

# **SUMMER'S OVER**

**By**

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The season was drawing to a close and autumn was approaching. Joe Summer measured out his run as he marched solemnly back to his mark with a much battered cricket ball in his hand. It was the last over of the match, the last of the season and maybe the last of his professional career. He was thirty-eight years old which was generally thought to be too old for a medium paced bowler and he liked to be considered as fast.

He was surprised when his captain threw him the ball as the opposition needed only six runs to win and his previous spell had been expensive. Before the match he had overheard the captain talking to the chairman of the club cricket committee saying that he thought it was time for Summer to retire because he was well past his prime and he wanted rid of him. Summer looked round the ground and saw his team mates and the sparse crowd fidgeting looking bored or with their heads bowed as they seemed resigned to defeat. He imagined the captain approaching the chairman again after the game was over and they had lost again for an eighth time in a row demanding that it was time for Summer to be let go.

He turned just beyond his mark and bowled a practice ball to Barry Turner, who had walked up with him from his fielding position at mid-off, then focused all his attention on Jennings.

Andy Jennings was one of the new crop of England wonder batsmen who had taken time off from international duty to rejoin his county and plunder the less talented cricketers on the county circuit. So far this game he had hit fifteen fours and four sixes. Two of the sixes and seven of the fours had been off Summer's bowling. Now he nonchalantly patted the crease at the striker's end having scored ninety-seven runs. Summer fixed him with his eyes looking for some trace of weakness. But although his side had lost seven wickets, Jennings looked unassailable.

Summer began his run. His legs felt stiff and his back sore. Jennings would be expecting a bouncer, or a fastball aimed straight for the batting crease, in revenge for the punishment he meted out to the bowler earlier, so instead Summer sent down a delivery of length at medium pace which the electronic scoreboard registered at eighty-two miles an hour. The overconfident Jennings misjudged it, playing too early across its line, and missed the ball which struck his pad.

Summer spun round to the umpire and bellowed, "Ow is 'e!"

The umpire was undeterred. "Not out."

The ball deflected off the pad to midwicket and Jennings scampered through for a leg-bye. Summer was incensed. He knew that the ball had struck the pad directly in front of the wicket and the batsman should have been given out. He stomped past the umpire back to his mark.

There was a different batsman now at the striker's end. It was Ross Lucas who was not nearly as talented as Jennings but a good county player all the same and he had scored twenty three. But Summer could not care who it was and charged to the bowling crease, stiff limbs and sore back now forgotten. The electronic scoreboard registered the speed of the ball he bowled at ninety-two miles an hour. It was too fast for Lucas and his off stump went cartwheeling through the air.

Disappointed that his victim was not Jennings, Summer shrugged off the congratulatory back slaps of his team mates and strode back to his mark. As he passed Jennings he heard him say, "Bit of a fluke that ball. Bet you can't bowl another one. Your usual dross is nowhere near that fast."

"You're lucky you were down this end," snarled Joe, "or that would have been the end of you."

"No way, the faster you bowl, if indeed you can bowl fast which I doubt, the further I'll plonk it over the boundary. I'm afraid you're past it old man."

Summer reached his mark. His heart pounded in his chest such was the effort he put into the last delivery and his mouth was dry. A young debutant bowler took Lucas's place. He was new to the game and this was the young man's first match so Summer did not even know his name. But it mattered not. The speed of Summer's next ball registered ninety-six miles an hour. The young man's reflexes were good and he managed to play the ball but only to send it skyward and Turner ran in from mid-off to take a fine catch. The crowd were out of their seats, cheering and clapping. His teammates jumped all over him. Two even kissed him. But Summer shrugged them off and marched back to his mark without uttering a sound.

The new batsman was Ken Hughes, a specialist spin bowler with a reputation of being no good with the bat. However, while the ball was in the air the batsmen had crossed and Jennings was once again at the striking end. His face showed a jubilant grin and he appeared to be mocking Summer.

Summer raced in again and sent down a full length ball just wide of the off stump at a staggering ninety-seven miles an hour. Jennings played an off drive but was deceived by its speed. It struck the inside edge of his bat, then his pad and sped towards the boundary. He scored two runs before it was cut off by a fielder and then stood once more at the striker's end. This time his look was deadly serious. He now needed one run for his century which would be the fastest scored of all time.

Summer stood breathing heavily at his mark. He was sweating profusely and his heart was a racing jackhammer. He was almost physically sick but took three deep breaths and then started his run. His legs pounded the ground then incredibly it seemed like he was flying, almost gliding across the grass. The ball in his hand wound in the air in a whirling windmill action and was released in a blur. In that moment he reached the peak of bowling perfection and passed into legend. Before that time no bowler had been recorded delivering a ball at a hundred miles an hour. Now the scoreboard registered the speed of the ball he bowled as an incredible one hundred and one.

Jennings never saw it but somehow it struck his bat and soared high towards the boundary. Summer watched it fly away. A vice-like pain gripped his chest; he crumpled to his knees and the last breath of his life left his body before the ball had a chance to land. Unaware of Summer's fate, the eyes of everyone in the stadium, but one, followed the disappearing ball. Jennings was dancing with delight at the certain six he was sure he had scored. The one exception was the wicketkeeper who cried out and pointed at the stumps because as the ball struck his bat Jennings had stepped backwards and dislodged the bails. He was out one run short of his century and his side had lost. Summer had triumphed.

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