

“Nothing to Play For”

April: First Game of the Season

Stainborough at Stainborough

Rain stopped play at 3.45 pm and an early tea was taken

The match, reduced to 30 overs, was abandoned at 6.30 pm because of hail

Stainborough	198 for 3 off 30 overs
Casuals	97 for 2 off 15 overs

The Casuals' season usually begins in April, two days after the Annual General Meeting. Frequently, however, due to inclement weather, the first game is delayed until May. The final match, on President's Day, takes place in September. Fifteen to twenty fixtures are scheduled between these dates, but because of rain and other reasons, not all are completed.

Stainborough, the first match, is one of The Casuals' longest running fixtures. A South Yorkshire league side able to muster a Sunday team if they'd no other commitments. There's a pub at one end of the ground and lovely spring blossom on the boundary, though not for long in a gale. They had a rotweiller at midwicket until it died one Christmas. Despite the April weather, which varied from two sweaters to a wet suit, the outfield always seemed safe enough, apart from the molehills.

Selection, theoretically, is about matching skills with vacancies, the resulting whole being greater than the sum of its parts. Take *The Magnificent Seven*. There's the gunslinger, the one who's good with a knife, the horse whisperer and so on. No such luxury for The Casuals however. Bill Crossland, skipper and secretary, was there already when I turned up. Six others eventually arrived, each unable to think of a reason to say no to Bill's tentative telephone entreaty. What of the intrepid senior eight that had attended The AGM? Marc Davis had gone to the rugby league final and Rupert Wilson was in Germany on business. But Greg, Will, Umbers and Jim were there with myself and Bill. Rob Hunter and Dominic Ford were the other two, and with them there it looked a decent side.

The skipper lost the toss and The Casuals fielded. Rob Hunter opened the bowling at the pub end. He was a thoughtful quiet South African post graduate student, except when bowling, when he turned into an unstable member of the 'big five' wild beasts best seen on safari. Bill, bowling second, came in from the practice net end, downwind. Tall and bald, he was the boss of a meat company. There was nothing he didn't know about a pig. Normally reserved, his round Yorkshire accent would quickly heat up when folk talked nonsense, in his view, about cooking sausages. At a barbecue, he triggered fainting spells in rugby forwards and made ladies cry should they go near one with a pointed instrument. When he was not playing cricket he played the concertina. Or rather, he fondled it and smiled. When not performing, he restored old knackered ones and sold them on.

I phoned him about cancelling a game once, 'Bill, about that fixture, any idea who the secretary is?'

'No idea, Dave, I'm walking down Kilrush High Street,'

‘Oh where’s that?’

‘Ireland. I’m at the concertina festival. Phone Rupert, he’s the captain.’ He disconnected, leaving me a tad bemused. Fancy him keeping his phone switched on.

As Bill prepared to bowl there were cries of foul as certain team members noted he had the wind behind him. He protested his innocence.

‘Didn’t I Rob? Didn’t I ask if you wanted to bowl slightly uphill into the mild breeze?’

However, Bill did take the first wicket of the new season. The batsman was a big step forward, playing across a straight ball. It hit the front pad. Keeper and bowler appealed. The umpire was a fresh faced thirteen year old who wanted to please and was quickly substituted. That was The Casuals’ LBW quota for the day. This brought a stylish left hander to the wicket who gently, and frequently, nudged the ball into the gaps left by chairman, Greg. Ex-Oxfordshire, ex-army, ex-sportsman, ex-everything and he limped a lot. Some weeks he sported a moustache, some weeks he didn’t. Short and stocky, prone to dreaming and laughing when he should be reading or doing something else useful.

‘Er, Greg, have you noticed that red thing? You might want to pick it up and throw it to the keeper. Just a thought.’

Stainborough were going along nicely when heavy rain fell. We took an early tea, apart from Dom, who listened to Norwich AFC on his car radio. They were in the playoffs. There’s a difference between an occasional and a ringer. An occasional was available to play because he was home from college or visiting a relation or something like that. A ringer was pressed into service to win a game or simply stiffen up the usual elderly Casuals line up against a club which habitually fielded a strong team. Dom was neither of these and a bit of both. He played league cricket on Saturdays and was also a Casuals member. Rob, another league cricketer, was the same. They were students at the local university, away from home, who could bat and bowl a bit, so we ignored their accents. Come to think of it when I looked round, apart from Greg and me, today’s Casuals were all league players of some kind.

The Casuals returned to the field when the sun reappeared and the skipper introduced his spin attack, Dom, and he took the second wicket. A long hop went way down to square leg where Will Ward caught it two-handed running to his left. Heroic.

The next batsman was several stones heavier than anyone else on the field. He was breathless taking guard, but the crease was a quagmire. Jim Harris was bowling, left arm over just short of a length with the occasional boomer down the leg side. Correctly spoken, his bearing and motor car suggested he was something in the city. Immaculate kit, he always played in shades and a Casuals’ cap with his shirt collar up. Cool or what? Under the cap was a light tan tonsure rinse, this year’s colour he said. As the rest of his head was still pink, he hadn’t disturbed the annual shampoo sales figures much.

Jumbo fended one into the off side and called for a run. Dom swooped down on it. The bloke at the non-batting end sent Jumbo back and he was stranded. It’s not clear what happened next, but the wicket keeper must have had a senior moment. Despite Dom’s perfect underarm throw, the ball finished on the floor, the wicket remained intact and Jumbo made his ground. Loud hooting and cackling emerged from the home dressing room. Greg lay down at mid off and beat the ground. The rest of the fielding side either looked to the heavens in disbelief or were incontinent. Apart from the keeper that is, who hung his head. This was me. I’d taken over from Will, who fancied a bowl.

Will eventually did Jumbo middle stump. Quite the Roy of the Rovers. Superb catch and a wicket. From a good school with a good job as a surveyor. Short, slim, well-groomed and well-

spoken, he somehow continued to convey the innocence of youth despite being older than that. And a new dad - a daughter, Millie. No wonder he looked pleased with himself. Not for long. The young lad in after Jumbo was a sixteen year old Yorkshire trialist who carted Will's last over all around the park. Will walked off the pitch quietly, concentrating on his boot ends.

The Casuals' turn to bat and the skipper organised the order, 'We need a steady opener. Oh, right, we haven't got one. Dave, you'll have to do.'

So I went in with Will, no longer quite Roy of the Rovers. I got something on one delivery, missed two others and finally top edged a lamentable short one, caught within six feet of a very short boundary.

'Not your normal flowing stroke play Dave,' said Bill.

'Thanks, skip.'

'Nice round number though.'

'Thanks, skip.'

Rob was in next. The post-graduate student, something in computing. A skinny guy who failed to put on weight despite a comprehensive programme of self-abuse. 'I've put on a stone since last year,' he said in the pub after, cuddling a pint. Greg and I nodded and sighed and cleared our throats looking for the spittoon.

Rob and Will scored at the required rate. Could we make their total? The partnership broke however, when Will cut to deep square point for a relatively simple catch. He'd made 46, happily restored to Roy once more. He phoned home to see if Millie was asleep and had she had her bath? She had? That was great.

Meanwhile, a man on a mission had walked to the wicket. The day before, in a league game, he'd not troubled the scorers. A mix up taking a risky second run, and both batters had arrived at the same end. One of them was out and he was still visibly seething. This was Umbers. A large man, a large car and an accountant, so presumably a large bank balance. More plummy than Jim but less well turned out. He used to kiss his bat between shots. His stock stroke was an awesome step forward, nearly into the bowler's half of the strip, and he wasn't too bothered if he got bat on it. Balls off the wicket went four or one. Two's were rare and painful, three's unthinkable. Unfortunately for Umbers, the day's weather was to postpone a reversal of fortune. The hail came and that was that. Match drawn and abandoned just as The Casuals were on their way to victory. An early drink, except for Roy who went straight home.

'Did you enjoy the dinner, Dave?' asked Greg, in the pub, presumably referring to The AGM.

'It was okay. Not many players. I counted eight out of the fifty that turned up. It was mostly older guys there for a booze up. It didn't seem much of a Casuals' bash to me.'

'The rugby club dinner clashes most years,' said Bill.

'Not the sort of do that Dom or Rob would go to anyway and the older guys like to reminisce a bit,' said Greg.

I took a sip of beer, 'Okay I can see where this is going,'

First game of the season abandoned because of the weather and three players short. Most of the elderly core of the team had played. No change there then.