

The next big thing

A bright future beckons for **Isa Guha** – the commentator shaking up cricket’s old boys’ club

Cricket: the Ashes, Fourth Test

From Wednesday 10.25am **Radio 4 LW/5 Live Sports Extra**

FACED WITH A challenge, Isa Guha approaches it in much the same way that she ran towards the crease in her days as a right-arm, medium-fast bowler: at full tilt. She’s been doing it her whole life.

Whether it was as the only girl on the colts’ team at her local club, the first woman of South Asian descent to play for England, winning the World Cup, completing a Master of Philosophy in neuroscience or learning the subtle art of cricket commentary, she always wants “the next thing”.

“With anything in life, you have to be taken out of your comfort zone,” she says. “It’s like a

‘I’d love to get to the point where we don’t talk about gender’

magnet for me to go somewhere I haven’t been before and to be constantly challenged.”

We’re at the home of cricket, Lord’s, as England’s men take on Australia in the Second Test. Guha is taking a break between commentary shifts for the BBC’s *Test Match Special*. The talk – aside from Steve Smith’s batting and Jofra Archer’s bowling – is that the next thing for Guha, 34, might be to replace David Gower as lead anchor on Sky Sports Cricket, for which she has done ball-by-ball commentary since 2018. Understandably, she deflects the question. As does the former England batsman when I ask him for a comment. “I’d rather not, sorry,” he says, amiably.

It’s easy to see why Guha has risen to sit alongside names such as Michael Atherton, Nasser Hussain, Jonathan

Agnew and Phil Tufnell. She is composed, amusing, eloquent and exudes expertise. As we chat, the TV shows a review of the umpire’s decision not to give an Australian batsman out LBW. “He’s gone,” Guha says, matter-of-factly, and she is, of course, spot on.

Her cricketing life began with High Wycombe, in Buckinghamshire, and she went on to play for Thames Valley, nipping out to join her dad in the car to listen to *Test Match Special*.

“It would have been Darren Gough bowling,” she says. “He was my hero. I’ve always been inspired by characters like Gough. It’s quite an Australian mentality to think you’re never out of the game. But he had that, the personality to make something happen on the pitch – that’s what I always wanted to do.”

Guha made her international debut in 2002 and played for England 113 times. She was in 2009’s World Cup-winning squad and the triumphant Ashes sides of 2005, 2008 and 2009.

After England’s men won the Ashes in 2005, they drove through London on an open-topped bus. Trailing behind them were the victorious England women’s team.

Guha remembers someone shouted: “Are you the Wags?”

Back then, she found the reception amusing.



FULL TILT
Isa Guha bowling for England in 2008

Edited by
JANE ANDERSON



PHOTOGRAPHED
EXCLUSIVELY
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MARK JOHNSON

“It was an incredible time,” she says. “My thought process was, ‘How good is it that we’re here with the guys?’ It just felt very privileged. Whereas now I’d be like, well, no, the women are there on merit – they *should* be there with the guys.”

Since retiring in 2012, Isa – pronounced “Eesha” – has become a familiar voice in broadcasting, not least on *TMS*, the radio institution that once had a reputation as being the preserve of overgrown public schoolboys. She’s young for a cricket commentator, but what rarely passes without mention is her being a woman. Not the only one, she’s always quick to point out, citing fellow pioneers such as Alison Mitchell and the Australian Melanie Jones. Yet they’re invariably still seen not as commentators, but as *female* commentators. “I’d love to get to the point where we’re not talking about the gender issue,” she says. “It’s about how good you are.”

FORMER AUSTRALIAN SPINNER and fellow commentator Shane Warne has been crucial in building Guha’s confidence, and he tells me that she’s up there with the best. “She’s so bloody good at it,” he says. “She can see why something is happening and she will also pick up things about the tactical side of the game.”

Guha is eager to help girls progress in the game, particularly those from an Indian background – one of many values she says she inherited from her mother and role model, Roma, who moved here from Calcutta (now Kolkata) with her husband Barun in the 1970s, two weeks after their arranged marriage. “She was never fazed by anything,” Guha says. “She wanted to always put herself in challenging situations.”

Roma died, aged 65, from cancer in January, which came up on *TMS* after a poignant discussion about bereavement between Agnew, Andrew Strauss and Glenn McGrath. (On day two of the Test, many people wore red for the Ruth Strauss Foundation, in memory of Strauss’s late wife.) Guha’s composure cracked on air.

“It was emotional,” she admits, her eyes watering. “Days like that bring people together as everyone’s got their own battle. I do feel like two separate people at the moment – one that’s dealing with that and one in my work environment. I’m trying to get to the point where I’m one person. I think guys tend not to reveal what they’re feeling. But it’s something Rich [singer/songwriter Richard Thomas] is very good at. I’m super lucky to have him in my life.” They married last September, and she laughs when she recalls how little he knew about cricket before he met her. Now, she says, “He absolutely loves it.”

As Guha says goodbye, a head pops around the door. It’s one of Australia’s veteran cricket correspondents. “We love her in Australia, too!” he exclaims. “She knows her stuff. You have to or the boys will eat you alive.” Rest assured, that won’t happen to Isa Guha. **JACQUELINE FULLER**

DAVID CRAWFORD

PICK OF THE WEEK

Python at 50: the Self-Abasement Tapes Wednesday 11.00pm Radio 4

We at *Radio Times* were well prepared to pay tribute to the Pythons as they celebrate 50 years since the first broadcast of the *Flying Circus* on BBC1 (see page 40 for details of how to buy *RT’s* official *Monty Python at 50* bookazine). But the BBC are no slouches themselves. In the run-up to the official anniversary on 5 October, Radio 4 offers up this five-part appetiser in which Michael Palin (below) is to be found in a sewer beneath Johnson’s Pâtisserie on London’s Edgware Road, scrabbling around in the effluent in search of some of *Python’s* great lost works.

Today he unearths gems that have never before been broadcast – and when you hear the gloriously scabrous and profane sketch about the Fat Ignorant B*****s’ political convention in the USA, you’ll understand why they never went to air. The N-word is rightly bleeped, but what’s just as shocking is how relevant the sketch is to contemporary America’s political landscape.

We’re safely back to the absurd in a courtroom sketch with a hang-’em-high jury, a disinterested judge and two love-rival lawyers, while the country and western version of Terry Jones’s angsty song *I’m So Worried* – from the 1980 *Contractual Obligation* album – is an amusing diversion.

Palin presents his material with the silly, mock-serious air of classic *Python* BBC presenters – his updates on the fate of Johnson’s Pâtisserie are wonderful – and there’s a welcome appearance by Terry Gilliam at the close. There’s gold in them thar sewers.



AMBRIDGE DIARY

The Archers this week...

Pregnant Lexi is back, which is good news for Adam and Ian, who have been on tenterhooks. However, a night out for Ian’s birthday proves to be a little overwhelming for her. And when Roy makes a kind gesture later on in the week, Lexi finds herself in an uncomfortable position.

Emma continues to navigate her newly single life with an ever-attentive Tracy at her side, but things take a bizarre turn when Tracy makes a drastic decision that leaves her employers at Grey Gables baffled. And Kate digs herself a hole – unintentionally awakening Peggy’s mischievous side.

Plus Jim and Jazzer continue to be the show’s best double act as the Prof gets some help following an anxiety attack. **DAVID BROWN**