

# How to bowl an ice maiden over: the cricketer's guide to life in the freezer

As a former county professional, **Iain Fletcher** thought he'd seen it all – googlies Down Under, thick edges in Asia. But the pick-pock of leather on willow at -12C? Is that a polar bear in the outfield?

**T**he sun is shining as I don my cricket sweater, adjust my chosen headgear – a large woolly hat – and thrust my hands deep into my fleece-lined pockets. I glance round the ground, marvel at the mountains that frame the venue and march out with the rest of the team to field the first session.

So far, a normal start to any game of cricket in the world, something I have done many times as both a professional and an amateur in England, Australia and Asia. The major differences between these venues tend to be the thunder of nearby surf, the minaret of a local mosque or a crowd of street hawkers on the way to the ground. But as I take the field to make my debut for Old Cholmeleians, I pass the thermometer, pause, and give it a quick tap to check it's working: -12C. What are we doing playing cricket?

Cricket on Ice, as the tournament is billed, started here in St Moritz in 1989, the brainchild of some pleasantly eccentric cricket-lovers, both English and Swiss. Of course, wherever the English, and indeed Asians, go, then cricket will be played; but the Swiss as well?

Well, yes, seems to be the answer, due mainly to the fact that the game is played just 20 minutes further down the valley, at the Lyceum Alpinum Zuoz international school. Their affinity with the old colonial game started back in the 1920s, when a teacher from Britain, Gordon Spencer, introduced both cricket and Eton fives, and both games are still well served by specialist coaches at the school.

Stamping my feet and securing my gloves, I take position in the covers. Paul Matcham, a partner in a London law firm, assumes a station 10 yards away to form a defensive ring and warns: "If they hit it hard, Fletcher, mind for broken fingers."

Considering my fingers already feel like Captain Scott's, this is hardly encouraging. The pitch itself is a couple of cricket mats rolled on to a flattened part of the ice, while the outfield is the natural snow that covers the frozen lake. Apparently, when the former England cricket captain David Gower played in the tournament some years ago, sadly for his automobile parked beyond the boundary, the lake was not frozen enough to support its weight and it sank, slowly glugging its way to the depths. Another attempt at a cover drive that Gower lived to regret...

Not having a car to worry about, my own gloomy thoughts are of imminent frostbite as I acknowledge the urgings of our captain, John Zani – "Win this and we win the trophy" – crouch



low and prepare to do my bit for victory. Zani is a circuit judge, and in addition to Matcham, there are two other lawyers and also a government advisor on educational policy in our team, a London club side whose players come largely from Finchley and Hampstead.

Not exactly the kind of men one would expect to be risking broken legs and fingers on a frozen lake while in pursuit of a rock-hard cricket ball. Mad dogs and Englishmen? There might be something in the old cliché, save for the fact that the opposition are a mixture of antipodean and Asian expats, with a couple of Swiss thrown in for local flavour.

Still, cricket is quintessentially an English game, a legacy to the world, and as this is the final of Cricket on Ice 2005, national pride demands I do my best. The opening batsman for Winterthur Cricket Club takes guard, surveys the field and settles into his stance. It is only then that I realise that, despite the dramatic surroundings and novelty of playing on ice and snow, this is not a gimmick, but proper cricket of a standard seen on thousands of village greens every Sunday throughout the summer. Only on a far stickier wicket.

The conditions mean bowlers' run-ups are understandably shortened, and fielding is made more cumbersome by the fact that trying to sprint on a mixture of snow and ice is not particularly easy. But the competitive instinct is fully evident, and opposition and umpires are honoured in the truest traditions of the game.

I soon discover how tricky running is on the lake when I move into a prime spot to stop the opposition stealing quick singles. "Yes!" screams the batsman as he dabs the ball towards me. I respond, alert to the chance of a run-out, and nearly measure my length on the snow. "You look

like a rather balletic elephant," Matcham informs me as he stifles a grin.

At these temperatures, he has more chance of seeing a polar bear. But it's not the only poor display by Old Cholmeleians as Winterthur, the current trophy holders and Swiss champions, benefit from some wayward bowling.

Becoming accustomed to the conditions, I notice a ridge has formed at one end of the wicket – no doubt some ice compacted underneath the mats. If the bowlers can land the ball there, it should fly chest high. Our wicketkeeper, Lindsay, a student at Leeds University, has already been hit in the mouth from just such a delivery, so when I receive the call to bowl I have a plan; one step for a run-up and a fast arm action propelling the ball to the ridge.

"Whoa," yells the batter, Bruce, as my first delivery whizzes past his nose. I proceed to hit him about the ribs for the next few overs, but for Bruce there is greater indignity to come. He has travelled 10,000 miles from New Zealand, ostensibly to see his son and new daughter-in-law, but later in the bar, he confesses the real attraction is to play in such a unique cricket match. And his reward for such sacrifice? Dismissed lbw by your correspondent.

My successful appeal echoes down the valley into Italy, and it should help Old Cholmeleians win the game. Instead, it brings a chap called Horace to the crease.

Now it may be that, like many in Winterthur, he works in the insurance business and, like most in that industry, considers all risks and rewards before finally eschewing adventure – but he certainly doesn't bat like it.

In fact, he's as clean a striker of a ball as I have seen in amateur cricket, and he launches me over the boundary, past the

pedestrian walkway and on to the road. I turn to follow the path of the ball and cringe at the loud screeching noise, imagining dents to the Porsches and BMWs parked nearby. But it's just the noise from our captain as the runs pile up.

The final target we are set is 185, a lot of runs to score in the allotted 25 overs, and precedent is not with us, Old Cholmeleians' highest-ever score being 130. Things are soon made a lot more difficult as we are reduced to 60 for 5, and yet through patience, strong hitting and aggressive running between the wickets as the fielders mimic Torvill and Dean, victory is earned with two overs remaining. The batting heroes, suitably toasted in the evening, are wicketkeeper Lindsay, still sporting a bruised cheek, and Mani Khaliq, a fast-bowling, big-hitting warrior.

Despite the conditions, the most trying aspect of the game is self-preservation. When fielding, an attempted slog swirled towards me on the deep midwicket fence. As it descended from the brilliant blue sky and the cry of "Catch it!" echoed from the expectant bowler, I wasn't about to risk broken digits, and decided that the ball was going to be cushioned in a couple of inches of snow before my hands even got close to it. How to make it look plausible, though?

I paused, staggered left then right, made a great display of shielding my eyes from the sun with my arm, lurched forward and looked suitably distraught as the missile landed a couple of feet in front of me. My left hand wafted close enough, desperately clutching at what I had intended it to – fresh air. My sentiment was one of mission accomplished as my unbroken fingers curled round the ball, and were sound enough later to manage a glass of celebratory champagne.

**Game of Swiss snowballs: the annual battle for the Cricket on Ice trophy at St Moritz may appear more quirky than competitive, but the players take it seriously. Participants have included former England captain David Gower (left)**

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