had seen Pooch through to the ton. They had added a fine 84 runs. Benny headed out for the final couple of overs. His job was simple. Hit ones or threes. Mostly ones, I think in view of Poochie having been out there for a long time and looking a bit tired. He completed this task with his usual expertise. This allowed Pooch to keep flaying the bowlers to all parts of the ground and also saw the 300 come up in the final over. Pooch also rolled past his previous highest score for the club which used to be 132. Just to dot the I's and cross the T's, Poochie even hit the last ball of the innings for six. It was fairytale stuff at the Rock of Gibraltar. Neddies 307 for 5 after 40 overs and Poochie marching off unbeaten on 141. It was a great day for the club and for Poochie. The local lads were broken. They had no answers and they looked almost apologetic about the way our team had flogged them. Their spirit looked like it had taken off and they were a beaten band of cricketers. But still we had to finish strong and put them to the sword. Even assuming that they couldn't chase down our huge score, winning was going to be a lot sweeter if we bowled them out rather than allowed them to grind out 40 boring overs. So fueled up on some excellent ham burgers from the club house and a few chocolates and drinks, we took our shiny white Kookaburra and all of our hopes and ambitions out onto the kitty litter.

We switched the bowlers' order back to a more conventional longer match format today. Benny and Preds would open and then Ramjam and Daffy would plug up the middle overs before the Dillon boys brought us home. Roybie had injured his shoulder and had to sit out his stint at the bowling crease and Ramjam had the thrill of getting a late call up and so he became the only man to play in all six games on tour. He was very excited. Roybie would have taken his spot in the

batting line up if needed. He decided to sit out the fielding session but he contributed by doing a sterling job with the score book. Roey would have been very satisfied. Preds had the honour of the first wicket in Gibraltar. He induced a lofted drive from Perez and Ramjam took the easy catch at mid off. Perez's traumas at the bowling crease were further exacerbated by his duck. Preds third over saw the Gib skipper, Hazel play a delightful lofted on drive high over mid on. Unfortunately for him, the sea breeze was against him and even worse Chico was against him. Chico ran in the same direction as the ball for a good 20 to 30 meters and held onto the best catch of the tour with his hands extended way out in front of him as the ball fell over his right shoulder. It was spectacular. It certainly was Chico's tour when it came to miraculous catches. Hazel couldn't believe it. He had hit the ball sweetly and assumed, most reasonably that he had four runs to get off the mark. On another day and to another fielder he would have been right, but not today. 2 for 13 became 3 for 27 when Preds clean bowled Daswani for 16. Just as Chookie's contribution to the partnership with Poochie was important and perhaps a trifle understated, so Benny was bowling brilliantly in tandem with Preds. He kept things tight and could easily have had his own swag of wickets. But today was Preds day and his fifth over saw him claim the first Flanders five for in an international. The first of the two wickets in this over came from a screaming catch by Ramjam at mid off. Stagnell, who had smashed an enormous six and subsequently lost our ball for us in the previous over, tried his luck again and succeeded in hitting the ball very nicely but unluckily for him, uppishly. Ramjam ran to his right and thrust up his hands and held on to a hot one. Later in the over, Roberts clipped one off his pads straight to Frankie at backward square leg and Preds had a five for. Once more he had the first five wickets of the innings. Who knew how many more would follow. At 5 for 33, the Gib boys were in tatters. We spoke about knees on tracheas and being ruthless and the boys all responded. Preds kept his incredible momentum going by snaffling the sixth scalp. Orfila nicked one to Leo who was standing in for Pooch with the gloves. Pooch deserved a bit of a rest after his batting heroics. Preds had 6 for 8 at this stage and still had two overs to bowl. The club record of 7 for 21 by Stevie was under threat, but somehow the batsmen survived the assault by the big man. He walked off to plenty of applause with eight overs, 6 for 16. It was a stellar effort. Ramjam had replaced Benny and was soon into the action claiming Gomez who top edged a cut to me at cover. Then he knocked over Lunn, with Leo finishing things off behind the stumps to make it 8 for 48. Next, some electrifying work by Leo saw Daffy collect his first wicket of the day when Chadwani lifted his back foot for a split second and Leo whipped off the bails in the blink of an eye. We came off at drinks after 20 overs with the Gibs at 9 for 67. The only real question was who would have the huge honour of taking the final wicket to complete the 6-0 Invincibles tour. Ramjam induced a nick but Stevie couldn't quite hang on at second slip and so Daffy was still in the running. Both these young blokes deserved the honour, but it was finally Daffy who had the privilege. Howton and Parwani were making nuisances of themselves and actually put on the highest Gib partnership of the day but at 86 the innings was over. Daffy went through Howton as he tried to slog once too often and we were home. We had emerged as victors by a whopping 221 runs. Easily our easiest ever international win and close to being one of the greatest ever winning margins in our long and illustrious history. Roey will have to do the research on that issue. Again the win had been set up by so many players. A great team effort yet again with a constellation of individual highlights. It was a real thrill to be able to anoint our inaugural international centurion and our inaugural 5 for man. Both these boys deserved the honour and the whole team was thrilled for the two of them. We hung around to have a yarn to the Gib fellas. They were all great blokes. There was some good natured banter about the upcoming Ashes. Of

course they were all strongly Anglophilic. We handed over our maroon pads to store in their club house in readiness for the Moroccan's visit. We had teed this arrangement up earlier. They were very content to help us donate our gear to the Moroccans. We drank a few softies and even a few beers and shared a few laughs. I had an overwhelming sense of relief. We had set ourselves a ridiculously large task and here we were as the 6-0 victors. We had ticked off international matches in Africa and Europe and together with our wins in Vanuatu and Japan we are still unbeaten in international fixtures against four separate nations, spanning the four continents. Obviously the 2012 tour to North and South America is the next frontier and then perhaps we'll have to look into Antarctica. The red balls will have to be taken for that tour. The pitches down there might even make Tangiers and Sano look half playable.

After one last lingering look back over the ground and up into the dizzying heights of the Rock, we loaded up a council bus and headed home. Conveniently the bus went straight past the gondola that would take us to the top of the Rock and so a detour was seen to be the obvious plan. The barberry apes had to be seen and of course the views to Spain and Africa were a must see. The gondola ride was a pleasant little bonus highlight for the day. Poor old Mel doesn't go well with heights. I remembered she had hated the giant Ferris wheel in Tokyo, but she gritted her teeth and looked at the horizon and made it up successfully. It's ironic for a girl who doesn't like heights to go out with a bloke who is 6'8". Love must conquer all barriers. The views from the summit area were special. Africa lurked over the Straits of Gibraltar. The sparkling blue of the Mediterranean was peaceful and inviting. The seagulls were devilishly playing on the thermals around the rock and the odd ape would scamper past with mischief on its mind and mayhem in its eyes. There were lots of fortifications to look at, while the Bash Brothers got in touch with their distant primate past by playing with the monkeys. Pete Dunne suddenly appeared on the path looking hot and bothered. He had gone back to our hotel instead of jumping off the bus at the gondola. From there he had run up the Rock. He is just amazingly fit. The apes looked very interested in him as he sat and caught his breath. They seemed really impressed at his exploits. Once we had had our fill of the rugged Rock and all its spectacular views, and had enough of the apish escapades of the barberry apes and the Bash Brothers, the group headed back to the gondola. Mel braced herself for the terrifying descent and bravely led us down. Again the views were magical, with the township nestled so quaintly into the base of the mountain. The shipping lanes were busy and the seagulls gently watched our progress. The distant green coast line of Africa again made us forget all the gastro and the long hours on the bus and rekindled our fond memories of Morocco. A gentle stroll through the town and into and out of a few shops saw us home in no time. Meanwhile, Stevie and Chico, and maybe a few of the other young socially minded blokes came up with a stroke of genius for the night's activities. The idea was launched that we should have a fancy dress night with each tour member dressing up as their favourite Flanders player. Naturally there were plenty of inspirations. As everyone started their fashion plans, Chookie was a popular theme, as was Sneaky Pete. Coming as an Aborigine was muted by a few blokes, in tribute to Pete Dunne's 1/8 indigenous status. Menag would have been a tremendous caricature to dress up as too. Personally, I went with a blast from the past. I taped up all my joints on my hands with strapping tape and put my surgical kit into my pockets. I placed an artery clamp on my collar. Of course I was the great McDougall. The man with the dodgiest ligaments and the surgical nous of a genius. Pete, God bless him pulled on footy shorts, fashioned a Parramatta jersey out of various bits of his ward robe and wore his sports shoes. He was dressing up as me circa mid 1980's. I was very flattered and I reckon he really captured the unique fashion sense that I bring to the world. As we two older blokes

emerged from the lift and into the foyer downstairs, we felt that we had done well with the ad lib dressing up. Tragically, unbeknown to us, the social mafia of the team had cancelled the dress up theme and there they stood all kitted out in their best clobber. Further to my chagrin, they had no idea who either of us were dressed up as. Indignantly, Pete and I returned to our room and exchanged our costumes for some more formal gear. We were both very disappointed. Once more, I never really got to the bottom of why the outstanding concept was overthrown. I half suspect that Pete and I were set up.

With our wardrobe malfunctions corrected, Pete and I joined the rest of the squad and headed out for curry. Tonight had been long ear marked as the night the team would celebrate an event that had transpired a few weeks previously. The baby of the team, young Ramjam had turned 21 the week before we left. With his exams and the tour preparations, a big team birthday bash had had to be put on hold, but here in the shadows of Gibraltar's famous Rock and in the relaxing aftermath of our dominant 6-0 playing part of the tour we celebrated. Of course we put the pressure on the waitress and hence the chef, by telling them that Ramjam's mum was the world's greatest Indian chef and that Ramjam would be watching them with close scrutiny. The food was great and the mood was affable. It was a relief to have finished our cricket series and it was great to be in the First World. The excitement of heading home to loved ones was an enjoyable prospect. The positive vibe was palpable. A few drinks were enjoyed but no one got too messy. Ramjam's health was toasted and of course we gave him a rousing rendition of Happy Birthday. It was a simple night's pleasure. The social butterflies kicked on whereas I peeled off at a reasonable time and enjoyed a leisurely stroll through this quaint and charming little country. It was with a deep sense of satisfaction that I headed to the land of nod on this auspicious night.

The Gibraltar airport is a huge novelty. The main street of town actually intersects the runway. Boom gates keep the road traffic off the tarmac when jets arrive and depart. Just as it is incredibly exciting to see trains clatter by when you are stuck at the railway boom gates, so it must be even more thrilling to sit at the boom gates here in Gib. Just as we were on the brink of making it through the whole adventure without incident, Preds almost caused a diplomatic incident at the airport. As his taxi pulled into the airport, he saluted the Rock in perhaps a slightly disparaging way. The poor bloke had missed the last gondola down on the day before and had ended up having to walk all the way down by foot. After a long day of cricket and his bowling heroics, it was a long march for the big fast bowler who after all is the wrong side of 35 years old. The taxi driver had missed several doses of his medication in recent days and was clearly on the wrong pills anyway. He started ranting and raving at poor Preds and created quite a scene. What a Muppet. There always seems to be a story unfolding when the Neddies are on tour. We had a few hours to kill at the cosy little airport. It had a rural feel about it. Again, it seemed that we had been transported to a distant era where life was much simpler. Gib really is enchanting. Emails were popular as the boys announced their impending home coming to those who needed to know and perhaps the glorious victory of the day before was being heralded back to Australia's shores. I had a ball trying to carry all the trophies that we had won. It was a heavy and an expensive exercise. The excess baggage bill was savage. I thought about how much easier it must be to carry the Ashes around. They're so much more compact. We eventually took off down the tarmac. We waved at all the cars stopped at the boom gates and Stevie spied a beautiful little cricket ground right in the centre of town. When he told us all about the lush outfield, we wondered why the internationally acclaimed Ned Flanders XI had been banished to the kitty litter of the Europe Point ground. We dodged all the birds and then took our long last glimpses of

the magnificent Rock and set a course for Heathrow for the final time as a group. I chatted to the hostie and asked her to announce on the PA that CJ and Ramjam had decided to become engaged and that EasyJet again had the pleasure of the all conquering Ned Flanders XI. She promised me she'd announce the great news to the captive audience but she failed to deliver. It was just one last characteristically crappy effort from EasyJet. As we touched down at Heathrow, I started looking forwards to a few last highlights that had been planned before heading home. While the main body of the team was off home today, Pete and I were kicking on for a few days in London. Stevie, Chookie and Mel and of course CJ were off to Greece in a few days' time. Chico and Pooch would return to their normal London life while Leo and Sally had another day in the great city. Ramjam was about to cut a swath through Europe, with a 15 countries in five days tour with Con Tiki. "And there on your left is Germany and sorry you missed Italy when you blinked back there." All three Frankels had more adventures to write in Europe and Britain. There was a sense of anticipation in this segment of the fold. The rest of the boys were off home. The long, tedious flight was exhausting just to contemplate for Mickey and Preds. Benny looked tired just thinking about it too. Daffy just seemed to accept his fate. Even with all these new adventures and ordeals to look forwards to, there was still one big ordeal to get through. That was saying goodbye to the team. Goodbye to the 15 blokes and the five supporters who had been like family for the last three weeks. We'd shared plenty of highs together and suffered a few tough times as a group. Even though we'd all catch up again soon in Brisbane, it was still a sad time. There were hugs and handshakes all round as we split up. We had achieved some extraordinary deeds, and the memories of what had transpired over the previous weeks will live long in everyone's memories. The bad times will be quickly forgotten and swamped by the glories and the laughter that we built together.

Stevie, Chookie and Mel, CJ, the Dillon boys, Pete and I peeled off to the Heathrow Express en route to Paddington station. Pippy, Chico's brand new fiancé had met us at the airport and she was delighted to hear about all our tales as we made our way to our new abode. The Dillon household was generously offered to the remaining troops for the evening's big soccer spectacle. Spain was about to take on Holland in the Soccer World Cup final. I hoped for Spain's sake that their national team in this other eleven man game was more competitive than their cricketing equivalents. Stevie had decided he was going to be Dutch for the day. After all that is where the Derksen name comes from. He had tried diligently to find an orange jersey but had had no luck. Stevie, Pete and I headed for our new room and dropped our kits off. With all the excess luggage that I seemed to have accumulated, it was extremely brotherly of Pete to carry the huge box full of trophies all the way home. The three of us relaxed in the seemingly luxurious solitude of just the three of us. It seemed very quiet and peaceful. We showered and changed before heading out towards the Dillon mansion. We decided when in London we should do as the locals do and had a tremendous feed at a lovely little pub that was humming with the excitement of the soccer. We watched the first half there and then wandered down the street to meet up with our mates. Chookie and Mel had beaten us there and they brought CJ along too. Young Ramjam was entrenched too. We reminisced about our cricketing glories and the highs and lows of touring life. We reflected on the funny times and the annoying times. By the end of the yarn the annoying times had all been transformed into hilarious yarns that will live long in the Flanders folklore. Spain won eventually, with a late winner, deep into extra time. I bet they would have swapped it all just to have another chance to have a crack at the mighty Neddies. After all Soccer World Cups come round every four years but this might have been their only chance to take down the men in maroon. After a few minutes of consoling, Stevie pulled through and decided

he was fully over the disappointing result. We said goodbye to Chookie, Mel and CJ who were off to Paris bright and early the next morning. I'd next see them in Brisbane. Ramjam was off with the Con Tiki mob in a couple of days and our long, sad goodbyes would have to happen the following night.

Stevie D was a man who had grossly overspent his energy reserves. The next morning he looked totally drained. The tour, the Exelby wedding and the new house had taken up all of his emotional energy. Besides this all his clothes stunk. He had no clean clobber. He decided that despite the offer from Pete and me to join us in a day trip to Oxford, he would have a quiet day. He did his laundry and ran a couple of errands and savoured a bit of solo time. He needed it. He had given so much of himself in recent weeks to other people and now was a time for recharging the batteries. Pete and I barreled out of the hotel early and made our way to the lovely city of Oxford. I'd been there a couple of times before but Pete was so enthusiastic I was happy to triple up. You always get something new out of another trip to a place like Oxford. The university buildings exuded such a scholarly ambience that we both imagined what it would be like to attend such hallowed institutions. You couldn't help but study hard. We laughed about the fun we'd have doing a subject at Oxford, to the point that I made some enquiries about how to enroll. Perhaps when Andy gets a bit older, I'll take my family here and study some more archaeology. Pete said he'd bring his crew too. Of course then we would have to organise a Flanders tour to Oxfordshire and of course play a few games on their lush, quaint little grounds. We visited one of my most favourite shops in England- the Alice in Wonderland shop. Lewis Carroll was a local graduate and the old world charm of this little shop never ceases to mesmerize me. I bought a couple of presents for Andy and imagined bringing him here in the coming years. From there we visited a very famous landmark. The Iffley Road track was the sight of some incredible history in the field of human endeavor, way back on 6th May 1954. Chris Chataway and Chris Brasher led the great Roger Bannister out as his pace setters, as Roger became the first man to break the four minute mile, "in a time of 3 minutes 59 .4 seconds". We both had goose bumps as we spotted the track and even more so as we ran a lap around the legendary lanes. Tommy Dover would have been proud. Of course Tommy would have run a sub four minute mile on the iconic track, but I was pretty stoked to peel off 400 meters in a time roughly similar to Roger's run for the mile. On our way back to the train station we noticed a sign to the Pitt Rivers Archaeology Museum but tragically time restraints killed our aspirations. Yet again, I will have to come back to this delightful city. As we met back up with Stevie at the hotel, it felt like we were meeting a new man. His restful day had seen a much more fresh faced Stevie D emerge to meet us. He smelt better too and had a whole outfit of fresh, clean clothes on. After we exchanged the news of the day, we made our way out to meet the Dillon's (including Pip) and Ramjam as well as Ramajm's mate, Jack. The next day was Chico's birthday. He turned 27. Tonight was his birthday bash with the metaphoric brothers from the Flanders. His choice was a curry place that apparently Prince Charles had frequented at one stage. The grub was outstanding, even Ramjam was impressed. He said it was the second best Indian food he'd ever tasted. His mum retained her gold medal status. It was with a heavy heart that we farewelled the team junior. He'd be away early the next day to see the whole of Europe in a few days with Con Tiki. Jack had flown over to join him. I can't wait to hear the tales as these two characters run amok all over the great cities of Europe. Gradually the quorum was getting smaller and smaller. Now there was only Pete, Stevie and I left in London with the Dillons.

A murky, overcast sky greeted us the next day. This was to be one of the big ticket items for the tour. Birthday boy, Chico, along with Stevie, Pete and I was off to see the first day of the First Test at Lords. Australia was playing Pakistan on a neutral venue because of Pakistan's political tumult. The chilly weather didn't dampen our spirits as we peered over the beautiful outfield to the wonderful, historical pavilion. Just three weeks before we had toured the same pavilion as a team and now here the four of us sat ready to watch Punter's boys take on the Pakis. We felt a strange affinity with the men in the baggy greens. Just like us, they were a long way from home and like us they were set to play a foreign nation's team in the great game. Extending the similarities, Punter lost the toss, just as I had made a habit of doing, and as the clock rolled over to 10. 30 a.m., Katich and Watson walked out to bat. They had the same stride of confidence, determination and purpose that I had seen so often in our own tour games as Sneaky and Frankie headed out to match wits with the brutish opening bowlers and so many unknown variables. At least these two blokes would be playing on a flat pitch and at least there was no carpet on the wicket and at least the umpires had a fair idea of the rules. They had it much easier than we did. I'll bet they didn't have gastro either. The Aussies seemed a bit intimidated by our presence. They had obviously heard that a few of the Flanders boys were in attendance and the pressure just did them in. We struggled to about 8 for 180 odd by stumps. Katich played like his hero, Sneaky and ground out a tough 83 but everyone else played loosely. Amir the 18 year old fast man was brilliant and I reckon we were witnessing the emergence of a bloke who will play Test cricket for many years to come. Still we weren't just there to watch the Aussies in battle. We roamed around the museum again and saw the Ashes. I showed Stevie and Chico the gallery upstairs where three weeks previously I had learnt that the word "cricket" is actually derived from a Flemish word meaning bat and ball. Of course Flemish reflects an origin in the area of Belgium and France called "Flanders". So as so many of us had suspected for so many years, the name Flanders is germinal to the whole concept of cricket. From the museum, we stocked up on Lords paraphernalia at the Lords shop. There was so much great stuff. Just strolling around the ground was enough to make me sigh and feel overwhelmed by the history. Every few meters there are posters with huge photos to commemorate men who had done something special at the home of cricket. I had even been a firsthand witness to a few of these immortal acts. I had seen Glenn McGrath take 8 for 38 back in 1997 and I had flown over to London for 60 hours back in 1999 to see Australia take on Zimbabwe in the World Cup. Johnson the Zim champion had peeled off 138 from Warne, McGrath and assorted other Aussie legends. Of course Bradman adorned lots of posters and that other god of cricket, W.G. Grace was recognized by the regal Grace Gates. The plaque simply said, "W.G. Grace. The Great Cricketer." Over lunch, we yarned about exotic locations where each of us had spent a birthday. It was pretty hard to trump Chico's effort on this his 27th birthday. Pete had to bail out just after tea to head off to the airport. He was heading home a day earlier than me. As he seems to do on every holiday, Pete had decided to escape a trifle early. Why break tradition and at least it was only a day early. He was very keen to see his lovely family and everything that needed to be achieved had been extravagantly achieved here in Europe and Africa. So my roomie for almost the entire tour was bailing but I'd see him in the next few days back home. It was sad to watch his back as Pete walked off, up the steps of the grandstand and out through the exit. Chico also snuck off a little bit early. Understandably, Pippy was wanting to share the great man's company on his birthday. And then there were two. It was left to Stevie D and me to fly the Flanders colours at Lords for the rest of the day. It's always a treat to spend time with Stevie D. We had had such a ball together in Nepal last year and he is always a great bloke to yarn to. Stevie was off to Gatwick

airport hotel that night and so we shared a quiet final dinner together at an atmospheric little pub. We reflected on the previous three weeks of glorious Flanders history and laughed as we remembered the fun times. I walked him off to Baker Street station, past the Sherlock Holmes statue and down into the caverns of one of the original London Tube stations. We shook hands and I hoped that with Chookie and his two female fans, that the four of them would have a blinding time in Greece and Turkey. As Stevie made his way through the turnstile, for the first time in over three weeks, I was all on my own. Thank God for that! Even if I was a bit sad to see everyone head out, a bit of solo time is one of my favourite things. I headed back to the room and enjoyed the simple pleasure of watching TV in bed.

Next morning, I had no real plans. I had to be at Heathrow by early evening and that was my only commitment. I ambled out to Lords on a fifteen minute walk from the hotel and sat in a park and enjoyed the flowers and the birds. A few mothers with strollers walked past me and I wondered how my Ginge and Andy were going and I felt excited that I would soon be reunited with my little family. At Lords, Hussey peeled off 50 and Hilfenhaus banished a couple of early Paki batsmen. Just after lunch, I vacated the splendor of Lords and headed into the Baker Street station area to have lunch at a pub. I thought one last English pub meal would be a nice piece of closure for my time here in England. I loaded up all my bags and hired a taxi out to Heathrow and so commenced my 32 hour nightmare return home. The only highlight was my eight hour stop over in Hong Kong. From the lounge, I watched the sun set over the water as the jets flew in and out of this extraordinarily busy airport. A couple of hours sleep and plenty of hours of misery saw me touchdown in my beloved Brisbane. It was a real thrill to see the Glass House Mountains as we made our final descent. I love this place. All the trophies made it home safely as did I and it was with a huge amount of emotion that I pushed past a few punters and out through the gates to see my lovely Ginge and of course my favourite little boy, Andy.

The drive home to 25 Charmaine Street, Moorooka was a great time to wax lyrical about the trip. Obviously there were dozens of ripping yarns to relate, but I suppose if I had to summarize things briefly, my enduring memories could be stated quite succinctly. I'll never forget the thrill of arriving at Albir's cricket ground and looking out over the mountains in the background. The view was even more special late in the afternoon as we sat around with a few beers and reflected on our first tour victory. The first win in Morocco was tough and the partnership between Preds and Chookie was a supreme example of focus and determination. Then the gala day at Marrakech was probably my most special game of the tour. The press circus, the coaching clinics and the huge presentations made to us by the Moroccan Cricket Board will always be etched into my psyche. The back to back games in Tangiers, with Chico's gritty fifty odd and then of course the great Menag taking 4 for 6 in two overs are special memories. The hazy late afternoon sun and the calls to prayer emanating from the minarets combined to make the finale to our African series very special. The mateship that we shared at the end of the series with the Moroccan lads was a real heart moving experience. Wandering down the main street of Gibraltar, it was a treat to be back in the First World. The Gib match played in the foreground of the immense Rock, with the lighthouse pipping and the seagulls gliding around us created perhaps the most picturesque spot that I have ever played cricket. Poochie's dazzling century and the relief of seeing Sneaky get his much deserved half century to join Frankie as an international half centurion were also thrills. Then there was Preds destruction of the Gib batsmen on his way to a six for. All these moments made me proud and happy but it was the intangible moments on tour that reinforced to me that this club is such a pivotal part of my life. It was the laughter and the

jokes and it was the joy that I saw on everyone's faces when one of their team mates achieved something special. Like Daffy's wickets and Ramjam's successes. I was so happy that Daffy had the honour of taking the final wicket on tour. It was a wicket that saw us complete the dream of an undefeated tour across Europe and Africa. It was a special moment. I get such a lot of joy out of seeing the young blokes do the business. I really loved the commitment to do the small things that Ramjam showed. Camel Toe never missed out on anything on the tour. On the field, I'll always remember the kid hurtling his way from long off to be there at the bowler's end to help complete a run out at Tangiers. That is team spirit. As is things like Pete Dunne's excitement at his catch and his wicket, and his behind the scenes good deeds like making sure everyone had a bottle of water in Marrakech. And it was the unbelievable commitment to their team mates that Stevie and Chico showed by organizing so many tiny details for the tour. Leo's confidence and the way he spreads his positivity around to all his team mates was a great indicator that the team is in great hands with the youthful generation. Roybie's undying selfless attitude was something that permeated the whole trip. He is a bloke who can't help but put his mates first. He is so persistent in his desire to see everyone else get a go before he does. It was a thrill to see him play that Gordon Greenidge flat bat pull, up on one leg, that sailed for six in Tangiers. I'll always owe Frankie for his insistence that I bowl the final over in the first Tangiers match. I am secretly very excited to have taken a wicket. Benny showed that beneath that bustling exterior there is a heart of gold and that heart beats for just one woman and that's Delia, his wife. It was lovely to see how much he missed her. Ain't love grand!

Just as the players have so thoroughly enriched my life so have the five supporters. CJ was a riot. She is such a contrast to the Chicken. Her wicked sense of humor made for many moments of hilarity. Agi was a great source of help with her linguistic talents. Her French and Spanish were a tremendous asset. I'll always thank her for her help in translating during the fracas between Leila and Hayat. It was a comfort to have someone else there as a buffer. Phil just chips in all the time. His jokes and his positive thoughts always lift the morale and of course he has become an integral member of the Flanders empire. Melly is a special girl. Her quite strength is something I find very comforting. She is such a sensitive soul and by that I mean she is sensitive to other people's needs. This tour wouldn't have been the same without her softness and gentleness. Thanks Mel. Sally was making her Flanders touring debut. Her happy smiling face always made any moment brighter and I was very impressed the way she remained upbeat despite a few dramas with money in Morocco. It wouldn't be right of me to forget Pippy. Pippy was there for all of our London time. The Pippin is so upbeat and perky and just exudes an incredible happy and positive aura. It was a pleasure to knock around with her when she was available. I was just shattered that thanks to the clowns at EasyJet, she missed out on Spain.

As for me, I'll finish off my journal by a bit of self indulgence. I always hoped that each player would be able to have a grand tour from three perspectives. Firstly, being the Flanders, the team always comes first. So the tour had to be successful from a team point of view. The 6-0 result speaks for itself on that score. Every bloke on tour contributed amazingly to this awesome team achievement and should be very proud of himself. Secondly, I wanted each tourist to enjoy the contrasting cultures of the countries we visited. With memories to cherish like the sun rising across the Sahara's desert dunes and over Algeria, the frenetic activity of Fes's souk, the lazy feel of Essaouira and hurdy gurdy of Marrakech's main square, I believe that we lived in and immersed ourselves in a unique set of cultural experiences. The trips to Lords and Wimbledon and the tapas bars in Spain were all days out to savor. I was so impressed at the way everyone threw themselves into experiencing every new opportunity that presented itself. On the third and

final count, I really hoped that each player would have a personal on field highlight. To a man I can think of special personal moments of glory that each man enjoyed. They can talk about them in their own journals, but I'll finish off with a couple of mine. I was really over the moon to collect all the trophies for the team at Marrakech. It's about time the Flanders racked up some impressive silverware. I felt that it was a unique recognition of what the team has achieved over many years. My favourite on field moment was also later that same night in Marrakech. With the Flanders score of 127 still a long way away from the Moroccan's 9 for 51, I was very excited as their number eleven smashed a Pete Dunne delivery straight down my throat at deep extra cover. I was thrilled for two reasons. Firstly I had felt very responsible for getting Pete involved on the tour. As a part time cricketer, I really hoped that by some miracle, Pete could do something magical on the paddock. Of course he had already pulled off his incredible catch in Rabat, but an international wicket would be something for him to tell his grand children about for many decades. So all I could think as the ball careered out towards me was I have got to hang on to this one for Pete. The other bonus with that catch was that it won us the game and that was just the perfect way to end what had been close to my favourite ever day as a Flanders man. My other personal thrill was to bat for a while with Chico as he single handedly won us the first game in Tangiers.

So now as I ease my way back into Brisbane life, the day to day grind of general practice and the rewards of family life, it is great to reflect back on the tour and to reset the goals for the grand club. Sporocco has seen us tick off Africa and Europe. Oceania and Asia have already been successfully confronted and defeated and now we have just two more continents to come, see and conquer. The quest to be the only club in history to play against international teams in all six inhabited continents is almost within our grasp. 2012 is looming large and that year should see us embark on our next grand adventure. Perhaps the cricketers of Belize and Peru should start getting nervous now, because the Flanders are coming for you, fellas.