

Investing in Youth: The Future Hedge Top Stars

By Jon O'Shea

In order to remain competitive in the ever-demanding Halifax Cricket League, those in charge at Northowram Hedge Top have long taken the view that to progress as a club it is essential to invest in youth. The 2006 Club Development Plan outlined the aim to: "promote a thriving junior section capable of producing generations of enthusiastic, loyal, skilled, disciplined and ethical players" – a clear indication of the club's intent.

The club has actually had in place an under-18s section since the early 1950s, but the real momentum in youth cricket has been achieved during the past three decades. An under-15 team was first established in time for the 1978 season and has since provided the starting point for many fledgling Hedge Top stars to get some much-needed playing experience under their belts.

Since that time, the amount of cricket (or any other sport for that matter) played in schools on a regular, organised basis has, of course, drastically declined or, in some cases, has disappeared completely from the curriculum. Therefore, the need for local cricket clubs to fill this void by actively promoting junior cricket has become all the more pressing, especially with the multitude of distractions the modern world can offer budding sportsmen and women growing every day.



An old Hedge Top junior side

In an effort to remedy this problem, Northowram Hedge Top made a concerted effort to strengthen their already friendly relationship with the village's junior school and, back in 1996, took the step of introducing an under-12 team. It immediately proved to be a hugely successful venture, and by the start of the following season it was thought necessary to introduce a second team at this age group. The natural progression of this new seam of talented youngsters meant that, in 1998, the club then set up an under-13 team to accommodate them. Today, there are under-11, -13, -15 and -17 age groups representing Northowram Hedge Top in their respective Halifax junior cricket leagues.

The investment quickly paid rich dividends: the under-15s put together back-to-back league and play-off wins in 1992 and 1993, and they went on to carry that level of achievement into the under-17 team with league wins in 1995 and 1996. These successes were capped by a fine triumph in the 1999 Collinson Cup. More recently, the club's youngsters in the under-13 and under-11 age groups were Halifax Junior League winners in 2004 and 2006 respectively, and the under-15 boys are looking to complete a hat-trick of titles in the 2007 season.

All impressive stuff, and surely reflective of the fine job done with dedication by Hedge Top's five ECB Level One coaches and one Level Two coach over the last few years. The high watermark of their achievements could be seen in the selection of no less than four juniors in the Halifax Under-15 Select XI last season.

Two of those to benefit from the structure carefully laid in place by the Hedge Top Lane hierarchy are Sam Gardner and Adam Stocks. Both young cricketers are well engrained in the club tradition as Sam's father Andrew is Hedge Top's star bowler, first-team captain and the new club chairman, while Adam's dad Ian has long been captain of the 2nd XI.

They each made their way into the second team in the summer of 2006 via their form for the Sunday XI – another means of giving those with potential more time out on the square, generally alongside men of a more advanced age, who have years of invaluable experience (and dodgy tips!) to pass on. Last year Adam made even more appearances for the second team than his dad, the captain; he also came second in the batting averages (ave. 24.63), with a top score of 88 not out, in addition to a fine century for the Sunday eleven.

Sam Gardner even found himself making six appearances for Northowram Hedge Top's 1st XI and he topped the second team's bowling averages in spectacular style with an average of 14.19, a frugal economy rate (3.15), and best match figures of 5 for 21. Former club chairman Ian Spencer paid the young man a considerable compliment when he suggested that "he could turn out to be even better than his dad". High praise indeed!

Despite the pair's obvious talents, they and their peers may perhaps not go on to represent the club to the extent that their fathers have before them. For instance, Adam Stocks will shortly be leaving Northowram to attend university, and many other young players' educational and employment aspirations will also undoubtedly take them further afield. Often these players will, in due course, become lost to the club entirely – a situation now endemic in village cricket nationwide.

For Northowram Hedge Top there is also the problem of sharing a small village with 'the club over the wall': Northowram Fields CC. Current coach of the Under-11s and Under-13s, Stefan Litjens – who became involved on the coaching side because of his young sons Kyle and Keir growing interest in the game – believes that Fields' newly-established youth set-up (their neighbours have recently even started an under-9s team) will lead to the village's 'butter' being spread too thinly. The Hedge Top Under-11s are currently struggling for numbers despite having a healthy turnout of over 20 boys last year, a situation far removed from the traditional one whereby Hedge Top regularly had sufficient resources to lend players to Fields when needed.

Stefan also thinks that simple geography plays a part, as because Northowram Fields' Westercroft Lane ground is situated closer to the main road (and in front of Hedge Top's premises) youngsters dropping in 'on spec' are more likely to join the first club they set eyes upon. It seems that at which Northowram club certain up-and-coming juniors play will remain a bone of contention between the two for some time to come.

However, it could equally be considered that such keen competition can only be beneficial for the children of the village as a whole, as both clubs must strive to maintain quality coaching staff and suitable equipment and facilities in an effort to attract the stars of the future. Whatever the obstacles facing Northowram Hedge Top, the recent successes of the kids at Hedge Top Lane suggest that, without doubt, there are many with a bright cricketing future ahead of them.