

# TESTING TIMES

IN PURSUIT OF THE ASHES

*Also by Andrew Strauss*

Coming into Play

# TESTING TIMES

IN PURSUIT OF THE ASHES

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Andrew Strauss

with Scyld Berry

  
HODDER

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*For Ruth, Sam and Luca*



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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I sit here in the warm afterglow of victory at the Oval as England's Ashes-winning captain. Sounds pretty good, doesn't it?

Before I get too caught up with what has happened, I have to thank all the players who represented England over the last eight months that I have been in charge, but more particularly the 15 players that took part in the Ashes series. No team ever wins the Ashes without contributions from numbers one to eleven, and this series was no different. In fact, the only real reason that I can come up with for the amazing turnaround from Headingley to The Oval is that the team kept tight as a unit when it would have been tempting for many of the players to start blaming others for our performance. It says a lot about the characters in the dressing-room that they kept believing when many others doubted. Thanks also have to go to Andy Flower and the rest of the England team management for the terrific work they have done preparing the team over the last few months. They don't get the accolades that the players do, but they deserve them just as much.

Only your family really knows what a toll playing in an Ashes series takes on a player. They are the ones that have to put up with the roller-coaster of emotions, the single-tracked mind, the endless phone calls, the lack of sleep. A huge debt of gratitude has

to go to Ruth, Sam and Luca, for being there for me through all these testing times, managing in their different ways to take my mind away from the stresses and strains, while at the same time reminding me of what is truly important in life. People often ask me why I wear my wedding ring around my neck when playing. The reason is that it is a constant reminder that I don't do this on my own.

I would like to thank Scyld Berry for all the hard graft that he has put into getting this book ready so soon after the series has finished. He has achieved the balance perfectly of allowing me to concentrate on the cricket, while at the same time making sure that we didn't cut corners.

Finally I would like to thank my publisher, Roddy Bloomfield of Hodder & Stoughton, for all his enthusiasm. In the first place he encouraged me to write *Testing Times* and then together with Sarah Hammond worked efficiently to see that the book progressed smoothly.

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# RECOVERY AND REDEMPTION

After being dropped from the England team for the tour of Sri Lanka at the end of 2007, New Zealand was not my first choice of a place to go to recuperate. I had gone 13 Test matches without scoring a hundred, in a run of bad form which had lasted six to eight months. I had wanted to go to South Africa to play four-day cricket but, for one reason and another, this possibility fell through. Then Andy Moles, the Northern Districts coach, contacted me and seemed incredibly keen for me to go and play for them in the New Year. If I was selected for the England tour of New Zealand it would be good preparation. If I wasn't, it would be useful to be out there if injuries offered me a way back into the Test side.

My visit didn't get off to an auspicious start. After a holiday in South Africa, I arrived 48 hours late in New Zealand and missed the first match. An inexperienced stair-driver at Johannesburg Airport drove the stairs into the side of the plane and broke its door. But when I did arrive in Hamilton, an hour or so's drive south of Auckland, I was immediately impressed. The players in domestic cricket in New Zealand are very young, some of them 19 to 21, because if you have not made it into the international ranks by the age of 26 or 27 you are looking for a job in the real world. There aren't the big entourages that English clubs have, and teams

rely on the hunger and enthusiasm of their players. It was very instructive for me: they had a great desire to improve, really 'put in' at practice, and had an incredibly high standard of touch rugby in the warm-ups. The old codger had to be enthusiastic.

Staying with Andy Moles was, shall we say, simple yet effective. He lived on his own in a bungalow in Hamilton. When Ruth and our son came out, he very kindly vacated his house for a couple of weeks. There was a small garden which Sam appreciated by hitting balls over the fence. Northern Districts had also persuaded Toyota to lend me a 4 × 4 with my name splashed over virtually every panel. Fortunately, in the land of rugby, not many people seemed to know or care who I was.

Where this arrangement was not ideal was that I joined Northern Districts to play in the Twenty20 competition and five one-day games – and I was trying to get back into the Test side. We had some interesting journeys along the way, all to new places for me as I had never been to New Zealand before: Christchurch, Dunedin, Lincoln and Palmerston North. We stayed in Travel Lodges and motor inns, not five-star hotels, and I had to share a room, which I wasn't used to. I shared with our wicket-keeper, Pete McGlashan, whose great claim to fame – before he got into the New Zealand side for the ICC World Twenty20 – was inventing all types of cricket equipment for the twenty-first century, like a batting glove which is Velcro'd so you can rip it off between deliveries and vent your fingers.

When we went to Palmerston North, I found it fitted the archetypal description of a country town. It has one shopping mall which people come to from miles around, to the McDonald's and Subway where they could get a fix of civilisation. John Cleese once said that anybody

not brave enough to commit suicide should go to Palmerston North. I was beginning to wonder whether it was all worthwhile.

I have kept a diary since going to Adelaide with the inaugural Academy intake of 2001. We were 'encouraged' to do so by the head coach Rod Marsh, the former Australian wicket-keeper – and I use inverted commas because it was semi-compulsory. By nature I am not someone who leads a structured life and likes to get all his thoughts down on paper. This was more of a cricket diary with entries about how I was batting, and what I was working on; about what it was like to be away from home, and what issues were surrounding the team. And since starting to play for England, it has been quite liberating to put my thoughts down on paper, because it has helped to give me the head-space to work out how to score runs for England.

This is my diary entry for 12 February 2008:

Here I am in Palmerston North, the middle of nowhere, following my dream of playing for England. The last few months have passed, and suddenly it feels like groundhog day again. Spending time in a hotel, waiting for a cricket match to be played, hoping that tomorrow will bring me some much needed form, continuing on a long journey to where?

The truth is that I have enjoyed coming to New Zealand and meeting new people. In a way it has been a new challenge for me and, to a degree, I have passed the challenge. I have settled in well with the boys, I have handed out advice like a senior player should, but I haven't really scored any runs, which is what I have been brought here to do.

With the England tour just around the corner, I am a little concerned about my form, that much is for sure, but what I am more worried about right at the moment is my lack of desire. Being dropped for Sri Lanka opened my eyes a little. I desperately needed

some time with Ruth and Sam to reconnect and also realise what is important in life. It was three months of monotony back at home with not all that much to do apart from the odd gym session, but I loved it. I got bored but there was something really satisfying about being a family, something that I had been unable to do for so long.

The strange thing about cricket is that it toys with you. When you aren't scoring runs, you wonder why you play the game, especially at this stage of my career. On the other hand, when things are going well your ego gets massaged and suddenly you feel invincible and that the game was made for you. I suppose the real question is how long are you willing to put up with the constant ups and downs, especially when it involves being away from home and loved ones for such a long time. Is it worth it?

I don't really think that I can answer that question right now. I am not playing well, which is probably affecting my mood, I am away from Ruth and Sam, and am in a foreign country with teammates I don't know that well. I think that after this tour, I will be in a better place to decide what the road ahead entails.

The key to it all though is: what is the motivation for playing? All players question whether they are doing the right thing at times, especially when not in form. Are we all totally motivated by money? Will we genuinely miss the adrenalin rushes, the highs, the lows? Or are we just trying to avoid, for as long as possible, the humiliation of watching someone take your place? All I can say on the matter is that I have watched someone take my place and felt the horrible feeling of rejection, but did I miss being there?

Anyway, these are questions that are swirling around in my mind. They may or not be answered in the coming weeks, but I think that if I am to give myself the best chance of performing over the tour, I have to be focused, not on whether I should be here or not, but on the present, which is my next innings or match.

Cricket-wise, I am in a difficult mental state. I have done some

good work with Toby Radford [the Middlesex coach] getting further across, moving early and making sure that I don't get my front foot too far across. In my first innings here, it felt pretty good, but then the Twenty20 campaign meant that it was into sloggng mode . . . going at the ball and getting my front leg out the way. I had some success but nothing like enough. Coming back into one-day cricket, I got caught down the legside for 0 in the first game, and then laboured for 10 runs on a difficult pitch in the second. Not the sort of scores that you expect from an overseas pro, and pretty frustrating. I will continue to do the right things, train hard, and hopefully things will come right. What I have to do more than anything though is back myself. Rather than think of pressures, I have to go out and enjoy the challenge and back myself to come through it. There is no reason why I shouldn't score runs. I should be in my prime and, with my experience, if I can get into some decent form, then there is no reason why I shouldn't go on a golden run of form. That has got to be the plan. Let's see how it all goes.

A few days later I played my last innings for Northern Districts, still without much to show for the time and money they had invested. I went to pull my second ball and it lobbed to mid-on – the easiest catch I have ever seen in my life (I am not going to count the one I dropped during the Stanford tournament in Antigua because the lights were so poor). And the mid-on fielder dropped it. It was such an easy catch that my partner just stood there in the middle of the pitch as he watched incredulously, and he was run out. But I went on to make a hundred. It was in a losing cause, admittedly, but this innings set me on the road to recovery and redemption.

My next two entries were not long delayed, and much more purposeful and optimistic.

24 February 2008

Twelve days since my last entry, and it may as well be 12 months because everything feels completely different. Twelve days ago, I was playing for Northern Districts struggling to get some form, wondering if everything is worth the trouble. Now I am back with the England side, something that seems so familiar, and have also come in having scored a hundred in my last innings for NDs.

It was the perfect way to finish, and I really felt as though I owed them something after the way they treated me. It took some early luck, but in the end people only remember the runs you score, and time in the middle was completely invaluable. It is always hard to look back at an innings and learn lessons from it, because generally it feels so easy when you get runs. You do what is natural, and you score runs. It is only when you get out that you start analysing where you went wrong. I suppose the lesson to be learned from the hundred was not to think about technique when you play. The first 30 runs were scrappy because I was constantly thinking about where my weight was etc., rather than the game situation and the areas that I needed to hit the ball. By the end of the innings, I was playing the ball later and on merit, which we all know is the way to go. Unfortunately it is always much easier to do that when you have a hundred to your name than nought.

I arrived in Christchurch with a slight spring in my step. I didn't have to pretend that my game was in order while being secretly very worried about it, and I rightly felt quite positive about what is to come. All in all it is good to be back. It seems as though the players are happy that I am here, and there is definitely a feeling of coming back to the family. I suppose I knew it was going to be a bit like this . . . not missing it when you are away but settling straight back in again when you are back.

As is always the case with tours, they start slowly without much intensity. There were only five Test specialists together [Strauss, Steve Harmison, Matthew Hoggard, Vaughan and Monty Panesar],

and although we trained pretty hard, the practice sessions were not particularly challenging. As is also the case with tours, the intensity picks up very sharply and dramatically, and if you are not aware, you can end up not getting your levels up in time for the First Test. We have now joined up with the rest of the squad and we play the first practice game tomorrow. I am looking forward to it, although I feel a little nervous but, all in all, I know that I need a good couple of performances over the next few days to get into the Test side. I am sure that they want to put me in, but if I struggle and Owais [Shah] gets runs, then the decision may be difficult to make.

27 February 2008

The two-day practice match didn't really go to plan. I got four off quite a few balls, and then hit my stumps trying to deflect the ball from hitting them. I felt pretty gutted, especially as most of the rest of the guys did get runs, especially Owais. Thankfully they have picked me for the warm-up game tomorrow, and I will get one or two more chances to show that I deserve to be in the side, although I am batting three, not opening.

I'm not really sure how I feel about this. On the one hand it is great to get in the side at any position, and the fact that they have included me shows that they have plenty of confidence in my abilities. Batting at three is slightly different, but not overly so, especially if we lose an early wicket. All in all, it will be a different challenge, and one that I should be capable of overcoming, although I have to make sure that I prepare myself mentally. The thing is to be switched on enough when waiting to bat to know how the bowlers are trying to take their wickets, without expending too much energy doing so. Above all though, it is important to be excited about it rather than worrying about what may happen.

I think the stuff I talked about the other day is incredibly important, especially at three. As it is a different position, the

opposition will be looking for signs of hesitancy, and I have to make sure more than ever that I portray that I am in control of events. Good body language, stomach for a fight and sheer willpower will ensure success, but you have got to want it. Do not shy away from the challenge, and push all negative thoughts to the back of your mind.

Before the First Test we had a first-class warm-up match in Dunedin against a New Zealand Major Association XI, effectively their A team. In accordance with our habit of making a slow start on tours we were dismissed for 131 in our first innings, to which I contributed 5 runs. But we reacted strongly – another of England’s habits during my time – and we drew the game comfortably, and I did contribute on this occasion:

2 March 2008

My birthday today, although in truth my present came yesterday with a second-innings century when I really needed it. I am not very good at putting down my feelings when I score runs because it generally seems easy. You see the ball, make the right decisions and score runs. There is none of the mental anguish that comes with low scores, no soul-searching to see if you are mentally hungry enough, no questioning desire. All it is is a feeling of peace and tranquillity. God, it feels good.

There were, however, a couple of things that came out of the innings that should be important, both for this series and beyond. The first was a feeling of inner calm. It is hard to describe really because it isn’t tangible, but I didn’t feel any pressure to score runs quickly. In fact I was more than happy to play out maiden after maiden if necessary. There were no hopeful shots, just reacting to the ball that was coming down at me. I could have continued batting all day. The only times that I got a little hasty against the

spinner were the times that I came close to getting out. It was just watch the ball, get still and react.

Linked to this, but not quite the same, was a willingness to keep all the percentages in my favour. If I look back at the innings that I have played over the last 18 months there has been a general intent to be aggressive, to take the game to the bowler, and in doing so I have lowered my percentages of staying in. When I play my best, I may score quickly, but I do so by picking off balls, and letting them come rather than going at them. Mentally it was like going back to a familiar playground, one whose location you have forgotten. When you arrive there it is very familiar, comforting and exciting, but the real joy is in the rediscovery.

I am feeling really good about the Test match now, because I have remembered how to score runs. It doesn't guarantee anything, but it makes life a hell of a lot easier. Here's to a good practice week, a memorable Test match, and the best present of all, seeing Ruth and Sam at the end.

4 March 2008

I can't say how excited I am about the game tomorrow. Everything just feels right. I feel in good form, I feel confident, I am excited to be back, I can't wait to play Test cricket again, and I know that at the end of the week I am seeing my family again. Life is pretty good at the moment.

The practice over the last couple of days has been excellent. I have continued in practice what I was doing in the match the other day. When batting in the net, it has all been about switching on, getting trigger movements out the way, keep still and react to the ball. I have hit the ball straight, and feel well balanced.

Over the last few days I have read a couple of books that have been really interesting. Firstly Justin Langer's book came up with some ideas about form, making the most of it, getting out of bad form etc., as well as some good quotes and stories.

Today, though, I read a very thought-provoking book called *The Secret*. It explains that the law of attraction governs everything, and if you can get it working for you, you can achieve anything. If you think about the concept too hard, then you can get caught up in why and how it should work, but everything that I have experienced in life backs it up.

The theory is that what you think about happens. If you think positive thoughts, then those positive thoughts will come about. For example, in a game of cards, the person who believes he is going to win usually does. It may be the most experienced player, or the one with the most money etc., but he thinks he is going to win and, more importantly, he believes he is going to win. At the other end of the scale, the gambler with one chip left, who has lost repeatedly on the night, is more often than not going to lose.

Why most people don't achieve as much as they should do is because they don't really know what they want in life, what their goals are, and as a result they don't focus all their energy on believing that they can be achieved.

Think about cricket. Who are the most successful players . . . the ones with the most belief. Okay, some get that belief from being extremely talented, but more often than not they are positive people who believe that they are in control of their destiny.

Why do we score runs when we are in good form? Simple. We believe that we are going to, and so it happens.

Why do we not score runs when we are out of form? Simple. In our minds are thousands of negative thoughts. We are worried about technical problems, about our place in the side, about being humiliated and, sure enough, it comes to pass.

How then do we get back into form? I haven't tried it but it sounds reasonably simple. Firstly, we have to get ourselves believing in positive thoughts, rather than negative. So, whenever a negative thought comes into our mind, we have to push it right back and, instead, think about something positive in our life. It could be family, bank balance, golf

swing, whatever is making you happy. Probably best to have a range of things to think about whenever those negative thoughts arrive.

Secondly, you have to adopt a winning frame of mind. Wake up in the morning, and be grateful for everything you have and everything that is going to happen to you that day. Also give something to someone or do something for someone. It will make you feel better about yourself and start thinking positive thoughts.

Thirdly, you have to have a clear goal that you are trying to achieve . . . i.e. score runs that day. Draw it on your hand, or put up a sign, so that every time you see it you remember what that goal is and you believe that you are going to achieve it.

Fourthly, visualise doing it. Maybe, on the day before the match, imagine the scoreboard with a hundred on it, see the bowler running in, see yourself playing the shot to score that hundredth run. Hear the applause, feel yourself raising your bat to the crowd. Look at the weather, smell the smell. Feel it in every pore in your body.

I suppose this is the sort of stuff that sports psychologists talk about when they say ‘reconnect with past success’ when they talk to you. Having spent plenty of time in the last 12 months searching desperately for form, there are worse things to do than be positive, be grateful for having the chance to play for England, and savour the idea of scoring a century.

As it turned out, Hamilton was a classic example of the First Test jinx which has started to pursue us. In 2004, starting with the First Test in the West Indies, England won four opening Tests in a row, before losing the first against Australia at Lord’s. Starting then, we haven’t won the opener and have lost half of them.

Hamilton ended up being a complete disaster because we batted like idiots on the final day and handed victory to New Zealand. Going into the second innings of that Test, when we were set 300 to

win off 81 overs, there was a feeling of people being under pressure. We knew we should draw it, and we had everything to lose, with only an outside chance of a win. Then in the space of an hour and a half, after competing pretty well for the first four days, a match which most people had pencilled in as a draw was turned round by Kyle Mills in an excellent spell of swing and seam bowling. We might have underestimated him before the series: I got a pretty good ball that left me and I edged it. We were 25 for three and worse followed. We were all out for 110 and New Zealand won with 26 overs to spare.

I haven't been in many dressing-rooms lower than England's that night: very quiet and disconsolate. A side we had expected to beat had outfought us on a slow attritional wicket. Everyone was reconnecting with the feelings of defeat in Sri Lanka, and most guys realised we had to change. The two main casualties were Matthew Hoggard and Steve Harmison who had struggled to get anything out of the slow wicket. These were two big decisions because they had been two very influential bowlers for England in the 2005 Ashes series, not to mention before and afterwards. Those two bowlers being dropped brought it to the front of everyone's mind that the 2005 era was over and we had to move on.

On the batting front, I couldn't believe how relaxed I was when batting. I was at peace with myself, especially in the first innings, where I got stuck in for a session, scoring 43 before maybe getting a little ahead of myself against Daniel Vettori and getting the only ball that turned in the game just after lunch. In the second innings, although I couldn't have done too much with that ball from Mills, I probably wasn't as switched on as I could have been. I wasn't in my zone where I move early, keep still and let the ball come, and maybe I paid the price.

As with all England teams though, we were incredibly motivated to respond to this setback, and so often a team which has those thoughts performs well. We won the Second Test largely thanks to the new-ball bowling of Jimmy Anderson who took five wickets in New Zealand's first innings, and of Ryan Sidebottom who took five in their second. When conditions allow him to swing the ball for a long time, Anderson is as threatening as anyone in world cricket. If he wasn't quite so effective in his second innings, it was because he was the recipient of a football-induced ankle injury. Our medical staff had just relented about letting us play football – and when Anderson tripped over, with nobody within ten yards of him, you could see the shock-waves go through the medical team. But they strapped up his ankle, and Anderson bowled through it, just like the bowlers of old say they used to do.

Tim Ambrose's hundred in our first innings was another factor in our win. He had taken over from Matt Prior after the tour of Sri Lanka and right from the start I enjoyed fielding at first slip next to him. He has a refreshingly old-fashioned attitude: instead of electrolyte drinks and Caesar salads, it's cups of coffee and rolled-up cigarettes. But he impressed everyone on that trip with the softness of his hands when keeping and his aggression when he shared the match-winning partnership with Paul Collingwood in the Second Test.

When I batted though, I felt nervous in my first innings, and struggled to get in that calm place that I have been in lately, and in the end perished playing a shot I shouldn't have and getting out softly. I was so pissed off with myself it was unreal. That feeling of utter frustration and feeling sorry for yourself is so debilitating.

Thankfully, the second day in Wellington was far better and I

took a couple of catches in helping us get a useful 140–run lead. In my diary entry for 14 March, I wrote:

Tomorrow is an important day for me, and I have to go out there and get a score, but the only way that I will do that is by sticking to my game-plan, getting in the zone, being patient to every ball, not getting emotional or frustrated, and playing each and every ball on its merits. The other key is to keep being positive in mind. It is so easy to be thinking negative thoughts about what might happen in the future, and let a hundred things get into your mind rather than watching each and every ball like it is your last, and backing your game. That is all you can do. Remember when you wake up in the morning to be grateful for everything you have in your life, kiss Sam and Ruth goodbye, enjoy the fact that you are fortunate enough to be representing your country, doing something you love. Enjoy the fact that tomorrow may be the day that we go a long way to winning the game. Be happy that you have great mates. Be excited about the challenge, and let instinct take over.

Having spent much of the night tossing and turning, wondering what lay in store for me on the third day, I went out there and played pretty well. I wasn't hitting the ball quite as well as I would have wanted but a battling 44 was enough to get us into a position to win the game, as well as keep my place in the side. In the end, it was a really satisfying win after a long, tough, barren spell for the lads, and the series was level at one-all.

But I still had not made a hundred, and now 15 Tests had passed without one. I still hadn't made a fifty in this series. Time was running out and the Third Test in Napier was going to be the last of the series, and maybe my last for England for a long time, perhaps

ever. Undoubtedly that match saw the most nerve-wracking and gut-wrenching days of my career.

In the build-up I was distracted by the need to get runs, even when I was away from the ground. When Ruth and I took Sam to a park near the hotel in Napier, she would look up to see me playing shadow shots or fiddling with my grip when I was meant to be playing with Sam on the swing. It was the only time in my life I have struggled to sleep. I knew it was do-or-die time. My team-mates knew it. The media knew it.

Your team-mates in those circumstances are not sure what to say to motivate you. But I can remember one conversation in the middle of a net practice before the game. Collingwood came down the net and said to me: 'Straussy, you're not playing your game.' I said: 'I've been working for three months to improve.' He said: 'I know your strengths are pulls and cuts and I've hardly seen you play one all tour.' In some ways those words almost underlined the point that I was in the last-chance saloon. But it was reassuring that one of my mates had taken enough interest to think about my plight and say something.

My diary entry on the eve of the Third Test was more upbeat than I actually felt.

So here we are again, set for the Final Test match of the series, a match that both sides desperately want to win in order to win the series, and for England the end of another long hard winter. For me, I need a score, both for myself and our chances of winning the series. I feel in reasonable nick, but the key is to be in the right mindset from ball one. Remember what works for you. Get the trigger in early, keep still and play the ball on its merits. Have a clear mind and stay in your bubble, whether you are scoring quickly or

not. Now is not the time to be thinking about technique or anything other than watching the ball like a hawk . . . it is too important a game for that. Remember to enjoy the occasion, Strauss, and come out fighting. These are the sort of games that people remember, the sort of games that winners come to the table, these are the sort of occasions that get your blood flowing, and now is the time to show everyone your class. Enjoy the five days, and remember that your beautiful family are right there with you. Be thankful.

Not surprisingly, given the stresses and lack of sleep, I felt tired on the first morning of the Final Test in Napier and before I had woken up properly I was back in the dressing-room, out for nought, caught in the gully off the debutant swing bowler Tim Southee. In the dressing-room I was absolutely distraught – the claps on the shoulder and the ‘bad lucks’ did not register at all. All I could do was stare at my bat and think it was coming to an end.

That night I had a dinner with my wife that was in complete contrast to the dinner I had enjoyed with her after scoring my hundred on debut for England. Then I was thinking about heading into a world I knew nothing about. This time I was seriously contemplating that the journey might well be over and I would have to come to terms with life back in the county system.

For some reason, by the time I started my second innings, all that stress and pressure of feeling that I had to perform had left my body. With only one innings left I felt it was too much to expect to pull it out of the bag, so I was just going to enjoy my last innings for England. What was meant to be was meant to be, and worrying about it was not going to help.

As I went out to bat, my first priority was not to bag a pair. I wasn't

nervous, and my ninth or tenth ball was a juicy half-volley on my legs from Chris Martin, and I was up and running. I was helped by the fact that I had to bat for only one session that evening, so once I got to 20 or so I had the goal of getting through to close of play, by when I had reached 42. That night I felt that it could have been all over by now – but I was still fighting and had still got a chance. Realistically, though, it was going to take a hundred, not a fifty, to keep my England career going.

Walking out the next day with 42 to my name, I felt a mixture of hope and excitement, two feelings I hadn't experienced much in the recent past. I flashed at a wide ball early on, and it went past gully, exactly where I had been caught in the first innings, and I remember thinking this might be my day. I pushed Martin down the ground to reach 50 and I was focusing on what the New Zealand bowlers were trying to do, and for the first time in a long time I felt in control of my destiny.

As I hadn't made a hundred for 15 Tests, and for 19 months, the last thing I was going to do was give it away. They had two spinners in Daniel Vettori and Jeetan Patel, and an old ball, but I was not going to take any sort of risk. I was not going to make the same mistake as against India at Lord's the previous summer when I tried to force the pace to reach my century and was out for 96. So I had to endure a couple of very spicy overs with the second new ball from Martin when 97, and I played and missed two or three times. Then came a wide delivery which I drove off the front foot through the covers. Now I think about it, for the first time since, it was the same shot which had brought up my hundred on my Test debut at Lord's.

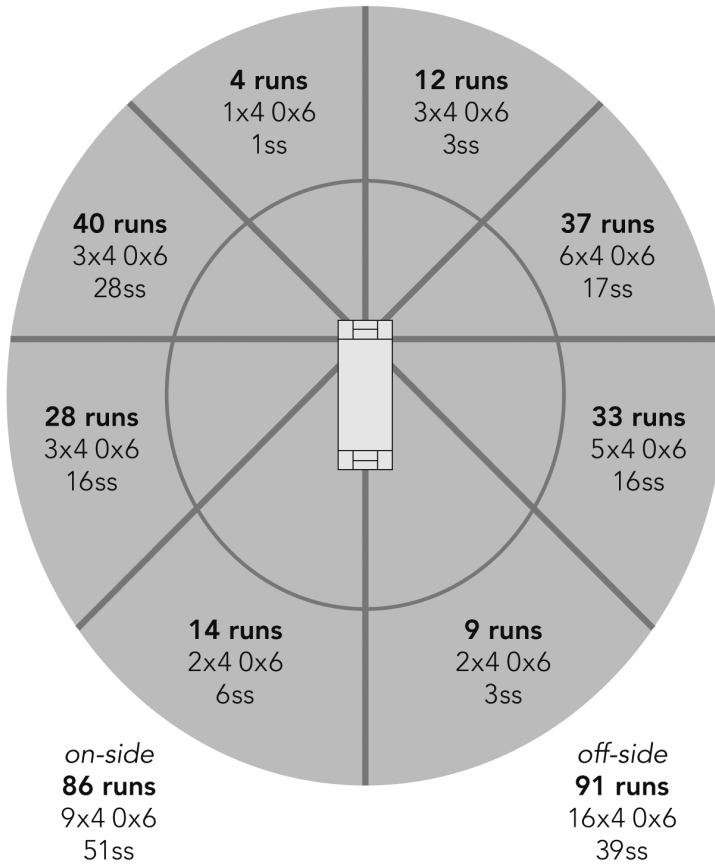
I finished that day – only the third day of the game as the first innings were over so quickly – on 173 not out. I felt as proud as I

have ever done. When you dig really deep, sometimes it is for your team, sometimes for yourself. In the dressing-room everyone said pretty much the same thing: that it had taken a lot of guts and my character had come through. More than anything, performing in those circumstances made me think that when the going gets tough, that is what motivates and brings out the best in me. And, when you are armed with that knowledge, it gives you huge confidence for difficult times in the future.

When I got back to the hotel that evening I felt a warm glow at the back of my neck, stiffness in my limbs, an ache in my lower back from bending over all day, tingling legs from the mandatory ice-bath up to my waist, and such total mental fatigue that even constructing a sentence was hard work. All those wonderful by-products of scoring a Test hundred. We had some room service and I'm not sure whether Ruth tucked Sam or me up in bed first. I think I was asleep by 8.30 or 9 o'clock.

As always after a big innings, you wake up during the night and replay your favourite shots in a mental highlights package. The way the bowlers were bowling; the shot to reach my hundred, hitting Daniel Vettori – by some irony, the captain of Northern Districts, whenever his New Zealand duties allowed – over mid-wicket to reach 150; and that flash wide of gully when I was 43. This time the recollection did not make me sit bolt upright or bring on a cold sweat, only a pleasant smile.

England v New Zealand  
 Third Test, Napier, 22-26 March 2008



**AJ Strauss**  
 2nd Innings 177

Runs	177	Scoring shots (ss)	Non-scoring shots
Balls faced	343	1s	53
Strike rate	51.60	2s	12
Scoring shots	90	4s	25
		0s	253