

BROADCASTING EVENTS OF NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

Criteria for identifying events to be listed

*A RESPONSE FROM THE ENGLAND AND WALES CRICKET BOARD
(ECB)*

Introduction

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB), as the governing body of English cricket, has responsibility for issues ranging from investment in grassroots development to the well-being of the England national team. The ECB's vision for the future has been set out in our development plan "*Towards the Millennium*" and more recently our structure plan "*Raising the Standard*", which together reflect the ECB's determination to make the game in this country more competitive and successful.

Given this proposed strategy for the future, the ECB welcomes the Government's consultation paper on Listed Events - particularly when the broadcasting environment is undergoing such change - and the proposal that explicit criteria should be developed to provide transparency to the listing process. The ECB is firmly of the view that this consultation exercise should provide the basis for decisions on Listed Events whereby open minds and clear criteria can decide the list, rather than historical accidents. The ECB agrees with Government that events should be listed "only when there is a strong case for doing so". For us, it is vital that this process is not bound and limited by the past, but does help sports governing bodies and broadcasters build for the future.

Cricket's Current Position

At present all cricket Test matches involving England (including overseas Tests) are Listed. This situation means that English cricket is more limited and restricted in its ability to negotiate broadcasting agreements than any other sport. The impact of this on the domestic game is dramatic and we have set out our case for de-listing in a separate briefing paper (see attached).

For the purposes of this paper we intend to focus on the Government's consultation paper and provide a constructive and, hopefully, creative response to the proposed criteria.

What Should The Criteria Be ?

Taking the consultation paper's criteria the ECB would make the following comments:

- ▶ *the event and its outcome has a special national resonance, not simply a significance to those who ordinarily follow the sport concerned*

The ECB accepts that this is a useful suggestion. However, we would note that "special national resonance" is a subjective term that requires assessment on how and when viewers, listeners or readers respond to any *resonance* felt.

There can be little doubt that Tim Henman in the Quarter-Finals at Wimbledon has incredible *resonance*, whereas an England Test match against Sri Lanka has only limited impact across the country. Yet the latter is listed and the former is not. Indeed it is questionable whether all Test matches have the same degree of *resonance*. Test matches against Australia or the West Indies, for example, have greater *resonance* than similar games against India or New Zealand.

In cricket, even when such *resonance* can be shown, it is absolutely clear that most supporters do not need, nor can they usually access, ball-by-ball terrestrial TV coverage. Those who want to follow the progress of a Test or a series usually do so via a mix television coverage, Radio 4's *Test Match Special*, TV and radio news/sports bulletins, newspapers and highlights programmes.

Moreover, other factors such as the nature of the event concerned and how one can evaluate the idea of an "outcome" also need to be considered. Cricket's current listing means that it is not simply a single Test - an event - which is affected but an entire *Test Series*. This means that neither single outcomes, nor even the outcome of an entire series, are evaluated. This is because a Test Series might be decided before certain matches are even played. However, attempts to impose listing halfway through a series to encompass a potentially decisive game would simply be impractical for both the sport and the broadcasters.

- ▶ *it is a pre-eminent and popular event giving it particular potential for encouraging participation in the sport concerned*

This criterion seems at first glance to make sense but it is in need of clarification. "Pre-eminent" and "popular" events exist in most sports and TV exposure ought to encourage participation - however should that be a basis for listing?

It is unlikely that any TV company would be interested in an event which was not in some way "pre-eminent" and "popular". Equally, almost all sports governing bodies crave for greater "participation" in its sport. However, there are many forms of broadcasting available, particularly with a commitment to the unbundling of TV rights, and participation can be encouraged in different ways through different media. Certainly it can be shown that the FA Premier League's TV arrangements with Sky and the BBC have provided a successful mix of live and highlights, satellite and terrestrial coverage, which has led to greater promotion of, and participation in, English football.

For cricket, the current picture is a lot less healthy when judging pre-eminence and popularity. Attendances at an entire Test series (some 400,000) are less than those of an average, single Premiership football club over a season, and viewing figures for BBC live coverage are far below those for every other Listed Event. The promotion of the game is also circumscribed by the limited space available for promotional and feature-based programming on terrestrial television.

Moreover, while the ECB fully supports the view that accessible television exposure can encourage participation, it is also important to note the value of grassroots development through community/schools coaching programmes on encouraging participation. It is vital that this fact is not lost on Government. However, without freedom to negotiate its broadcasting deals, the ECB is limited in the amount of money it can invest in such development and, in turn, in its ability to encourage participation.

- ▶ *it is an event which serves to unite the nation; a shared point in the national calendar*

This proposal is a strong one. If Listed Events are to continue then this should help inform the decision-making process. For cricket the implication of such a criterion is interesting. While certain followers of the sport might like to think that a Test match "unites the nation", it is not a view shared by large numbers of the UK's population, particularly those outside of England and by many millions of non-cricket fans - particularly women - where keen interest remains low.

Even more significantly, a Test Series is by definition not a "shared point in the national calendar". A typical domestic Test Series lasts for three months from early June to the end of August and a typical Test match lasts four to five days. Current arrangements mean that the entire season of Test match cricket, covering 30 days (180 hours) and six separate events, is listed compared to 10 minutes of the Grand National, 3 minutes of the Derby or 90 minutes of the FA Cup Final.

- ▶ *it involves the national team in the sport concerned in a major international tournament*

This again seems attractive at first glance. However, how are we ever going to attract major events such as the soccer World Cup or the Olympics to the UK if governing bodies are to be restricted in the way in which they can conduct their broadcasting negotiations? From cricket's point of view the use of "major international tournament" as a criterion is thought provoking. However, with only 9 full member countries competing in Test cricket, the idea of a Test series as a *major international event* is questionable.

Proposed Further Criteria

With regard to the proposed further criteria in the document, the ECB would make the following comments:

- ▶ *it is likely to command a large television audience*

The ECB have some sympathy for this proposal, though the growing base for satellite and cable television in the UK means that this may become increasingly possible to achieve outside of terrestrial television. For its part, cricket does not command huge prime time television audiences. The weekday average for Test match cricket on BBC is lower than 2 million with less than 3 million at weekends. Audiences for the other domestic Listed Events can be as high as 15 million. Clearly, cricket is being penalised at present on the basis of this criteria.

▶ *it is a regular, readily defined event of limited duration*

This is an important criterion. In general, it is difficult to see how a true sense of occasion can be sustained and "national resonance" encouraged over the entire duration of a sporting event which lasts for many days - such as a Test Series covering 30 days and played over a 3 month disjointed period. We believe that it makes more sense to define the criteria for listing with an eye on a *typical* sporting event which will, invariably, be of a limited and regular duration.

▶ *it has a history of being broadcast live on free-to-air services*

This seems to be the least useful of the proposed criteria. The ECB would question the value of judging the future by the events of the past. Here we believe the Government is in danger of trapping certain sports, most notably cricket, into a permanent cycle of restriction at the very time when the digital broadcasting revolution is opening up all sorts of possibilities for the future.

For English cricket the historical reality and, if listing of all domestic Test matches continues, the likely future, is dealing with a defacto BBC monopoly. This is neither good for the game's revenue and future development nor for the well-being of the broadcasting market place at a time of such change. In this context, the ECB does welcome the references to the importance of "costs and benefits" to a sport in deciding on listing, particularly the recognition of the impact on "the income or potential income" which may be lost.

In addition some thought needs to be given to the fact that free-to-air services do not necessarily provide the best basis for coverage, the correct scheduling, the right promotional benefits or indeed the highest production standards. In all of these areas new possibilities now exist.

Other Factors

As with every other modern sport, TV monies are vital to future investment in English cricket from school level up to Test standard. More weight needs to be given to that particular reality.

The ECB welcomes the reference to the "broadcasting market" since English cricket has been hit by the limits placed upon it by the defacto BBC monopoly for many years. This situation will be further reinforced by the provisions of the 1996 Broadcasting Act relating to subscription television, when English cricket seeks to negotiate its next TV deal for 1998.

Indeed on the broader broadcasting front it is worth noting that the whole categorisation of broadcasters into categories A and B, as defined by the 1996 Broadcasting Act, looks

increasingly outdated. This is because the digital revolution is likely to herald an increase in the accessibility of subscription television and, importantly, blur the traditional definitions of terrestrial, satellite and cable services. This point seems to have been overlooked in the current consultation paper.

The ECB does, however, welcome the proposal that listing will be evaluated against the provision of "arrangements to ensure that highlights of the event are available to all viewers". The ECB have been active in, and are committed to, the development of the Sports Voluntary Code of Practice on TV rights and are happy to give guarantees on unbundling and satisfactory access if that were felt to be appropriate for the future - as reflected in the ECB's current broadcasting arrangements.

Further Criteria

If listing criteria is felt to be the way forward then the ECB would suggest that a Listed Event:

- ▶ *should merit full transmission*

In the case of Test cricket, this should mean ball-by-ball coverage. Unfortunately, due to the BBC's other programming commitments - for example Wimbledon, Ascot, children's programmes and news slots - Test cricket coverage is often interrupted or missed for other events. This has meant no live coverage of important moments such as Graham Gooch reaching 300 in his magnificent innings against India.

In addition it should be noted that terrestrial scheduling means that this is a continuing problem and one which also limits the development of supportive programming round the Test match and between games in the series.

The ECB also believes that listing should not apply where:

- ▶ *same day highlights of the event are available to all viewers*

The ECB feels that this path of agreed unbundling and innovative approaches to access provides a genuine basis for a positive way forward for all concerned and should be pursued.

Some Conclusions

The ECB is delighted that the Government are seeking a new way forward on Listed Events. If a list needs to exist then it is appropriate that this should be subject to consultation and based on fair and transparent criteria, even though there are certainly logistical and philosophical difficulties concerning the justification of certain criteria.

In this document we have tried to respond positively to the consultation paper and make useful suggestions on how criteria might be applied and made to work fairly. We hope it will be of

value and interest to all of those involved in the decision-making process. The ECB is also keen to be involved in the developing dialogue on this vital issue.

English cricket is severely affected by the current Listed Events arrangements and our case for change has been set out elsewhere. We hope that this current exercise will produce a new consensus, some forward thinking and a sound platform for UK sport for the new millennium. We want to play our part in making sure that the outcome of this process is a positive one for all concerned and provides the basis for confidence in the future development of English cricket.

England and Wales Cricket Board
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