



PITCH PERFECT

She's among the world's top female cricketers at a time when Australian women's sport is reaching a new zenith, yet Ellyse Perry can walk around the streets almost completely unrecognised.

STORY BY *Konrad Marshall* PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Kristoffer Paulsen*

IT'S JUST past noon on a dark, damp winter Wednesday in Melbourne when Ellyse Perry – possibly the greatest female cricket player in the world – pulls up next to me with a gritty little skid. “Nice wheels,” she says, smiling and nodding at my old pushie, while sitting atop a brand new gravel bike by Giant. “I didn’t bring my rain jacket,” she adds, glancing up into the grey. “We’d better get moving.”

And so we do, bound for cricket practice and a chat, rolling down the inner-eastern Windsor street she temporarily calls home. It’s lined with paperbark trees shaped like broccoli bunches, and narrow terrace homes with pretty iron lace fronts. Rain falls in thin curtains, and the cloud cover is so swollen that the sky looks like one big soggy doona.

It doesn’t really make sense but Perry – who has blonde hair and blue-green eyes, who smiles with an easy gleam, and who is most recognisable when wearing a bright yellow uniform and a thick smear of white zinc cream across her nose – looks, somehow, precisely the part in this sodden city streetscape. Perhaps it’s the navy shorts, dark hoodie and black helmet, or the way she assuredly tears along this wet cul de sac, ripping through that roundabout, shooting down into that graffitied underpass, over the rotting leaves on the edge of a muddy park and into the entrance of Junction Oval. This is her training base before heading to London where, as the most gifted all-rounder in our world-beating, top-ranked national women’s cricket team, Perry is a pivotal prong in this month’s multi-format battle against England to retain The Ashes.

Sitting down with her at the Junction Oval, near the nets before a session, Perry, 28, says she actually doesn’t mind a rainy, Victorian winter. She’s been in town for four months – moving south from her home in Sydney’s Chatswood to be with her husband of four years, rugby

union player Matt To’omua, a Wallaby fly-half and new Melbourne Rebels recruit – and the city is growing on her. She’s been for long, cold rides along Port Phillip Bay by St Kilda, and up over the hills on the distant Mornington Peninsula, as part of her relaxation routine. A coffee nut, she also bikes to new cafes every week, including yesterday, when she was forced to leave her sleek wheels chained to a tree in Elwood, after a flat tyre.

But she’s long gone now, enveloped in an English summer, where you will see her on television screens, doing the thing she loves best. One of the simplest ways to divine the soul of any athlete is to ask them about that love – the moment, skill or move they enjoy most in their sport. And so it proves with Perry. When it comes to bowling, I expect her to say something about knocking over middle stump, or crafting an intimidating spell in which her opponent is pinned down, pushed back and controlled by fastidious line and length.

What Perry actually adores, however, is a fleeting, kinetic experience. Her joy is that split second when delivering a rocket, her body turning sideways, heel firmly planted, calf extending, the ball leaving her fingertips exactly as intended, in perfect seaming position. What happens at the other end of the pitch is important but largely irrelevant to that feeling, because Perry refuses to focus on outcomes – only processes.

It’s the same with her batting. I was hoping to hear her gush over a sweetly struck hook shot, or that moment of fulsome connection when a cover drive is creamed through a gap for four. But she doesn’t say anything about vision or timing or the giddy absence of feeling when the ball hits the fat of the bat. “I guess it’s about fluency,” she says, her gaze drifting to the practice nets. Her voice has a warm, scratchy quality and her speech is laconic, but she’s grasping at a clear idea. “When you’re hitting the ball well, there’s this

feeling like your whole body is moving together. Your feet, your arms, your hips and shoulders are all in sync, all working in one straight line, nothing out of place. Knowing that you’ll play the one shot you’re supposed to play to that ball – that’s what I love.”

THIS KIND of straightforward single-mindedness is perhaps what’s made Perry the cricket star she is today. That, and abundant natural ability. In 2018, she was named the world’s best player, heading an inaugural top 20 list which *The Guardian* asked a 15-strong expert panel to compile. It’s easy enough to see exactly why and how that happened.

She grew up in a sporty Sydney home, with a GP mother who once swam and played senior club netball, and a high school maths teacher father who played squash for Australia and top grade cricket, too, as an all-rounder for Sydney University. Mark Perry knew his daughter had talent long before she began starring in sport as a teenager in West Pymble, or even as a pre-teen in South Wahroonga, but further back at their first family home in Thornleigh, when she was only three years old.

“Ellyse was riding a scooter, and she picked up this tennis racquet,” he recalls. “She asked me to throw her a ball, and she hit this tennis ball right over the top of the shed. I just thought, ‘Huh, that’s handy.’” She took naturally to sport but was the only girl on her first soccer team (the Beecroft Wombats) and in her first cricket team (at Oakhill Cricket Club). At first, her bobbing golden ponytail stood out as much as her talent, but she grew. There were constant driveway cricket battles against her big brother, Damian, three years her senior, and most afternoons were spent at the park with her dad, practising drives, cuts and pulls. Sport quickly came to dominate her weekends, then



weeknights, and soon she was playing in state representative matches, meaning constant travel and 5.30am starts.

Australian teammate Alyssa Healy first met Perry when they were nine, at one such tournament in Cobram-Barooga, a Murray River town on the NSW-Victoria border. Perry was tiny, and looked funny in baggy clothes, so Healy called her “Dags”, and still does. “We were two little tomboys who just wanted to play outside, and had to be called back in every night after the sun went out,” says Healy. “But even then, she was technically correct. Skilled.” Sport then was seemingly never hard work, or a sacrifice, but rather an enthusiastic choice. “If someone’s going to make it in sport, they’ve gotta love it. All of it,” says her father Mark. “The motivation’s gotta be intrinsic, and it was with her.”

Still, extrinsic acknowledgement wasn’t far away. In 2007, when she was just 16, Perry became the youngest cricketer to represent Australia, male or female, scoring 19 runs off 20 balls in a one-day international against New Zealand. A fortnight later, she debuted for the Australian women’s soccer team, the Matildas, in an Olympic qualifier against Hong Kong, and scored a looping goal two minutes into the match. Her career in the dozen years since has not dipped or wavered but ascended anew.

In 2010, she helped steer the national side to victory in the Women’s T20 World Cup. A year later, in a 2011 FIFA Women’s World Cup quarter-final against Sweden, she curled a long-range strike on her non-preferred left foot that Socceroo legend Craig Foster described as one of the best Australian goals in World Cup history, by either a man or a woman. At the ripe old age of 20, Perry had become an international dual sport champion.

Her profile rose, and she continued scoring runs in cricket, and goals in soccer, balancing the commitments of both sports, making headlines that reflected her rise. *Peerless Perry, Ellyse the incredible, The ultimate role model and Australian sport’s pitch-perfect poster girl.* In 2013, her versatile brilliance saw her named by *SportsPro* magazine as the 36th most marketable athlete in the world. (She was the solitary Australian on the list, and the only other cricketer was Indian captain and megastar Virat Kohli.) She became a commodity, with sponsors such as Toyota, Jockey, Red Bull and Microsoft clamouring for her ambassadorship. These days the sponsors in her stable are Adidas, Fox Sports, Commonwealth Bank and watchmaker Hublot.

It led her into situations like the one she’s in now: an evening photo shoot in the grandstand of a suburban oval, trying on outfits supplied by a stylist, putting so a make-up artist can touch up her lipstick. They don’t need to do much with her hair; it has its own perpetual windblown lift. The photographer issues his instructions: “Turn that foot”, “Look to me”, “Pull those sleeves up”, “Let’s try one with the hood” and “Make it look like you own the place” – and Perry looks like she’s done this before. “Yeah, here and there,” she says, grinning ruefully. “You could say I’ve done a few.”

When she decided to focus solely on cricket, her first love, in 2014, even more seminal moments came and went. In the 2015 Ashes series, she topped both teams for runs (264) and wickets (16) and was named Player of the Series. In 2016, *Wisden* named her the leading woman cricketer in the world, after a season in which she scored 17 half-centuries in 23 one-day international innings – the best such streak for any cricketer, man or woman, ever. In 2017, she scored a

Below: Ellyse Perry with husband Matt To’omua.

defining 213 not out against England in an Ashes Test in front of her home crowd at North Sydney Oval. And for good measure she was named the International Cricket Council’s Women’s Cricketer of the Year.

Perry became a grand stage performer, with nary a misstep or hiccup along the way. “Pressure can do terrible things to you,” says her father. “You can just fold under it. Collapse, really. Or you can embrace it. I think she just prepares, prepares, prepares, so she can embrace those expectations.”

Ben Sawyer has worked with Perry for almost a decade, in coaching roles with state team the NSW Breakers, Women’s Big Bash League (WBBL) side Sydney Sixers and the Australian team as an assistant, and remembers her as the most mature 19-year-old he ever met. “There’s no surprises with Pez. None. What you see is what you get,” he says. “Every time I get asked about her, I say the same thing I’ve said a million times: the most successful people in the world make their own luck, and that’s what she does.”

If a gauntlet was ever thrown down it was two years ago, when the Australian selectors wanted Perry to increase her strike rate, embracing risk for the sake of runs, instead of batting so conservatively. “She does put a high value on her wicket,” says Sawyer. “The challenge was to let go of that.”

Naturally she rose to it, using the WBBL as her playground, casually topping the batting table last season, shedding her own self-made shackles and slashing her way to 777 runs. “That was amazing, but not surprising,” says Healy. “She’s carried the weight of female sport on her shoulders for a long time. But it never shows. You never see it.”

TODAY, MELBOURNE adds another doozy to its catalogue of grim mornings, and we take a walk. The wind is gusty, cold and annoying, and a train rumbles past while a tram dings. Perry moves at a brisk clip, leaping over a slippery railway footbridge and onto the hip end of Chapel Street, a shopping stretch in the inner eastern suburbs made trendy by vintage boutiques and hawkers. It’s vastly different, she says, to her suburban upbringing, and that was a conscious choice. She moved into an apartment in this busy urban precinct to be in the thick of things for once. She tells me this as we walk past a young woman wailing in the gutter while a handful of police open the door of their divvy van.

“You never know what you’re going to see here,” Perry says. “I come down here sometimes at 7am, and even then you have such a mix of people: walking dogs and pushing prams but also people staggering home after a big night out.”

We stroll for a kilometre or so and settle into the back booth of the cafe where she buys her coffee beans. She orders a long black and a bowl of bircher muesli, and the thing I realise – which has been clear the whole time we’ve been walking and talking – is how few people, none in fact, notice her. Despite her stature in sport, she goes utterly unrecognised, without a single fawning hello or selfie request.

Make no mistake, this is odd. Were the beloved tennis champion Ash Barty to walk in here, or the risen soccer star Sam Kerr, or the bombastic basketballer Liz Cambage, heads would turn. With Perry, however, I almost expected such anonymity. There’s something generic about her celebrity. Approaching this story I conducted a thoroughly unscientific survey, asking five random people in my office “Who is Ellyse Perry?” Four didn’t know, and the fifth offered a

hesitant reply: “Is she ... a cricketer?” I did the same thing with five strangers on the street; her name was not familiar. Do fans ever stop her in public? “Every now and then, I guess,” she says, straining to remember. “But not really, no.” I imagine that is a double-edged sword: Perry can live her life without being hounded into seclusion, but it’s also a potentially worrying sign about the profile of women’s cricket as a mainstream sport. “Mainstream is an interesting word,” she replies, sipping her coffee. “We consume sport really differently today than we did even five years ago. There are so many leagues in so many sports. ‘Mainstream’ is broader than it’s ever been.”

What about the wage gap? A new pay deal struck with Cricket Australia in 2017 was hailed for raising the minimum retainer for female Australian representative players to \$87,000. Men in the same position will receive \$313,000. In soccer, the disparity is scandalous. (The Socceros were reportedly paid about \$8 million in total for a 2018 World Cup performance in Russia that included three straight losses and a plane ticket home. If the Matildas had won their entire 2019 World Cup tournament in France, they would have received half as much.) Is it frustrating, putting a positive spin on sluggish, incremental gains?

Perry pauses, starts to speak, then puts down her spoon. “Honestly,” she says, “direct monetary comparisons aren’t helpful. If you’re going to look at remuneration, you have to be realistic about what revenue we’re bringing in for the organisation and the sport. And as it currently stands, women’s cricket is still a cost to the business. That doesn’t mean I don’t think there’s a huge role for Cricket Australia to play in investing in women’s sport, and other sporting organisations to do the same. But maybe we need to focus on getting more women involved, not just as athletes but as managers, coaches, volunteers and, most importantly, fans. If we’re going to make money for the business, we need all of those parts in place. It’s a bit of a chicken-and-egg scenario.”

I’m surprised to find her so forthright – in particular offering a view that might enrage at least a few members of the sporting sisterhood. If there’s one criticism of Perry that recurs regularly it’s that, well, there’s nothing to criticise. She’s neither controversial nor a crusader. The cricket scribes I consulted about her before our interviews variously said, “She doesn’t give you much” or “There’s not much to give”. Another was blunter still, noting that some athletes have hidden depths but Perry perhaps has “hidden shallows”, which was not meant as a slight but a reminder that the narrative arc of her life is blissfully undramatic. *She is what she does – she just does it exceptionally well.* (A recent satirical autobiography of hers was titled *Perry-faction*.) Basically, if Ellyse Perry were a movie script, the plot would lack a dramatic middle – there’s no turmoil transcended or hardship endured – and she happily admits as much. “Everything I’ve experienced has been positive, and keeps getting better, too, so for me it’s not worth whingeing,” she says, shrugging. “It’s worth cracking on with what you’re doing.”

Her opinionated pragmatism continues. “I would argue,” she says, digging into a grape on top of that bircher bowl, “that by and large the coverage of women’s sport is incredibly positive. In a lot of ways it’s flattering. It’s good news and I love reading positive stories, but what happens in male sport – and it comes with the territory – is that they get heavily criticised. For everything. In so many ways. In media, online, from people in the street. They deal with things that female athletes just don’t have to worry about yet.” Will that be a sign of progress, when she gets raked over the coals for a bad innings? “It really will!” she says, laughing. “Because it’ll show that people care.”

On cricket issues people care about, I’m curious to know how she reacted to #sandpapergate. Perry was on tour in India when news from South Africa broke that Australian players had been caught ball-tampering.



From left: Perry in action for the Matildas; batting and bowling for Australia. Below: Perry with cricket teammate Alyssa Healy.

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“It was an odd feeling. In Australia, people had this deep sense of ownership of the incident, even those who aren’t fans of cricket. But because we were abroad, we weren’t grasping the gravity of it all.” Was she disappointed in the culprits: Steve Smith, David Warner and Cameron Bancroft? “Everyone was, yeah. It was just a bit bizarre,” she says, shaking her head. “A bit hard to fathom. Just odd.”

Perry is herself known as a competitive beast, so I also wonder, given that the cheating in Cape Town was in part a consequence of the win-at-all-costs mentality within the men’s team, is she mindful of the team culture she wants to help create – as a veteran of the women’s team? Again, her response is uniquely her own. “There’s two extremes in male sport: there’s complete and total worship of them, or complete and utter contempt. Those extremes create huge problems at either end. And it creates distance, too, and leads them into a bubble,” she says. “And that doesn’t quite exist in women’s sport, where there’s a better sense of connectedness to society. And so with the girls you have this open group of athletes who are a little bit raw, but genuine, and happy to display themselves and their personalities and emotions in a really good way. That’s our culture.”

So no need for “Elite Honesty” – the much-derided cultural catchphrase seen adorning the change room walls of the Australian men’s team? “We have our own set of values, personal to us,” says Perry, playing the straight bat. (These values include “Team first always”, “Informed and accountable”, and “Fearless”.)

“Fearless” is the one that stands out for me,” Perry says. “It just means taking the attacking option, or the option that you’re scared of. Listen to any interview with any player from the team now and they always mention ‘fearless’ – it clearly had cut through.”

Heading back down the footpath, dancing around puddles and dodging leaky down spouts, I ask if she’s sick of being a spokesperson for all things sport and women. It must get tiring. “I actually think it’s funny how that has evolved,” she says, pulling a peach hoodie over her ears. “A while ago, those questions about pay rates, or ‘Does it upset you that you can’t be a full-time professional?’ were literally the only questions you got. And it just perpetuated the issues, because you weren’t able to highlight the game. That’s changing though, into ‘How great is women’s sport going?’ The next step is, ‘Can you talk to us about that last innings?’ Hopefully we’re almost at a point where women’s sport is, just, sport.”

THE FLUORESCENT-lit training facility back at Junction Oval feels like a warehouse. We’re indoors but the Cricket Victoria training headquarters just south-east of the Melbourne CBD is not heated, and Perry is padding up for a session in the nets. First the right pad, then the left one. Always right then left. She does the same thing with shoes. And socks. And sleeves. With everything. “I do that without even thinking about it now,” says Perry. “Things just go on the right side of the body first.” It seems like the only quirk in an otherwise completely unquirky person, but Alyssa Healy points out at least one more serious superstition: “She’ll wear every piece of equipment until it dies. And rots,” Healy says. “Honestly, she’s got the smelliest kit in the room. Her helmet is basically bone white – bleached by age.”



Perry strides out onto lane two in the nets, a stripe of yellow artificial turf within a wide green carpet. A coach sends a bouncer at her head, and she dips and ducks by bending her whole body, and he yells, “Well watched, Pez! Well watched!”

A teammate, Molly Strano, 26, bowls next. Strano talks Perry through the imaginary fielders she needs to avoid, in the beautifully bizarre language of their sport: “I’m gonna have a straight mid wicket, long off, slip 45, and a ring for four.” She sends down ball after ball but the deliveries don’t seem to trouble Perry. This doesn’t surprise Strano, who describes Perry as a frightening amalgam of discipline and prowess. “It’s difficult to articulate how hard a batswoman she is to bowl against,” Strano sighs. “Pez is ... daunting. Just daunting.”

Even to the untrained eye she has that enviable mix of substance and style. When blocking, her posture swiftly lifts – elbow high, body straight, all in upright

alignment – and she holds the pose for a moment, fixed in space like some baroque Bernini sculpture in relief. And when she hits the thing, lashing out with her blade, it stays hit. Perry belts one straight at me, and although I’m safe behind the net the velocity is not welcoming.

That comes from natural ability, of course, but also attention to detail. Most athletes have some part of their work that they hate. Ice baths. Team meetings. The gym. Perry says she has the “occasional wavering motivation day”, but that’s all. She loves the gym. Loves it. She has some great guns, too, but weights for her are more about meditation and improvement. “You just focus on yourself the whole time you’re in there, concentrating on what movements you’re doing. It’s an introspective headspace. And it’s going to make you better at what you do. And it’s measurable; your progress is absolute.”

The work also keeps her energy levels high, which is crucial when considering her exhausting schedule. After the Ashes in England, it’s back home to Melbourne briefly before heading to the West Indies for a tour in August. Then she’s home again for a September series against Sri Lanka. In October, the WBBL starts again, meaning she’ll head up to Sydney to play for the Sixers. State-level cricket will beckon early in the approaching summer, then in February, a T20 World Cup tournament on home soil.

I need a nap just reciting her calendar, but it’s a dream for Perry. Not the travel or even the challenge, but the games and what comes after. In the photos that are taken of Perry for this story, she seems most at home in the change rooms, leaning back into one of the wooden nooks they use as lockers, surrounded by strips of Elastoplast and tubs of Peak Whey Protein Isolate. After any training session or match, if she isn’t lingering on the field, flinging balls at anyone who needs extra practice, then she’s in here, hanging back, shooting the shit. She might be the polite, infallible, unknowable, unrelentingly modest yet Perry-fect automaton of Australian women’s sport, but she’s happiest in the stink of the locker room, amid mud and sweat and baskets of gear covered in grass stains.

“Being together on the field as a group, operating as a team, making important plays is a great thing,” she says, pausing. “But, without a doubt, my favourite thing? It’s sitting in a change room like this after a match. There’s no time frame on how long you’ll sit there. There’s no formality. You’re just enjoying each other’s company, thinking about cricket.” ■

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