

“Nothing to Play For”

May: No Need for a Ringer

The Rock at Old Almondburians CC, King James’ Grammar School.

Casuals	186 for 3
The Rock	130 all out

I’m told that ‘The Rock’ CC was founded in a Brockholes alehouse. It was subsequently barred and whilst the team retains the name, the players now take their after match enjoyment elsewhere. They are an evening league outfit and The Casuals’ usual suspects tend to be the stronger side. Marcus Longbottom was captain. An accountant and a studiously competent if somewhat defensive batter.

During the opening overs, Marcus skipped from the tea preparation area adjacent to the tavern, where several casuals were light-heartedly commenting on the game’s early phases. When he did take the field he remained but a moment, to gently dab the track, to take guard, to miss a straight one and to walk away to the sound of his breaking castle, endearingly and succinctly captured by the scorer with a single large round number. It took everyone by surprise, including me, next man in, who hadn’t expected to bat. I was underprepared, which some would suggest is normal. But at least, when I got to the crease, I engaged with the opposition, enough indeed to necessitate the scorer making a fuller and less rounded record than the one preceding mine.

Before Marcus, Rupert had opened with Will. Will crashed it around and in no time reached his total. Rupert took a tiny bit longer. He began confidently, poking and prodding outside off stump. Then, when their quicks came off, he lost a little of his rhythm. In fact, the slower they came the harder he made it look. If it hadn’t been for the tavern, some of us would have lost the will to live. Rupert finally went on to make second top score. Prize for top score was a pair of specs and a stopwatch, so prize for second top score was two pairs of etc etc .

After tea, when we took the field I recognised one of their umpires. Bob Heywood. He played in The New College second team when I was captain. Over forty years ago I wrote a summary of our season for the school magazine, of which the following is an extract.

‘Fielding has been quite a prominent feature, especially Heywood’s brilliant caught and bowled against King Edward VII School, Sheffield, which will always be remembered.’

Huddersfield New College Magazine
Summer Term 1965

Not the most memorable prose style. Bob’s feat was outstanding and the venue was good too. A grand sounding name, an imposing building as backdrop to the cricket field and a large

tree at square leg. Does anyone else remember the sun shining every Saturday during May and June in the 1960's?

Seeing Bob standing there from my habitual spot at third man took me back a bit. A cricket life begins the day you first pick up a bat, it ends when it ends and in between is a rich personal memoir. For me it started in 1954 in the back garden and finished in 2005 with The Casuals when I was in my late fifties. Five to ten years of early promise followed by forty or so of disappointed mediocrity. On reflection, the promising and big for his age schoolboy was selected too young for school teams like the U15's. "If you're good enough you're old enough" didn't work for me. I failed at the crease with no sympathy from fifth formers with yellow fingers, pale collapsed faces and mayhem on their minds. Between fourteen and eighteen I gave up cricket, recovering during my final year in the sixth form to captain the Second XI. Right there is identity. An outsider, exposed and found wanting. The hard lonely business that batting can be when the confidence has gone. There is nowhere to hide on a cricket field.

I didn't play much in Liverpool apart from a couple of games for the University second XI. I turned out in the evening leagues from 1972 to 1985, when we moved between Cardiff, Saddleworth and Northallerton. In N. Yorkshire, I also joined a country house team which played in the village where we lived, near Bedale. We came back to Huddersfield in 1985, where the Ear Nose and Throat surgeon, strangely enough called Mr Smelt, formed a hospital team. We played our home fixtures on the YMCA ground on Birkby Hall Road, opposite The Nuffield Hospital as it was called then, where, I confess I used to work. I made a point of driving to appointments past the Willow Lane terrace where I was born. I remember one away game at Hullin Edge against The Elland Hospital, when a short thick set bloke trundled up and bowled some off spin. This is easy I thought and promptly presented him with a caught and bowled which he gratefully received. Back in the clubhouse they told me the bowler was Graham Eadie, Australian International Rugby League full back and one of the world's most valuable players. His wife was a nurse.

One of the hospital's regular fixtures was against The Almondbury Casuals. I remember three games, all in the rain, two abandoned. The first was at Shepley CC when we retired to the bar to watch the test with South Africa. The second was at Silcoates School, Wakefield, when I was caught off Hylton Roberts, a larger than life character who has now sadly died. His relationship with a piece of chocolate cake during tea needs no imagination. We spent the whole of one committee meeting telling stories about his appetite. Not a bad memorial. The hospital eventually completed a game at Thongsbridge. Rod Kelly, ex-Holmfirth professional, got me somehow or other. But the game was more memorable for when I bowled and rapped one of The Casuals' batsmen on the pads. The umpire gave it out and bloke refused to go. There is no record of what I said, but it wouldn't have been pleasant. I recall Greg improbably fielding a scorching drive to square leg and then his fielding colleagues letting him know how improbable it really was. These guys seemed alright, so I asked how I might get a game. Tim Beaumont was chairman. A stocky rubicund jolly chappie with a plum in his mouth. 'You can play whenever you like,' he said. I played in the end of season President's game to start with, along with my son, Chris, and from 200, tried to be available for the regular season.

The Rock's batting was never in the hunt. Will, Sam and Greg kept one end going whilst Jim and Bill took wickets at the other. Bill dismissed their best bat and Jim's figures were the

best of the day. Jim's flare for fielding had not diminished either. He dived full length in plenty of time. He'd occasionally stop one if he just kept his eye on it.

I like to think of myself as the evergreen glove man. No one else does. I was in the catches, grateful just to keep hold. Then a misfield and a timely wicket. A short throw from Bill found me in no man's land twenty yards shy of the wicket. The ball spilled from my gloves and the batsmen furthest away called for another run. He'll not get that he must have thought. But, quick as a flash I threw down the gloves, and just in the leathers, prepared to hit the wicket. Will, trembling somewhat, stood behind the stumps, waiting for goodness knows what. He was never in danger as I'd no arm. What amounted to a gentle lob followed and Will took off the bails. The victim came to a standstill a metre short of the crease, open-mouthed and clearly perplexed, maybe even a tad furious. He was admirably restrained and direct in his comments, if a rotweiler is restrained. No forgiveness at all.

I sidled up to Marc after the game, 'I wasn't selected last week. Skipper said he'd got his team.'

'Same with me,' said Marc.

'You have to pick your games, Dave,' said Greg, overhearing our moans, 'new captains bring new contacts and new ideas on selection.' The adult way to look at it. Greg's recurring common sense approach could be infuriating.

And nothing more was said. Occasionals who aren't on the occasional list and those who are on the list and don't phone for a game are hardly ever talked about. But we can't even discuss whether the captain's personal choices are discussable. Everyone goes quiet and looks the other way as if someone has done something smelly. What about the purpose of The Casuals? Are we there to win or to take part? Which captains are on which message?

I was confused. Sure we were often one or two short. Sure we probably lost more than we won. Did that mean the skippers had permission to bring in who they wanted? The Casuals have always had good league players, but they were all club members and played regularly.

What was I getting grumpy about? I had no evidence that any captain had brought in a top player just to win a game. I had no evidence that I'd been deselected. I had a sinking feeling if I asked what were the reasons for dropping players, I'd find out. The ineptitude of the aging cricketer has a ring of truth.

Banging on about ringers is particularly appropriate given the venue for the game against The Rock. Old Almondburians play on a lovely little ground located on the outskirts of a campus known to most of us as King James's Grammar School for boys and a famous institution. My personal favourite piece of its history involves the school's 1890's headmaster - Reverend Marshall, rugby union referee and president of both Huddersfield RUFC and Yorkshire RFU. He was one of the many muscular christians who would not countenance professionalism in sport, so much so that it appears he shafted his own club.

'In 1893, Huddersfield were accused by Cumberland club Cummersdale Hornets of obtaining star three-quarters Boak and Forsyth under suspicious circumstances. Such was the speed at which the players had left the Hornets that they were summoned to appear before Carlisle magistrates for leaving their jobs without giving proper notice. An English Rugby Union inquiry was soon under way and the chief witness for the prosecution was the outspoken Rev Marshall, who had earlier resigned from the Huddersfield committee after condemning the

actions of his club. At the subsequent hearing Huddersfield were suspended for eight matches. The committee were understandably far from happy.'

(Huddersfield Daily Examiner: Dec 8th. 2000)

No, I bet they weren't. So much for the Victorian middle class. Two years later and rugby split into professional and amateur and Huddersfield RU went with the professionals. They eventually transformed into the rugby league team who played at Fartown. My mum came from the union of a catholic Malone from Connemara and a rugby daft Addy from a family of Holmfirth tee-totallers. Gran and grandad Addy kept their scotch in a pot ornament on the mantleshelf above the kitchen range in case his family visited. He was born in 1875 and died in 1939. He worked a horse and coal wagon for The Coop, alongside Douglas Clark, another Cumbrian who became famous, but as a most valuable player with Fartown and Great Britain rather than for being an illegal transfer. Northern clubs like Huddersfield needed to be businesslike and attract the fans. The amateur administrators didn't. They also didn't want to lose their elite status. Commercial pressure for change resisted because of a perceived threat and its not hard to guess which side the Walkers and the Addys were on. Rugby didn't evolve to the next phase, it split in two.

An amateur Huddersfield Rugby Union side was reformed in 1909. Whilst dad was a rugby league man, in the fifties and sixties, when no one else was playing at home, he'd take me to watch 'The Old Boys' at Waterloo. It was only round the corner from where we lived. The spectators spoke a different language, 'Keep going Hudders,' 'feet, feet, Hudders.' I'd no idea what Hudders were, but I was only nine or ten at the time. Soccer was my first love and pretty soon I began to watch Huddersfield Town with my pals from school and I didn't return to the rugby club for another eight years or so.

In 1997, Rugby Union went professional and it is now a global multi-million dollar operation. At one time, if you'd played league, professional or amateur, you were a union pariah. Now players move across codes regularly, following the money. It'd made those 1890's Victorian gentlemen's eyes water.