

Jonathan Agnew



It has been a bruising week for English cricket. Kevin Pietersen has ensured that if he really has reached the end of the road – and there must be a possibility that he will never play professionally in England again – he has done so with spectacu-

lar acrimony. The reputations of teammates and coaches have taken a battering with his allegations of bullying and incompetence. If you really believe him, it seems nothing short of miraculous that the England team achieved all it did in that time.

Now the game must haul itself to its feet and move on. The management will be more aware of the one area that I believe Pietersen properly called out, namely the aggression handed out by the bowlers to fielders who make mistakes. While that is hardly bullying, it can be unpleasant and causes resentment. It is the sort of behaviour that if left unchecked, can quickly deteriorate and, after all, is usually counter-productive.

The England team could improve the image of the game considerably by winning. This year they have a World Cup (a place in the semi-finals would be considered a good result) followed by the Ashes, in which English supporters will be expecting nothing less than victory. I view that series against Australia as being absolutely crucial in the battle that the ECB faces in winning back its many disenfranchised supporters. The

board has had a rotten year in terms of its public relations, starting with the pompous statement that referred to the criticism of Pietersen's departure as coming from people 'outside cricket'. That observation rightly made a lot of cricket-lovers very angry – and not just those in Pietersen's camp. Fans who support England religiously and buy tickets every year suddenly found themselves wondering if they, too, were considered to be

outside cricket. The various leaks along the way, particularly the dossier containing Pietersen's alleged misdemeanours in Australia, made the ECB look petty and vindictive.

These scars will take a long time to heal. Not

as long as it will take for Pietersen to feel welcome again, but he does not appear to be bothered about that. The relationship between England cricket and its supporters must be at the top of the agenda for its new chief executive, Tom Harrison. A shrug of the shoulders and a 'they'll be back' approach will not do. The division runs far too deep for that.

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