

# HAMPSHIRE CRICKET SOCIETY

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THE BOB WILLIS TROPHY 2020

## PRELUDE

Once the fixtures and timetable were announced, it was clear that the composition of many teams would be compromised. In Hampshire's case, James Vince and Liam Dawson had been included in England's ODI squad. The counties had already cancelled the contracts of most of the overseas signings for the four day game. Nathan Lyon, Hampshire's registration, was therefore remaining in Australia. Others, including Kyle Abbott and Fidel Edwards were left stranded at home because of the Coronavirus. Hampshire had already lost Aneurin Donald for the season because of a long term knee injury. The team that took the field for the opening fixture at Hove therefore showed five changes from the side that played in the final Championship match in 2019.

Other Counties were in a similar position. It therefore presented them with an opportunity to blood new players, or give an opportunity to winter signings, or play those who had previously been on the fringes, in and out of the team. In the first round of matches, 14 men made first-class debuts and a further 11 made a county debut, having played first-class cricket elsewhere (including Tom Barber, formerly of Hampshire and Middlesex).

Some were not to be found in *Playfair*, but the *First Class Counties Second Eleven Annual*, published by the ACS, proved invaluable. The editor turned to this publication throughout the rest of the season. Hampshire handed a debut in that first match to Ajeet Dale, who was included in *Playfair*, and who had been featured in the March (1) edition of the Newsletter. When that piece was written, Covid-19 had just loomed over the horizon, but it could not have been anticipated that he would make his debut so quickly.

## ROUND ONE (1-4 AUGUST)

For those who cherish four day County cricket, the first round of the Bob Willis Trophy produced much to savour. Derbyshire chased down a club record 365 to defeat Nottinghamshire by three wickets with one ball to spare at Trent Bridge. Fynn Hudson-Prentice, formerly of Sussex, and a burgeoning all-round talent made a superbly judged unbeaten 91. Nottinghamshire are now without a win since June 2018.

In probably the biggest shock of the round, Leicestershire raced to a seven wicket win against Lancashire at New Road, Worcester. After twice bowling their opponents out, they required 150 runs off just 17 overs. Thanks to their captain, Colin Ackerman, who struck 73 not out off 41 balls, they reached their target with eight balls to spare. It was a very fine effort by a team who finished bottom of Division Two last year. Lancashire, of course, won that Division in 2019 and were due to play in Division One this year.

Northamptonshire battled to a draw against the odds at Edgbaston. At one stage, the former were 148 for five, still trailing by 79 runs. However, captain, Andy Rossington and Luke Procter then batted throughout the final day. Rossington batted for a total of 497 minutes in making a career best 135 not out (off 399 balls), while former Lancashire man Procter finished on 112. Earlier in the match, Tim Bresnan had scored 105 in his first match for Warwickshire after his “transfer” from Yorkshire.

County Champions Essex clawed their way back into their match versus Kent at Chelmsford to record a nail-biting two wicket win. After facing a first innings deficit of 89 (298 – 387), Simon Harmer (four for 35), aided by Jamie Porter and Sam Cook dismissed their opponents for 112. Needing 202 to win, Sir Alastair Cook ground out 66 in just under three hours. Essex seemed to be coasting but, after his dismissal at 147, four wickets fell for 24. Essex were still 31 runs short at the fall of the eighth wicket. However, Adam Wheater (26 not out) and Sam Cook (15 not out) saw them to victory.

There was also an exciting finish of a different nature in the London Derby at The Oval. After a somewhat dreary first three days and a quarter, Middlesex set Surrey 314 to win. The latter never seriously challenged after a top order collapse. Surrey skipper, Rikki Clarke, and Jordan Clark then mounted a fine rearguard action, despite the latter being clearly in pain from an injury. They batted for 23 overs and looked to be inching their side to a draw. It was at this stage that Middlesex captain, Steve Eskinazi, threw the ball to part-time leg spinner Sam Robson whose four previous wickets in his career had cost 50 runs apiece. He now took two in two balls; dismissing Clark with a rank long hop and then Dan Moriarty leg before. With the door ajar, Bajan fast bowler Miguel Cummins accounted for two more wickets before Clarke fell. Middlesex ran out winners by 190 runs. Earlier in the match, Moriarty, making his first-class debut, took five for 64.

In the other matches, Somerset predictably hammered Glamorgan, and Worcestershire eased to victory over Gloucestershire and, after a fairly even first two days, the impressive Ollie Robinson bowled Sussex to a good win against Hampshire at Hove. Phil Salt enhanced his England prospects with scores of 68 and 80. George Garten, who started his career as an out-and-out fast bowler, made an unbeaten 54 in the Sussex first innings. The highest score for Hampshire was James Fuller’s 30 the second time around. Their only real consolation in a rather

sorry display was Mason Crane's six wickets in the match, three dismissals in the second innings for Felix Organ, and on his first-class debut three first innings wickets for Ajeet Dale, including two in two balls.

## **ROUND 2 (8-11 AUGUST)**

Hampshire's victory against Middlesex at Radlett was indisputably the performance of the round. It was one for the history books, born out of considerable adversity. After the ring-rusty show at Hove, it was hoped that James Vince and Liam Dawson would return to bolster an inexperienced side. However, the former was absent for personal reasons. Dawson came in for Mason Crane; the latter could consider himself unlucky after his six wickets at Hove. Ryan Stevenson replaced Ajeet Dale. Both the replacements were to play an important part in the match, but neither finished it. Middlesex were pleased with their first innings total of 252 (Stevenson 4 - 70, a career best). They felt the wicket gave the bowlers considerable assistance, and were confident of gaining a first innings lead. They reckoned, though, without the first of two towering performances by Joe Weatherley, ably assisted by his captain Sam Northeast. Tim Murtagh was full of praise for the pair's efforts as they batted for almost three and a half hours in putting on 139 for the fourth wicket. Following Northeast's dismissal for a typically gritty 51, Weatherley followed shortly afterwards for a very fine 98 – an innings of excellent technique, concentration and almost faultless shot selection. He had batted for 310 minutes. Dawson was displaying similar attributes, and moved serenely on to 43 off 74 balls before disaster struck. He collapsed at the crease with what seemed like an Achilles injury, the type which would mean a long, enforced lay off. So it proved. He was stretchered off and it was later confirmed that he would be unable to bat again in the match. One suspected he would not play again in the season. Hampshire eventually reached 296 for nine, a lead of 47. When Middlesex batted again, Hampshire then suffered another setback. Stevenson had yet to bowl, and in chasing the ball, he impaled and badly gashed his leg on a metal tent pole. He, too, left the ground on a stretcher. It was later confirmed he would only bat in an emergency. Felix Organ, with his off-spin, stepped into the breach and responded so well that he took four wickets for 42. Middlesex were limited to 201. Another feature of the innings was that Brad Wheal, newly arrived (after quarantine) from South Africa, held three catches as a substitute fieldsman. Hampshire required 158 runs to win. The consensus on BBC Radio was that it was a challenging target, especially as Hampshire were likely to bat with nine, or even eight, men. It was noticeable that Keith Barker had started to limp heavily. Most of the batsmen gained a start but were unable to consolidate. When the seventh wicket fell, 50 runs were still needed. Importantly, Weatherley, having opened the innings, was still at the crease. Barker then limped to the wicket. It was evident that quick singles were out of the equation. Undaunted, the latter quickly unleashed a couple of early boundaries to release the tension. Weatherley caught the mood and it was he who eventually hit the winning runs, a boundary through extra cover. He was

undefeated on 64 (178 balls; 250 minutes; and nine fours); Barker finished on 28 off only 34 balls, a scoring rate out of character with that for the game. The match belonged, though, to Joe Weatherley; he had batted in excess of nine hours over both innings, and taken his side to a famous victory.

Other highlights of the round were Simon Harmer taking the first eight wickets to fall in Surrey's second innings at Chelmsford; his sequence was broken when he snaffled a slip catch! Jordan Cox (238 not out) and Jack Leaning (220 not out) put together an unbroken second wicket stand of 423 for Kent against Sussex at Canterbury, which was the highest wicket partnership in Kent's history. The remarkable Darren Stevens then took five for 50 in Sussex's second innings. The matches in the South had been played in enervating heat throughout. It was perhaps no wonder that the Sussex bowlers, without Ollie Robinson (called up by England but unused) wilted. Jake Libby (184) and Damian D'Oliveira (174) added 318 for the fourth wicket against Glamorgan at Worcester; it wasn't quite a record, but Libby's innings was a career best. Matt Critchley, the Derbyshire leg-spin bowler, returned career best figures of six for 73 at Leicester. It illustrated just how many potent leg-spin bowlers there are in county cricket these days; the cupboard has not been so well stocked for over half a century.

At the end of round two, four Counties still possessed a 100% win record: Somerset, Essex, Yorkshire and, surprisingly, Derbyshire.

### **ROUND 3 (15-18 AUGUST)**

The third round of matches were the most problematical to date, due to rain washing out many days' play all over the country. Hampshire again provided the most noteworthy performance, though in very different circumstances to that at Radlett. The fourth day in their "home" game against Surrey at Arundel started with their first innings total on 198 for three, a lead of 26. Such was the amount of time lost to rain, Surrey's first innings of 172 all out had gone on into the third day. Hampshire decided to press on and eventually reached 298 (Tom Alsop 87 and Sam Northeast 81). The most likely result was a draw, though Surrey's brittle batting throughout the competition gave Hampshire some hope that they would pull off another victory. And so it proved. Brad Wheal took the first two wickets before Mason Crane and Ian Holland reduced the Brown Caps to 27 for four. After tea, James Fuller entered the fray to devastating effect. First, he trapped Jason Roy lbw, before claiming a hat-trick. He induced Laurie Evans to edge to Alsop at slip, then accounted for Gus Atkinson leg before, and, finally, bowled Morne Morkel, who obligingly shouldered arms. Crane then administered the coup de grace by taking the last two wickets. Surrey had collapsed to 74 all out. Hampshire had bowled out Surrey twice in just 81.4 overs. The winning margin was an innings and 52 runs, a memorable achievement. On the first morning, Ian Holland had taken maximum advantage of

the overcast conditions marvellously well by taking four of the first five wickets to fall. At one stage, Surrey were 36 for five, before being rescued by Evans (65). Holland eventually ended with career best bowling figures of six for 60 some 48 hours later. Hampshire had made three changes to replace the men injured at Radlett with Wheal, Tom Scriven, making his first-class debut, and Crane coming into the side. The latter finished with match figures of five for 27. With so many regular players absent, Hampshire have proved a resilient side. Much credit must go to all concerned, on and off the field.

At the end of this round of matches, Essex were the only County with a 100% record. Porter and Harmer (eight wickets apiece) compensated for two shaky batting displays against Sussex at Hove, as Essex eased home by three wickets. Somerset were cruelly robbed at Edgbaston. They needed to take only two more Warwickshire wickets before the rains came, not for the first time in the match. Yorkshire and Derbyshire were unable to conquer the rain at Headingley. The only other side to win were Worcestershire who vanquished Northamptonshire by 78 runs at Northampton. Tom Fell (110 not out) scored his first century since 2015, when he was diagnosed with cancer. He has endured a wretched time since, and his century was heartwarming.

#### **ROUND 4 (22-25 AUGUST)**

Autumn arrived early as rain ruined this round, but it left some intriguing possibilities for the final round. It is a pity that the t20 Vitality Blast will start in the meantime; it will needlessly interrupt the momentum of what has been an absorbing competition.

Hampshire's match with Essex at Arundel suffered the most. No play was possible on the first and last day. In the meantime, only 78 overs were bowled, in which Essex scored 249 for 3 (Sir Alastair Cook 129 not out). Any realistic chance of Hampshire maintaining their interest in the competition is tenuous, and Essex's own chances of reaching the final were compromised considerably. It was perhaps inevitable that the weather would influence the outcome of a five match qualifying tournament.

In the other matches, only two innings were possible at Chester-le-Street (Durham v Derbyshire) and in the Roses Match at Headingley. However, Derbyshire, though winning only two of their matches (one less than Essex and Somerset), had acquired sufficient batting bonus (13) throughout their four matches to stay in contention going into the final round. Worcestershire's record was the same. Their prolific batting line-up had run up 15 bonus points. Against Warwickshire at New Road, both Will Rhodes (207) and Daryl Mitchell (110) scored centuries. Thus, so far, four of their batsmen have registered hundreds, the most by any County. On the other hand, their opponents in the last match, Somerset possess by far the most formidable bowling attack. They dismissed Gloucestershire for just 76 and 70 at Taunton, to win

by a mammoth 314 runs. To date, their pace bowlers Craig Overton (23 wickets), Josh Davey (18) and James Overton (15) have proved irresistible. County batsmen will be relieved that the Overton twins will be separated next year, when James will be playing for Surrey. (It was reported that Hampshire were close to signing him). But for the rains at Edgbaston in Round 3, Somerset would have virtually qualified for the final by now, but Worcestershire can still overtake them, if they win that final match. It will be interesting to see what type of pitch is prepared at New Road.

It isn't often that batting fireworks are associated with Glamorgan, but they provided them in spades at Northampton, in the direst of circumstances. In the first innings, they were 135 for nine, before debutant Callum Taylor (106 off only 94 balls) and Michael Hogan (33) added 124 for the tenth wicket. The situation was similar second time round. They had lost eight wickets for 60, but then Dan Douthwaite (86) and Marchant de Lange put on 168 off only 117 balls for the ninth wicket. After the former's dismissal, de Lange continued to blast away before falling for 113 off only 78 balls. His century was the fastest in Glamorgan's history. However, Northamptonshire regained their composure to ease home by six wickets.

The other two matches in which a result was achieved were between Middlesex and Sussex at Radlett and Surrey and Kent at The Oval. Both were fascinating cut and thrust affairs. Middlesex emerged victors by five wickets in three days, and Kent won by 17 runs. The other match, the East Midlands derby between Nottingham and Leicestershire was washed away on the final day.

And so, going into the final round, which starts on 6 September, the following teams are still vying for a place in the final:- Somerset (76 pts), Derbyshire (71), Worcestershire (70), Essex (70), Yorkshire (66), Kent (64), and Middlesex (59). As mentioned above, Somerset and Worcestershire play each other, Derbyshire are away to Lancashire at Liverpool, Yorkshire are home to Leicestershire at Headingley, Essex play Middlesex at Chelmsford, and Kent are at home to Hampshire at Canterbury. Only the winners with the most points in two of the three groups will go through to the final.

By common consent, the Competition has proved a success. Inevitably, the Conference format has started a debate on the structure for next year's County Championship. Watch this space.

The duration of next year's season, and whether fans can view it, will depend on developments regarding alleviating the worst effects of the Coronavirus, especially on whether a vaccine can be produced. Proposed developments for 2021 are likely to prove fluid throughout the winter.

The next newsletter will cover the historic international matches at The Ageas Bowl, the final round of the Bob Willis Trophy and the early matches in the Vitality Blast.