

Fred Root

Fred Root, Todmorden's professional from 1933-37, was always destined to be a cricketer. He spent many hours as an infant on the Leicestershire county ground at Aylestone, where his father was groundsman. The old Lancashire pro' Richard G Barlow told Fred at an early age that, if he could perfect the in-swing, he would play for England – and he was right. Fred played three test matches against Australia in 1926 and finished top of the bowling averages.

What was the secret of his success? Stocky, powerful and possessing immense stamina, Fred could bowl for hours, shambling up to the wicket and dipping the ball in towards the batsman's feet. His variation was an out-swing and Fred claimed to have picked up most of his wickets with this delivery. Fred did not invent in-swing bowling or its accompanying leg theory, but he became its finest exponent. The fielding restriction of only two behind square on the leg side was not introduced until 1957 and Todmorden wicketkeeper Tommy Carrick recalled: 'He had all his slips on the leg side. Sometimes he only had two fielders on the off-side.'

Leg theory was an unpopular form of attack - at its most effective it virtually eliminated the attractive off-side strokes - and was condemned as negative by some of the leading players in the game, including Jack Hobbs. Fred's Derbyshire captain was uneasy about using it and Fred was happier after World War I when he moved to Worcestershire, carrying the county's bowling attack virtually single-handedly until 1932. Leg theory was the forerunner to bodyline, the strategy used by Douglas Jardine in the infamous tour of Australia of 1932-33. The Australians were expecting a lot of short-pitched fast bowling aimed at the body, but not the leg theory field which accompanied it. Bodyline was effectively leg theory bowled shorter and faster.

Fred almost did not survive The Great War. He was shot as a dispatch rider in France and awoke in St Luke's War Hospital, Bradford, where he was told he would never play cricket again. The road back was via club cricket for Bowling Old Lane in the Bradford League and Dudley in the Birmingham League, so he had considerable experience as a club pro' long before he signed for Todmorden in 1933.

Fred was 43 when he came to Todmorden. He had retained his fitness and, crucially for an experienced county pro', his enthusiasm for the game. He was still the finest exponent of in-swing bowling in the world and became Todmorden Cricket Club's most successful professional. In five seasons from 1933-37 he scored 2427 runs at 22.8 and took 533 wickets at 9.8, including 5 wickets in an innings on 60 occasions.

Fred's batting was rustic but powerful and he could score very quickly on his day. He hit 133 out of Todmorden's 379 all out – both still records for a Worsley Cup Final – against Rishton in 1937, and 145 against the same opponents in 1936, which remained the highest score by a Todmorden professional until 1997.

It was, however, Fred's bowling which spearheaded Todmorden to a period of unprecedented success. The club won the league in Fred's first season, 1933 and followed that with Worsley Cup wins in 1935 and 1937. In Todmorden's three Worsley Cup ties in 1935 Fred took 21 wickets for 77 (6 for 14, 7 for 31 and 8 for 32) to virtually win the trophy single handed. That season he took 138 wickets at 7.6 in all matches.

Fred was most impressed by the cricket he experienced in the Lancashire and Bradford Leagues and his autobiography, 'A Cricket Pro's Lot', gives detailed insights to cricket at Todmorden in the 1930s. Here are some of Fred's observations:

...on his arrival in Todmorden

'I arrived in the small border town to take up my duties at four o'clock one dreary April afternoon. I had travelled 150 miles, and was looking forward to a meal and a rest, but the chairman, who met me at the station, took me direct to the cricket ground and I had surprise number one.

Cricket was in full swing and as many people were on the ground to cast their critical eyes over my doings at the nets as would have been reckoned a good county match 'gate' at Worcester ... There are no fewer than six full nets at Todmorden every available evening. Wickets are good and equipment plentiful.'

...on Todmorden's Centre Vale ground

'...the surrounding countryside is glorious, full of people literally teeming with cricket enthusiasm. Arthur J Richardson, the erstwhile Australian all-rounder, admired the ground so much that he declared it was the most picturesque he had ever seen, and so enraptured by its natural charm did he become that his attention was distracted from the game.'

...on the Lancashire League

'Never have I played in any sort of cricket that provides greater thrills than the Lancashire League. Crowds are large and the knowledge of the people who make up those crowds is exceptional ... The standard of cricket is high, the amateurs comparing with many county players, and the professionals among the best in the world ... matches are thrilling, short, snappy, and mostly decisive. Drawn games are looked upon with extreme displeasure ... under such conditions the old lackadaisical methods of county cricket appear appalling.'

...on the members and supporters

'They would rather miss joining the Co-op than the cricket club, and when bad times make money scarce, they make sacrifices to enable them to pay their

annual subscriptions ... they do anything in their power to assist the club. They will be very annoyed if not included in the roller XI ... and I have seen men do as much voluntary work on Lancashire League grounds in a week as a paid groundsman in county cricket does in a fortnight ... the rafters of the Hare and Hounds or the Shannon and Chesapeake ring to the laughter of good natured arguments. Exaggerations abound, about, for example "Jonah Clegg hit a ball over two hundred yards, and it dropped in yon shelter in the Park and that were o'er forty years ago." It was barely relevant that the shelter was only 10 years old.'

...on class distinction

'Cotton manufacturers rub shoulders with their own weavers ... in summertime they live on the ground. Morning, noon and night they forgather to discuss last Saturday's match and the prospect for next Saturday's game ... they would not miss a Lancashire League match for anything ... Every member of the committee takes his job as seriously as an MP ... There are no such things as class and creed when the committee is in session.'

...on the Todmorden players

'Players will rush out of the mill, drop off their clogs, don cricket boots, and practise seriously and enjoyably until darkness blots out the nets. No social distinction – one common effort for one common weal.'

'Todmorden boasts of a wicketkeeper – Tommy Carrick – who keeps to my bowling as well as any 'keeper' I have bowled to ... Carrick's constant appeals once annoyed Cecil Parkin and 'Cis' told the stumper he was taking part in a cricket match not a gramophone recital. Tommy promptly informed the great England cricketer that by his (Parkin's) antics he (Carrick) was beginning to think he was at a circus.'

'Todmorden has a lad sixteen years old, who has already stood the trial of Constantine and Martindale in the Lancashire League. For three years he has been the best boy batsman in Lancashire. His name is Richard Horsfall.'

'...as proof that 'nip' can be learned, I quote the instance of a young bowler I coached at Todmorden last season (1936). His name is Alec Smith and, if given the opportunity, this young man will be heard of in first-class cricket in the near future. He came to me direct from a junior club, very raw but with a will to learn and succeed. Almost at once he saw the idea, (of high arm, effort at release and full follow through) and developed almost over-night into a really good bowler. From the very first time he was included in the (Todmorden) Lancashire League XI he got good batsmen out. Had he been qualified for Lancashire I have the word of Harry Makepiece he would have been engaged on the staff at Old Trafford. But he was born in Yorkshire.'