

# Jonathan Agnew



England's women did all they could to raise the morale of our disenchanted cricket fans by reaching the final of the Twenty20 World Cup in Bangladesh. Although they subsequently lost heavily to Australia, their overall success underlines the progress that is being

made in their sport. Full-time professional contracts will now be issued to the 17 leading women, which will not only facilitate more opportunities for training and practice, but also enable the younger players to combine their cricket careers with completing university degrees. It is an important development in a sport that, by its nature of months touring away from home, generally relies on women who are not yet married and without children. Arran Brindle, who retired recently at the age of 32, was the one notable exception. She took time out of cricket to start a family, and when she returned to the England team in 2011, she would regularly tour with her husband and their son, Harry.

The golf circuit is about as far removed from those first tentative steps towards professionalism in women's cricket as Dhaka is from Augusta, the beautiful venue for this week's Masters. But while the course will no doubt live up to its traditional expectations of velvet greens and blooming azaleas, this year's showpiece is already battling against the loss of Tiger Woods. Arguably the world's most recognisable sports-

man, Woods has withdrawn in order to have a back operation, and the impact of that has seen the value of resale ticket prices plummet and television ratings are also expected to be damaged by the loss of interest.

Woods has won the Masters four times at a club that did not allow black members until 1990, but this response from the public has to be a warning to complacent sports administrators. That one man can have such a dramatic impact, despite the presence of so many talented golfers, is truly alarming, especially when you consider the damage that was done to Woods' clean-cut image when he was forced to admit a string of extramarital affairs.

**'Clearly Tiger's powers have dwindled, and so has his reputation'**

More significant than that is the fact Woods has not won a Major since 2008. Clearly Tiger's powers have dwindled and, significantly, so has his reputation amongst his opponents who still respect him, but no longer fear him. One can't help but wonder if after major surgery there is any chance of Woods, now 38, returning as the remarkable player he once was.