

Physically and Mentally

Nathan Bracken's rise to the top has been far from smooth: a serious knee injury hampered him last season, and many said he'd never be good enough to succeed.

1. INJURY

"Since the start of my Cricket Australia contract in 2005 I haven't missed a game through injury. I've had a couple of shoulder ops, and ankle ops, but in terms of pain and discomfort, the knee injury is the worst."

Bracken played with a knee injury for 15 months. "When we first had the scan done, we were told it was bone bruising. But when I had the op, they saw it was a chunk of cartilage that had come loose," he says. "It was hanging on by a thread. The thing that saved me was that little thread of cartilage – it was stopping [the knee] from coming out. If that happened, it would have been career done and dusted."

2. MOTIVATION

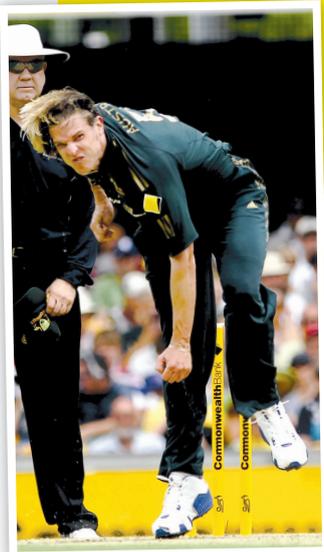
"Cricket is what we do for a living. It is a game, but it's also a job. There are obviously negatives – being away from my family – but through the tough times I think, 'Well, I could be working at an office job, or in a gym'."

"I do look at a lot of negative things. I do worry, and I do stress about things I probably don't need to. A lot to do with my job, but a lot of things in general that I probably don't need to deal with. For example, I'm probably too sensitive to some things. There are some things I was told when I was

young that still motivate me – I was told I wasn't good enough and I'd never be a top-quality cricketer."

3. TECHNIQUE

"I was lucky when I first started with the Australian team – we had a trainer on full time, but it's now to the point where we're doing testing and using that information to have individual programs, and find out how a player generates his pace. Mine might come from my shoulder, but someone else's might be the way they twist or the power through from the back leg."



CALCULATE YOUR FEELINGS

Today, you can even give a number to how you feel. Players are asked by physios how they're going – no casual question.

"It starts after the game: he'll come round and ask you how you rated that game – zero being best, and 10 being the hardest thing in the world. Some guys might play a game, bowl six overs, and come back and say, 'I was flat, I was tired, everything hurt – I give it an eight'."

"That all gets graphed – it's called the 'perceived rate of exertion'. As that gets higher, so your chances of injury increase. If a perceived rate of exertion keeps going up, you can sustain that for three weeks, then you have to have a rest. We use it to try to minimise the guys getting injured; guys breaking down. There's a pattern – the more work you do and more tired you feel, the more chance of injury."

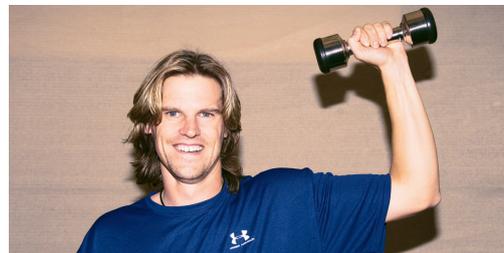
"Last year during the Commonwealth Bank series, my indicators went up every week, and each game was an eight – I was sore, I was tired, my knee was painful. I got asked, 'How are you feeling?'; but I said, 'I'm right to go.'"

THE WORKOUT

Bracken's workouts are a combination of strength, rehab and exercises that warm him up and help protect him from possible injury – what he calls prehab. Everything is designed to maintain him as a strong, dynamic, fit, explosive and modern cricketer. "For fast bowlers it's about producing as much power as humanly possible, as often as possible," he says.



PREHAB



ROTATOR CUFF We use that to protect our shoulder. A lot of throwing, bowling, even batting uses your shoulders. It's about getting all the stabilising muscles as strong as possible. We look at between 2-4kg and doing three sets of 10. It's all about being controlled – lock your shoulder right in, keep good posture and don't slouch over.



BALL PRESS-UP It's a good chest exercise, but it also gets all your stabilising muscles going. For us it's about generating force, and control. If I use more force with one arm than the other, I fall off the ball. We would do about eight, but as soon as your form starts to go, that's it. Stop. Keep flat and move through the range of movement.

ACTIVE STRETCHING



SIDE STRETCH It's my right side that gets a lot of pull – but if you're loose on one side but not the other, it counterbalances, so it's about balance. You can move your hips forward and backward if you're stiffer at the back. Lift with your hand, and push your hip into the ground, so that will open up in between your ribs and your hips. Stay as straight as you can and don't collapse into it. If it gets painful, stop. Then hold for 30 seconds.



HAMSTRING CATCH It's the active stretch of getting your hamstring warm. Get your leg moving, get the blood flowing, then get the stretch. You're going from a bent position to a straight one. It's almost like you're holding your leg there but trying to kick a soccer ball – a flicking motion. Make the movement quick and explosive; simulate running.



LUMBAR STRETCH It's key for the bowlers. It's about keeping your glutes and lower back nice and loose. And your hamstrings as well – they all contribute. Get the opposite knee on the ground and keep your shoulders flat, and hold it for about 30 seconds. Some guys, if they're really stiff, will do their active stretches for half an hour.

When you're playing one-day cricket, it's two matches a week

MONDAY

8 OR 9AM Wake up. Have a stretch, get off to the airport to fly.
2PM Arrive at the new hotel.
2.30PM A recovery swim, stretch and rehab. Then exercise and stretching for 35-40 mins.
3.30PM Physio and massages; I like a one-hour massage after the event.
EVENING We're pretty much left to our own devices at night.

TUESDAY

8AM I'm up about 8am every morning.
9.30AM It'll either be a weights session or a fitness session in the morning, then swap around.
1PM Lunch. Usually a sandwich.
2PM A walk and a stretch. Nothing with a bat or a ball on a Tuesday.
9PM If I'm feeling flat and tired, I'll have an early night. If I've got my family with me, it'll be a bit different.

