

SIMON HARMER

Turn

Proteas 'reject' off-spinner Simon Harmer has found unparalleled success in the English County Championship

WORDS: MARK SALTER

WHEN IT COMES TO DREAM STARTS, IT DOESN'T get much better than this. Feeling forsaken and more than a little forlorn, Simon Harmer committed himself to life in England, signing a Kolpak deal with newly promoted Essex for six months of the 2017 season.

After 12 matches, with a two-year extension contract, he was drinking from the champion's trophy. He had twice returned 14 wickets in a match, including nine in a single innings, was second on the wicket-takers' table with 72 (making him the most prolific spinner in England), and by the time the Warriors took their Sunfoil mid-season break in October, he was the leading wicket-taker in first-class cricket in the world in 2017 with 102.

And yet, when he took that deep breath and joined the exodus of Kolpak players from South Africa in late-2016, he was feeling far from secure.

'It was an anxious time for me,' he says. 'My contract with the Warriors had come to an end and I wasn't sure if I was going to get another, and I had pretty much given up the idea that I would play for the Proteas again. I didn't really fit in the Proteas set-up; I always had the impression the selectors didn't want me there; that I was just holding a place for Dane Piedt to come back, or for someone else,' he says.

Despite starting well, with seven wickets in the third Test against West Indies, his fire was dampened in the rain-hit tour of Bangladesh. But he came in for some raw criticism on the tour of India – a tour from which few emerged with any credit. He was replaced

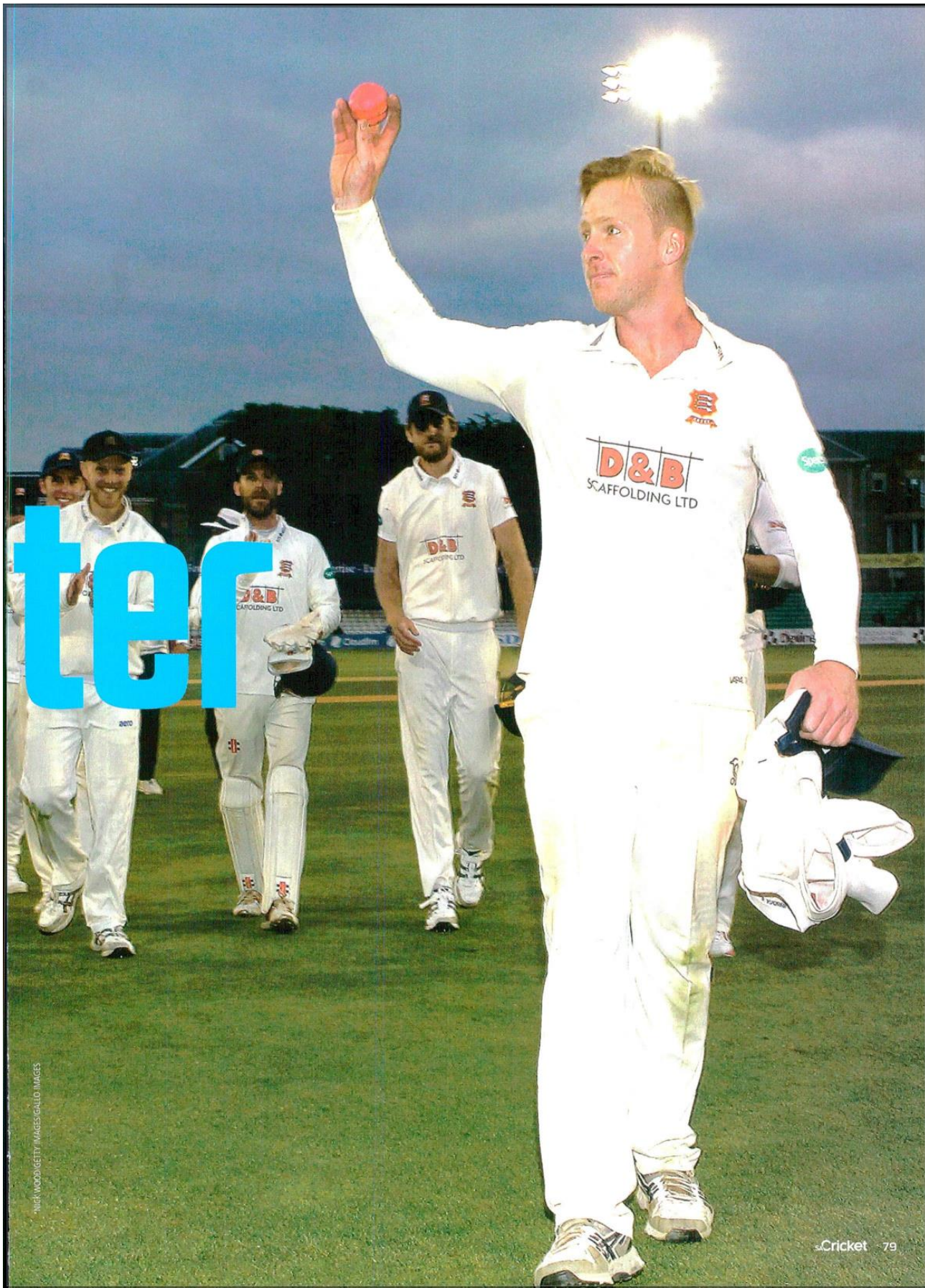
by Piedt. Twenty wickets at 29.40, it seems, was never going to be good enough; not even for a place in the South Africa A side.

'I was in need of some sort of security, and I thought I could get it with a Kolpak deal,' he says. 'Like everyone, I needed to know what was around the corner and to have some control over my life, and I didn't feel I had that in South Africa. Even then, my contract with Essex was to run from April to September. If it didn't work out, I would be unemployed and looking for other opportunities, so it was a nervous time.'

As it was for Kyle Abbott, who also took the Kolpak route. He came in for particular criticism, because he had just become flavour of the month after a long-term injury to Dale Steyn, but having continuously endured the uncertainty of his position in the Proteas team, he had already committed himself to Hampshire. Others have done the same: Hardus Viljoen, Rilee Rossouw, Stiaan van Zyl, David Wiese and Dane Vilas were all players on the fringes of the national team in one form or another, before they opted to play elsewhere.

Abbott was a particularly pertinent case in point. When he decided to take the Kolpak contract he had played just six Tests between February 2013 and December 2015. 'It's tough not knowing when you're going to get a game,' he said at the time. 'This Kolpak deal gives me four years of security, and playing cricket is an incredibly insecure environment. Knowing I have an income for the next four years ... that's quite reassuring.' »

For the Bet



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Cricket 79



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Abbott also came out of the 2017 Championship with praise and prestige, ending third on the Division One wicket-takers' list with 60, at an average of 18.20, an economy rate of 2.62 and an innings best of 7-41.

At the time of signing, though, Harmer didn't even have that security, although Essex had done their homework as they looked to bolster their squad for the new campaign in the first division of the County Championship.

'Essex is a tight-knit group,' he says, 'and they are keen to find people who contribute on and off the field to the ethos of the club. It seems they spoke to a lot of people before offering me a contract and felt I would fit in. But it was just a six-month contract to see how it went.'

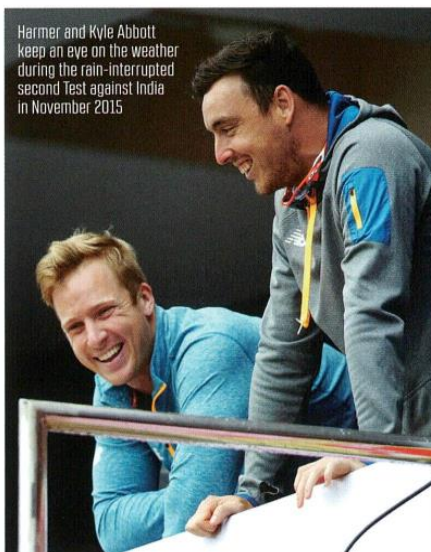
'I was fortunate that I joined them on their pre-season tour of Dubai, so I got to know the players in a social environment beforehand and was able to bond with them. By the time the season started, I felt part of the group. It's an intimate club [so intimate that four of the first-team squad were born

in the same maternity ward] and I felt I had landed with my arse in the butter.'

It had been an intriguing journey, through Tuks and South African Universities via Border, Eastern Province and the Warriors, to the snug and compact surroundings of the County Ground in Chelmsford, home of such giants as Keith Fletcher and Graham Gooch – both now part of their administration – and latterly of England captains Nasser Hussain and Alastair Cook. Harmer's journey took an important turn in 2007 when, as a bewildered matriculant, unsure of what he wanted to study, he paid his first visit to England, joining a family friend to play amateur cricket at the Stoney Stratford Cricket Club in Buckinghamshire. That was followed by stints at Royton and then, in 2015, as club pro at Monton and Weaste in the central Lancashire League.

'It was such a great time,' he says with enthusiasm. 'If anyone were to ask, I would say that's the way to go. At my first club, I had to work during the week; but I learned so much about myself, about responsibility

Harmer and Kyle Abbott keep an eye on the weather during the rain-interrupted second Test against India in November 2015



BY THE NUMBERS: HIS FIRST 10 MATCHES

Bat & Bowl	Team	Opposition	Ground	Date
1-59, 4, 0-78, 12*	Essex	Lancashire	Chelmsford	07/04/17
2-51, 9, 1-26	Essex	Somerset	Taunton	14/04/17
1-112, 1, 3-72, 20	Essex	Middlesex	Lord's	21/04/17
3, 3-23	Essex	Hampshire	Chelmsford	19/05/17
2-64, 0, 2-90	Essex	Surrey	Chelmsford	26/05/17
0-69, 20, 4-83	Essex	Surrey	Guildford	09/06/17
1, 6-92, 8-36	Essex	Warwickshire	Chelmsford	19/06/17
5-77, 9-95	Essex	Middlesex	Chelmsford	26/06/17
0-6, 7, 1-15	Essex	Yorkshire	Scarborough	06/08/17
12, 2-42, 2, 3-29	Essex	Somerset	Chelmsford	28/08/17



and independence. I was working 9-5 five days a week as a web tester for a mail order firm, earning eight pounds an hour, which was good money. It gave me enough to sink a few pints at the weekend.'

At Monton, he made a good impression, taking 68 wickets at 11.84 and backing that up with the bat, scoring 788 at a shade under 40. That was a useful addition to his CV when Essex started casting their net, trawling for a decent spinner.

'I didn't exactly take a truckload of wickets in my first few games at Essex [19 in his first six], but I guess they liked what they saw and they offered me an extension to my contract.'

Aided, perhaps, by Fletcher's definitive announcement that 'Harmy's a proper bowler'.

He made that clear when he took 14 wickets in the match against Warwickshire, with a career-best innings return of 8-36. »

ALAN AGGARWAL/ASHLEY WESTERN/GETTY IMAGES/GALLO IMAGES



SIMON HARMER

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ON TWITTER



4 Nov

What an unbelievable performance by @SmithKwagga for the Barbarians... Kwaggas wouldn't be extinct if they could run around like that

15 Sept

Champions of England! What a team. What a club. Back to back. 8 wins from 12. What more could you ask for? #Eagles @EssexCricket

11 Sept

Refreshing to see the honesty and passion in Moeneeb Josephs' post-match interview yesterday

13 Aug

Haters are going to hate! Well done Caster

12 Aug

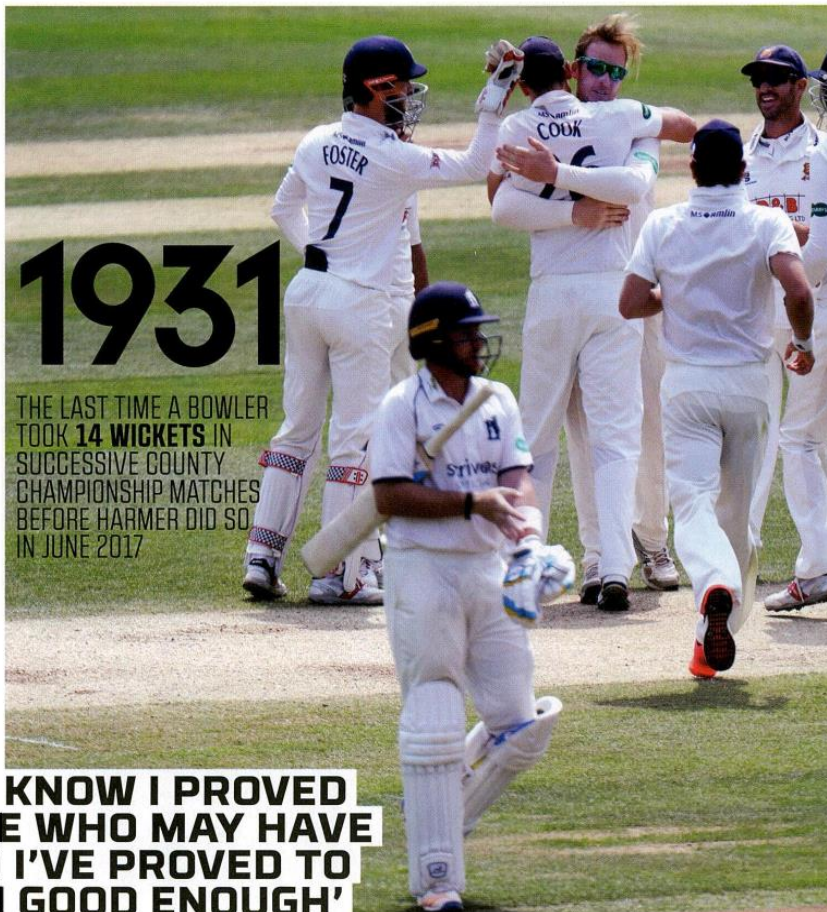
Chelsea, Liverpool drop points... Arsenal come from behind to win!! #COYG

11 Aug

Someone needs to get the chip off @ashyp_5's shoulder...

6 Feb

RIP Joost... a pioneer in the number 9 jersey in world rugby. An example that we are all mortal...



'IT'S JUST NICE TO KNOW I PROVED MYSELF TO PEOPLE WHO MAY HAVE DOUBTED ME, AND I'VE PROVED TO MYSELF THAT I AM GOOD ENOUGH'

Just to show it was not simply luck, Harmer repeated the performance the following week against Middlesex, but going one better and taking nine in an innings. It was testimony to his impeccable accuracy. 'In England, the surface is usually green and grassy, but underneath it is quite dry,' he says. 'So as soon as you wear away the grass, you've got something to work with and you get some turn. We always had two left-arm seamers, so I could target their footholes.'

Essex needed four wickets with six overs to go. Harmer took three of those, and was deprived of the perfect 10 when seamer Dan Lawrence nipped in to take the ninth wicket. Three balls into the penultimate over, Steve Finn plunged forward to Harmer and was trapped lbw. The Kolpak import had become the first Essex spinner to take nine wickets in an innings since Mark Illott in 1995. His growing fan base, known as 'Harmy's Army', danced in delight.

It was a performance so remarkable that it won Harmer the Moment of the Season award. The ECB featured it along with the Warwickshire display in their '10 great bowling displays of the season' clip.

There can be no better sight for a spin bowler than to see seven fielders crowded around the batsman. That's when you know you are on top, and your mates are trusting you to put the ball on the spot. 'It is exciting. Every ball is an occasion and there is so much theatre around the bat ... the oohs and aaahs. It's nice to enjoy moments like that.'

Essex certainly got their money's worth: Harmer played in all Championship games as well as nine one-day cup games and 13 T20s. The gruelling schedule has some spin-offs in that it gives players a fair crack of the whip.

'In the county system, you get backed for an extended period; you get eight, 10 games before they start looking at you and saying, "What's going on here?" In South Africa, if you have one bad game, you wonder if you're going to get dropped. You know you are good enough and if you are putting in the work, things will turn. As a spinner, I don't see the schedule as being an issue. For us spinners, the more we bowl, the better, because you are learning and adding to your game. I enjoyed the workload and getting the opportunity to showcase my skills.'

Even the four-day games attracted 2 000 to 3 000 people, and the one-day and T20 games were always sold out – a far cry from South Africa. The English public, Harmer believes, have taken to Kolpak players, despite the argument that they are taking places away from English players.

'I think the majority of Kolpaks lift the standard by bringing international experience to English cricket. For me, it's just nice to know I proved myself to people who may have doubted me, and I've proved to myself that I am good enough.'

It is worth noting the views of former Proteas' coach Russell Domingo, who made this observation when Harmer announced his Kolpak decision: 'It is probably in his best interests. Simon is still young and we've got a few spinning options around. It's a great opportunity ... go and learn your trade in England and come back when you're 29 or 30.'

It's over to the Proteas' selectors, now. ❧

MARK SALTER IS A FREELANCE WRITER.

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