

THE HAMPSHIRE CRICKET SOCIETY

Patrons: John Woodcock Frank Bailey Shaun Udal

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A warm welcome is extended to Murray Hedgcock on his second visit to the Society. His previous appearance was at the Annual Buffet Supper at Basingstoke Sports Centre in December 1979.

Our speaker has spent over half of his life in London, but remains as Australian in his cricketing loyalty as he was when first old enough to learn about the game. Born in South Melbourne, whose local club has had more Australian Test captains play for it than any other, Murray grew up in Victorian country towns, as his father was a postmaster moving every few years in search of promotion. Like all Victorian schoolboys of the age, he played Aussie Rules in winter and cricket in summer. His cricket inspiration derived from his High School headmaster being Bill Woodfull. Later cricket opportunities were limited because his work as a journalist involved many weekend assignments. Immediately before coming to England in 1953, with the hope of seeing Lindsay Hassett's Australians in action, he played a few games for junior teams of the Newtown and Chilwell Club in Geelong – Hassett's first club.

In London he joined a team whose home ground was Wandsworth Common, and met the uncertainties of the English turf pitch – having played most of his cricket till then on artificial wickets.

Returning to Australia after two years, he played more country cricket before moving to Adelaide and joining the Murdoch organisation. In 1966 Murray was posted to the London office of the Murdoch Australian papers, arriving with his wife and four children. They settled at Mortlake in South London, and have lived there ever since. Murray wrote regularly on cricket for the national paper, The Australian, although he was never a full-time cricket correspondent.

He played some years with Sheen Park on the fringe of Richmond Park, but again weekend work meant too little cricket. He became an MCC member in 1971. He retired as a staff journalist in 1991, but writes cricket occasionally for various publications, and is the Australian Cricket Society delegate to the Council of Cricket Societies. He earned praise for his work as editor on "Wodehouse at the Wicket" – an anthology of the celebrated writer's references to cricket in his books.

HAMPSHIRE IN 2008

Hampshire's 2008 season must have been the most schizophrenic in their entire history. With five matches remaining, relegation to Division 2 of the County Championship seemed almost inevitable. However, the County

responded splendidly by winning four of those games to finish a creditable third – a quite amazing turnaround. Durham eventually emerged as popular winners, but the record books will show that Hampshire beat them twice, on both occasions when the County was in the doldrums.

Many of the early season's woes were self-inflicted. The lack of a quality spin bowler quickly became obvious, a fact emphasised by Shaun Udal filling his boots at Middlesex with wickets, catches, a Twenty20 Final triumph and, ultimately, the captaincy of his new team. With James Bruce's belated departure, the County decided that a fast bowler was a priority, and Shane Bond was signed as the overseas registration. The New Zealander is indisputably a highly penetrative quick bowler – indeed one of the best – but unfortunately and frustratingly possesses an unenviable injury record. He demonstrated his class as he took 7 for 66 on debut against Sussex at the Rose Bowl – the second best figures on debut for the County (little could it be imagined that this feat would be equalled later in the summer) but then broke down in the innings defeat in the next match at Headingley. He returned for the rain ruined fixture against Kent at Canterbury and was instrumental in Hampshire winning their first match of the season, at the Riverside, as he returned figures of 5 for 57 and 4 for 72. The 4 – run victory was a nail-biting affair and the first of two exciting encounters against Durham. That match marked the end of his contract. The County tried to cover the absence of an overseas player by the speculative signings of Nantie Hayward and Rory Kleinveldt – many thought Billy Taylor would have been a sounder option – but they were quickly cast aside as the County were comprehensively defeated in the following two matches at the Rose Bowl – on both occasions by six wickets – by Nottinghamshire and Lancashire. With the seemingly impending signing of the gifted Indian leg-spinner, Piyush Chawla, the team travelled to Arundel but were overwhelmed by ten wickets in a horribly listless performance. Only the heroic James Tomlinson, Liam Dawson (on his Championship debut), the wholehearted David Balcombe and Nic Pothas, could be exonerated. At this stage, the County were bottom of the table, having lost four of the first nine matches. Of the remaining five, one was won and four drawn. Kent – courtesy of yet another century against the County by Martin van Jaarsveld – were firmly in the driving seat in one of these.

The other three – against Sussex and Surrey at the Rose Bowl and Somerset at Taunton were fairly even. The County may well have won the encounter with Surrey had not Chris Tremlett succumbed to injury again. In the first innings he had responsibly lead the attack and been rewarded with figures of 5 for 67. Unfortunately, he never approached that level of performance with the ball again.

It was then announced that Chawla would be prevented from signing for the County by the BCCI as Hampshire had included ICL players – Bond and Pothas – during the season. Hampshire's plight now looked absolutely desperate.

The County then signed Imran Tahir. It was obviously a gamble as the Pakistani leg-spinner had previously experienced a difficult time on his

previous sojourns into county cricket with Middlesex and Yorkshire. However, both van Jaarsveld and Pothas had seen him play in South Africa and spoke highly of him. After so many ill-starred signings, Hampshire at last pulled off a masterstroke. However, his presence did not immediately produce a positive result. Despite emulating Bond's figures on debut, at Old Trafford, the County mystifyingly finished 10 runs short with three wickets in hand after batting for the majority of the fourth day. If it had been a horse race there would have been a Steward's Enquiry. It seemed to the vast majority of their supporters that the County had frittered away ten priceless points in their battle to avoid relegation. Only the ultimate optimist could have ever envisaged that those points were almost to have a bearing on the Championship title.

Imran again proved his ability by taking 5 for 96 in another rain affected match at Canterbury. It was clear that, with James Tomlinson continuing to take wickets, the County's bowling potency had increased significantly. That power would be increased several fold if Dimi Mascarenhas and Tremlett, both seemingly affected by their England travails, were able to hit the straps. The batting, though, continued to remain fragile, but that factor applied virtually to every side in the Championship.

THE RUN IN

Hampshire were vying with Yorkshire for the second relegation slot when the latter came to the Rose Bowl at the start of August. The first two days were shaded by the visitors as Jacques Rudolph held their innings together in helpful bowling conditions, enabling them to reach 236. Hampshire tied with that total. At one stage they looked to be heading for a healthy first innings lead, but Adil Rashid in a joyous display of leg-spin bowling, induced a collapse. On the third morning, the visitors rushed to 45 off just 9 overs. However, Tahir, not to be outdone by Rashid's mesmerism of the previous day, then induced uncertainty in the Yorkshire ranks, taking wickets with the last two balls of his first over. Tomlinson, who had figures of 5 for 53 in the first innings, promptly swung the balance irrevocably towards Hampshire by dismissing four batsmen in 16 balls. David Balcombe administered the coup de grace (two wickets in seven balls) as Yorkshire subsided to 107 all out just after lunch. Carberry and Brown batted so positively that they knocked off the runs together before tea. It had been a remarkable two sessions of play, and a performance which must have uplifted the team.

It was at this juncture that Paul Terry's impending departure was announced. The real story behind his parting must await the fullness of time.

The next match, against Somerset, was ruined by early autumnal rain and cloud. The equivalent of a full day's play was lost. The West Country team, seeking their first Championship title, enjoyed a manifest advantage on first innings (436 – 316), thanks to the classy stroke play of Marcus Trescothick, the aggression of Peter Trego and a mature, calm and controlled display by Ian Blackwell (129). By now, the sun was shining, conditions favoured the batsmen and Hampshire achieved a creditable draw comfortably, Lumb and Carberry confirming their return to form with an unbroken second wicket partnership of 170. Lumb had made his maiden first-class century for

Hampshire in the first innings. The Somerset bowling attack, apart from Andrew Caddick, looked threadbare throughout the match and it was no surprise that they fell by the wayside at the season's end.

The match against Durham, played at Basingstoke, will endure in the memory for many years. It ebbed and flowed from the first over but the County eventually emerged victors by two wickets just after lunch on the third day, after all hope looked lost in the hour after tea on the preceding day. Mascarenhas recaptured his verve on the first morning; the two T's (Tahir and Tomlinson) continued to bowl well in tandem, admirably supported by Balcombe. Sean Ervine then played the innings of his life to steer his team home.

Throughout the run-in, Hampshire enjoyed a gap of a full week between Championship matches; indeed the intervening period following the next match against Surrey at The Oval and the final match at Trent Bridge was a fortnight. These breaks in play, however, did not disturb the County's momentum. A very poor Surrey side were duly brushed aside by an innings. After the omnipresent rain had curtailed the first day, Hampshire wobbled briefly on the second morning when they were four wickets down for 125. Lumb (72) and Pothas then steadied the ship, before the latter, Dawson (36) in a sumptuous cameo, and Mascarenhas took the County to their highest score of the season – 480 for 8 declared. The Hampshire wicket-keeper had endured a torrid time with the bat since his match-saving century at Canterbury but he now played a wonderfully authoritative innings. He and his captain plundered 165 in 30 overs, a record seventh wicket partnership for the County against their opponents. Mascarenhas was at his impudent and outrageous best. He fed avidly off any ball short of a length by pulling, cutting and hooking with considerable power. He also indulged in wristy glances and steers behind the wicket, on virtually every occasion fine of the fielder. He missed his much deserved century when he paddled to Jon Batty when on 99, made off only 114 deliveries. Pothas and Mascarenhas have always batted well together and they must now be regarded as one of the great Hampshire "pairs". The former finished on 137 not out. Subsequently, only Scott Newman and Mark Ramporakash made any headway against Tahir (4 for 29 off 22 overs) in the first innings. Mascarenhas invoked the follow on and immediately destroyed the top order (four for 13) himself.

And so to Trent Bridge. The first day's play was a turgid affair. On a dreadfully slow, green wicket of uneven bounce and under cloud cover which helped the ball swing alarmingly, the Hampshire batsmen had no option but to grit their teeth and grind out an innings. Pothas (44) and Mascarenhas (41) top scored in an all out total of 201, which took the best part of a full day's play. The difficulty of the conditions was demonstrated by the latter taking two and a half hours to score his runs. In their reply, Nottinghamshire were similarly in trouble early on at 56 for 3 but then Samit Patel demonstrated his burgeoning class with a fluent 70. He was the only batsman up to that point able to hit the ball off the square. However, upon his dismissal, Imran Tahir stopped the innings in its tracks, as he bamboozled the late order. Three batsmen failed to read his googly; the other had no answer to his flipper. He

finished with 4 for 55. Tomlinson, continuing his priceless ability to take wickets throughout the season, took 3 for 56.

Hampshire, facing a deficit of only 10, batted much more positively second time around. The wicket was still difficult. The County were initially indebted to Michael Brown in particular. He batted with great skill and intelligence and reached his half century just before close of play. After losing Lumb early on, he continued to prosper next morning and was eventually dismissed – leg before – just before lunch for 93. It was an innings of the highest merit. Chris Benham (66) also batted sensibly and attractively.

In the final session, Pothas, again, adopted a cussed approach and duly took toll of the demonstrably tired Notts bowlers to reach his third century of the season by the close. His partnership with the precocious Dawson (48 not out) was nearing the century landmark. Hampshire were now 368 runs ahead, and , with the ball turning prodigiously, firmly in the driving seat.

Liam Dawson had demonstrated unique gifts of timing at The Oval as he straight drove the ball to the boundary time and again. With Hampshire deciding to bat Notts. out of the game – the county will have been mindful that the Championship was at stake and were not wanting to be put in a position in which they could be accused of making a generous declaration – Dawson tore into the opponents attack. The declaration came when he reached his maiden first-class century. He needed only 48 deliveries for his second fifty which included a six over extra cover. He had now improved on his highest score in each of the last three matches. The experienced Pothas (125 not out) was a virtual bystander as Dawson went about his work.

Notts now needed 442 to win. They were in with a slight chance at 182 for 4 but after Mascarenhas had brilliantly held Patel, who had again batted spellbindingly for 77, off Dawson, the innings fell away and Hampshire recorded their third straight win by 203 runs. The wickets were shared by Mascarenhas (4 for 43), Tahir (4 for 58) and Dawson (2 for 36).

WHAT NEXT?

And so Hampshire finished third in the Championship when they looked near certainties for relegation two months earlier. They would have finished second had they possessed the confidence to obtain victory at Old Trafford. It is indisputable that had they replicated the form of the final five matches throughout the season they would have strolled to the title. And so what were the reasons for the extraordinary turnaround in fortunes? The catalyst was undoubtedly Imran Tahir. He hit the ground running and, in only 7 matches, took a staggering 44 wickets (avge. 16.68). There will be those who will query whether he will be as successful in his second season, but his armoury encompasses a well-disguised googly and flipper which will always pose problems for top-flight batsmen, and, crucially, enable him to run through a tail. Such is his potency that the biggest risk lies in him being overbowled.

No less important was the introduction of Liam Dawson. He is such an intelligent, confident and capable cricketer with an excellent temperament. His horizons, particularly as a batsman, are seemingly boundless. .

Dimi Mascarenhas also returned to form in the final four matches, in which he took 20 wickets and scored 233 runs. For much of the season he seemed to be weighed down by the cares of captaincy – it was noticeable that in the dark days of mid-season, Pothas demonstrably took over in the field – and perhaps by his England experience.

Nic Pothas also personified a discernible new hardness in Hampshire's approach in the final two matches. Every player fought his corner, but the wicket-keeper was the rock on which the opponents' bowling foundered. He gave no quarter, and offered a security not seen since the days of Chris Smith. The tag of "Happy Hampshire" has surely been dispelled.

In James Tomlinson, who took more wickets than any bowler in both Divisions, Mascarenhas and Tahir, Hampshire have a potent bowling attack. If Chris Tremlett can regain his form – his figures demonstrate the difficulty of his season – then Hampshire's line-up will be formidable. The big-hearted David Balcombe can only improve. Dominic Cork will generate greater competition for places and prove invaluable in the event of IPL and international absences, or injury.

Hampshire's top order batting remains a concern. Only Michael Brown batted with any consistency. He will be missed next season. None of the batsmen made the weight of runs necessary to elevate the County into a feared batting side. They also made their runs quite slowly. Most have enjoyed good seasons in the past and it must be hoped that they can do so again next year. The priority would appear to be, however, a punishing batsman in the top four. Dawson may fulfil that role in the future, but not quite yet. The County's strength is undoubtedly in the middle-order where Liam Dawson, Nic Pothas and Dimi Mascarenhas are as good as any trio in the country. Chris Tremlett also improved in the season, recording three half-centuries. Cork had a poor season with the bat in 2008, but he has centuries to his name.

However, the Championship is always won by the side with the best bowlers. Hampshire will be well served in that respect – but the batsmen must record higher aggregates, and make their runs more speedily.

Hampshire's late season form was also transmitted in the Pro40 in which they finished runners-up. It was unfortunate that their fixtures were completed well before that of their opponents. However, but for dropped catches in the first two completed games at Trent Bridge, and Cheltenham, where the match was lost on the last ball, the County would have won the title.

In the final analysis, 2008 will go down in history as a successful season. Only a detailed analysis of the County's progress will reveal that it was also a most remarkable one.

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