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The Approach to Cricket

A FEW weeks ago, when the talk was of cricket, people used to say: "Of course, New Zealand isn't really a cricketing country." There was not enough interest in the game (we were told), and without interest we could scarcely expect good performances. It was necessary then to concede that the Test results had been depressing, but the question of interest could be argued. Thousands of spectators who sat day after day, sometimes in changeable weather, were obviously not there because they had nothing better to do. And it is well known that some disturbance of home life occurs when the Australians are playing Test matches in England. If men of sober habits insist on keeping late hours for a broadcast, they must surely be interested in what they are hearing. The truth is, we had become a little defensive about cricket, and were expressing our feelings in different ways, none of which could have been pleasant for our players. And then, on March 13, all was changed. The long series of defeats was ended; and although New Zealand might still be the Commonwealth's poor relation in cricket, the feeling was abroad that the future would bring opportunities and triumphs. John Reid's team, by strenuous and skilful effort, had removed the flaw from the mirror in which the nation sees its image. And the strong fair face to be seen there was undoubtedly the face of a cricketer.

Afterwards, when the excitement was less intense, much was said and written about the spirit required for future achievement. The first and greatest need was concentration. If New Zealand was to win more Tests, with fewer gaps between the victories, our players would have to get away from "Saturday cricket": there might even, it was suggested, have to be a certain amount of semi-professionalism. All this may be true. It can hardly be doubted that players who have a few games on Saturday afternoons (weather permitting), and some interprovincial matches rather late in the season,

are at a disadvantage against professionals, and also against amateurs from countries where the playing season is longer than our own. These difficulties seem likely to remain, though wise policies can make their results less severe. It has already been shown that a New Zealand team could win a Test in spite of the usual difficulties, plus some additional ones imposed by the exhausting tours of India and Pakistan. If, however, the winning of Tests is to be the supreme interest in cricket, there may have to be changes in our approach to the game.

The "Saturday" outlook is not a bad one: it fosters, among other things, a sporting attitude which has helped to give New Zealand teams a fine reputation overseas. A reminder of this came recently from Pakistan in the form of a trophy inspired by New Zealand's behaviour in the Test match at Lahore. On that occasion, with 102 minutes left to play, and 116 runs needed by Pakistan to win the game, 30,000 people who expected a draw were delighted and surprised to see "a fielding side determined to give away nothing and yet not steal a moment from the batting side's time." That sort of spirit is not shown often in international cricket, but it is after all nothing more than the true spirit of the game.

The taste of victory on March 13 was sweet, and will be wanted again. But we must hope that enthusiasm will not lead to too much grimness. At its best, the match-winning mood in a cricketer is simply the concentration that every artist gives to the task in hand. And this should be attainable by a team if enough players are willing to undergo the training and self-discipline without which no sort of artistry is possible. It will not be worth having on any other terms. New Zealanders want to play and win, but they can have no wish to see a game become half an industry, or be introduced to those "incidents" which in recent years have shown what happens when the strain of cricket becomes harder than it was ever meant to be.

N.Z. LISTENER, MARCH 29, 1956.