



# REUTERS

Five years after Wellington, Lawrence plans comeback

By Gideon Long

LONDON, Feb 4 (Reuters) - When England start the second test in Wellington on Thursday, one man back home could be forgiven for brooding on a few painful memories and indulging in a little self-pity.

But self-pity is not David Lawrence's style.

Five years after he shattered his left kneecap on England's last tour of New Zealand, the big fast bowler is staging an ambitious bid to return to first-class cricket.

Aged 33, he is back in serious training and is negotiating to play for Gloucestershire when the English season starts in April.

"I'll be watching the Wellington test but I'd rather think about next season than dwell on the past," he said in an interview. "That's all over now. What happened, happened."

What happened was an injury, the details of which still send shivers down the spine as Lawrence retells them.

It was the final day of the 1992 test series. Lawrence charged in to bowl, slammed his leading leg down onto the bowling crease and then collapsed in agony, bellowing with pain.

His kneecap, which specialists later said may have been carrying tiny undetected stress fractures, had cracked in half like an egg. A gap of up to two cm separated the two parts of the shattered patella.

Eight months later, Lawrence was back in the gymnasium taking his first tentative steps towards recovery.

"I never had any doubts I would be back," he says with characteristic ebullience. "As far as I was concerned it was just an injury and I got on with it."

But in 1993, little more than a year after the agony of Wellington, disaster struck again.

"I was doing leg extensions in the gym and I felt my knee snap. I knew something had happened but it was nothing like as painful as in New Zealand and I just ignored it and got into the car.

"It was only when I went to see the specialist and had an X-ray on it that we knew it had gone again."

This time there appeared to be no way back and Lawrence turned away from professional cricket, opening a restaurant in Bristol, just down the road from his home town of Gloucester in south-west England.

But he kept in touch with the sport at a local level, rapping the knuckles of several unsuspecting batsmen in the Devon League and appearing in a few charity games.

Now, after a number of encouraging performances last season, he feels the time is right to re-launch his professional career.

"I played against a few first-class cricketers last summer and it went well and I thought, 'hey, why not'.

"I'm working out four days a week -- mostly strength training and aerobics -- and I'm incorporating cricket training into my schedule to try to get an idea of how the leg will react."

Lawrence's knee still hurts and probably always will.

"You've got to remember there are still pins and wires in there," he says. "On cold days it stiffens up and I can feel it but it's nothing I can't live with."

David Lawrence is a big man. At 115 kg he looks more like a heavyweight boxer than a cricketer and his bowling action back in the early 1990s was strictly about power rather than finesse.

Indeed, his weight, which he intends to trim back before next season, may have been in part to blame for his freak injury. One theory is his patella simply buckled under the strain of supporting his huge frame as he bowled.

But Lawrence says he has no intention of experimenting with his delivery style for the sake of his knee.

"I bowl one way and that's it," he said emphatically. "However you bowl you have to transfer your body weight through the knee. It's unavoidable.

"The only way to relieve the pressure on it would be to trim down to nine stone (58 kg) and bowl seamers and I can't see that happening somehow."

"But I'm still as fast as I was. I will frighten a few people I can guarantee you."

The idea is to play in around half of Gloucestershire's championship fixtures next season, opting for matches on pitches which suit him and taking it easy between games.

It is an ambitious project for a man with a suspect knee, and one which, as specialists have told him time and time again, could potentially end in tears, acute pain and another chronic injury.

But Lawrence is undeterred.

"It's not important what people say," he said. "People with cancer are told they have six months to live and they go on to live for six years. You can't always listen to what people tell you.

"I'm over 18 now. I know how to look after myself."

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