

Josh Davey: debuting with Strauss

Josh Davey, 19, dropped out of university in March to concentrate on playing cricket full-time; within six weeks, he was batting for Middlesex with Andrew Strauss, the England captain. His dad, Rick, has bought a Middlesex membership so he can follow Josh's progress and he was there at Wantage Road in April when his son walked out at No 3 for Middlesex against Northants in the CB40.

"I was more scared than Josh," says Rick, an off-shore surveyor in the oil and gas industry. "I don't know how he concentrated through that – Strauss was on three when Josh went out there; then Josh had 11 and Strauss was still on three... they put on about 30-odd together. I couldn't concentrate – I don't know how he did."

Davey junior was unfazed: "It was good experience; really enjoyable. [Strauss] is such a relaxed person, I wasn't really intimidated by it. We just chatted about the match situation. He helped me through it."

Davey gave up his Sports Science degree at Loughborough University midway through his first year in March to turn his summer contract with Middlesex into a 12-month deal. Davey's rapid rise – he grew up playing age-group cricket for Suffolk and was not spotted by a professional team until he was 17 – asks a question we've raised before in SPIN: if you are a promising young player growing up in a minor county, do you need unusual reserves of luck and persistence to make it as a pro? The answer seems to be 'Yes'. In Davey's case, there was another missing link, in the shape of SPIN's own batting guru, Gary Palmer. It was at Palmer's CCM Academy that Davey was spotted, at 17, by then-Middlesex head coach Toby Radford, who invited him to the Middlesex Academy.

Davey credits an overseas pro at his club, Bury St Edmunds, the South African Ryan Maron, with first teaching him to bat and, more recently, Middlesex Academy head Graham West with helping him win the full-time contract. A three-month stint at Darren Lehmann's academy in Adelaide at the start of 2009, alongside young English players who already had contracts, helped sharpen him up. But he says it was Palmer's Academy in Oxfordshire – a go-to place for youngsters who have fallen through the first-class counties' not always rigorous scouting net – that provided a shop window for him as well as tightening his technique with some unusual methods.

"The trial was quite normal - but then when the actual course started, Gary started coming up with all these drills using cones – running to the cones while still holding the shape of the shot, for instance. His methods were very different but I found I started hitting the ball better and my technique was improving. It was strange but it helped. We'd get there at 10 and bat 'til 5, on a Sunday. People think it's unusual to bat all day in the nets – but you're hoping to bat for seven hours when you go out on the pitch, so it does make sense."

How does Davey view the postcode lottery that means a player of equal talent growing up in, say, Birmingham has a greater

chance of a pro career than one growing up in Bury St Edmunds?

"You could say it's unfair, but you do get your chances: if you scored runs for Suffolk Under-15s against Middlesex, say, then the Middlesex coaches might try and get you into their academy. But I did find that you'd have to be a lot better, playing for the minor counties, to get noticed. If you're roughly the same standard as a Middlesex No 3, they won't take you – you have to be miles better; because they'll always go with their own."

"The first-class counties, even at age-group level, had more coaches and were just generally better prepared. In Minor counties, you might have three or four good players who carry the team, whereas the first-class team will be strong 1-11. So they always beat you!"

Having not caught the eye by the age of 17, the Daveys had to take things into their own hands. "The age-group thing had finished with Suffolk – after the under-17s, there's nowhere else to play, apart from for the senior Minor Counties. But if you're in your 20s, you need to score millions of runs in the minor counties to have a chance of getting a first-class contract."

So how come he managed to turn pro and his Suffolk contemporaries did not? "I got a bit lucky – but I think I also pursued it a bit more than anyone else. I had the six-hour round trips to Gary's Academy – and we had to pay for the coaching – I'd say I wanted it a bit more than

the other people in my team."

A batting all-rounder, Josh Davey is undecided whether he would best be compared to Paul Collingwood or Shane Watson. "Maybe I'm a Watson sort-of player, but not quite as fast with the bowling. So maybe a Collingwood. A batting all-rounder. Except I'm opening the batting now, rather than going in at 3 or 4 as I always have. I need to work on my bowling. I bowl first-change in the second XI.

"Middlesex do have a strong top order but then Eoin Morgan is away with England and Andrew Strauss will be going away – so that means spaces open up. And if you're

doing well at that time in the second team, you can go straight in. So it has its ups and downs."

Now Davey has moved off campus and is sharing a flat with Middlesex team-mate Dawid Malan. (It's a big difference from Uni, he maintains, what with Malan being the grand old age of 22.) At Angus Fraser's behest, Davey is playing for Shepherds Bush in the Middlesex League, when county commitments permit.

And, having batted with Strauss, there is a chance that Davey will be playing against him later this summer. Born in Aberdeen, he is qualified to play for Scotland. The national coach has already been in touch. It's early days but Davey is understandably keen. "I've spoken to the coach but he's going to come and have a proper look at me. They're playing Australia and England this summer. So that's potentially very exciting."

There are, plainly, no regrets about quitting Uni to play cricket. "University is always there, so I can always go back," he reasons. "But you're not 19 forever and you only get one chance to play cricket professionally. You only get one shot."



22
Percentage
of pro
players born
outside
first-class
counties