

“Nothing to Play For”

May: Not Selected

“1 in 12” at Stainborough CC.

Match cancelled.
Ground waterlogged.
Pity.

The Casuals fixture list encourages players who are available and wish to be considered for selection to contact the week’s match captain as early as possible. To save disappointment obviously. However, the team sheet is rarely full because hardly anyone ever makes the call. More often it is the other way about. Guys receive a muted grateful request from the skipper. At a Spring committee meeting a new captain asked for guidance as to his duties. They were summarised by Bill as follows:

Sunday before game – collect player availability, hand out bribes - hard work.

Monday – pick dream team from extensive membership - good.

Tuesday – discover contact numbers in “The Book” are flawed – bad.

Wednesday – contact available players. Half of them remember family commitments, golf fixtures, holidays in Bridlington etc – dreadful.

Thursday – team reaches eight, all batsmen, no wicket keeper, no ground – depressing.

Friday – flurry of activity, 13 players, five opening bowlers. Go out for a restorative gallon of ale. Dream of thrashing Caythorpe by 132 runs (Crossland 12 overs, 7 mdns, 6 for 12, Wilson – 0 not out off 23 overs) – jubilation.

Saturday – late spate of weak excuses. Windale’s knee injury flares. Jim Harris’s wife drafted in (better than him anyway). Eight opening bowlers and three wicket keepers – tolerable.

Beaumont confirms availability to umpire – bloody dreadful.

Opposition captain rings to ask if we minded their South African professional having a run out – check helmet and box availability.

Sunday – last sandwich completed, early signs of carpal tunnel syndrome in buttering hand - grim.

Match starts, Casuals field first. Druids 255 for 3 at tea, opening bowlers performed magnificently. Monsoon opens over Woodsome Park, retired to Shoulder of Mutton for restorative tonics and reminiscences – excellent.

Its quite predictable that Bill dreamed of beating Caythorpe because they are embedded in the Casuals’ psyche. Those that played against them anyway. It was my first game for The Casuals and I think it was also the first game of the 2001 season. I travelled down to Nottinghamshire with two strangers, Marc and Jim, in Jim’s motor. They talked about golf a lot and some dinner or other and I stopped listening. Caythorpe had two massive pitches, lots of wicket covers and a spanking new clubhouse. As we arrived, their Sunday team, total age no more than 220 years, was playing touch rugby on the outfield in front of the pavilion, which was

not the same as the clubhouse. They won the toss and batted. We may have got two out, or even three, all catches. It didn't matter, some other international or county player or first teamer would have come in next. The stock shot was a waltz to the pitch of the ball, followed by a timed bottom hand straight drive that scudded into the boundary hedgerows. Once or twice it bounced first. Their first team captain enjoyed playing the reverse sweep. We'd never seen it before. Their innings went on and on forever and out of sight.

I opened our innings with a ginger-haired lad who ran me out in the fourth over. Not a good thing to happen on debut and not much sympathy in the pavilion. Maybe they'd been expecting too much. Against tight medium pace, I'd been preoccupied getting my defensive shape as good as I could. 'Get on with it Walker,' a helpful remark from a bloke I found out later was called Rupert. Then a nice square drive for four and the run out. The ginger-haired lad got a fifty and I've not seen him since. Their quicks were replaced by Eddie Hemmings' two sons and it was all over. Hemmings was an off-spinner for England, Warwickshire, Nottinghamshire and Sussex. He retired playing in 1995 and coaching in 1998. Just our luck, he and his two spinning sons topped the Caythorpe bowling averages in 2001.

I went to the bar and had a few beers alone watching cricket on TV from Headingley and Bill finally brought me home. Who had organised such a mismatch, such a crushing defeat? I was told it was Rupert, and sure enough there he is in "The Book", 2001 fixture secretary. Those who remember Caythorpe won't want to be humiliated again. Perhaps more correctly, they want to give the opposition a good game.

The Casuals have three types of membership: playing, occasional and non-playing. Players make up a page, non-players two pages, whilst the occasionals are a page and a half; about 40 names per page in small type. These lists are contained in "The Book", alluded to above by Bill. This could be a well worn leather volume containing the traditions and history of the Casuals. It could be a spanking glossy annual, complete with pictures and a crossword, eagerly awaited in the Christmas stocking. Its neither. Its not quite the size of a fiver, convenient for the inside pocket if remembered. Paper and card, stapled together, are the basic materials. The cover has a different colour every year which varies from a pink that verges on the cerise to a sickly dark green and there are about as many shades in between as Jim's hair tints. This is "The Book", source of all Casuals information or so some people think. It contains lists of officials and fixtures as well as player contact numbers. Any question about The Casuals has one reply, 'Look in "The Book"'. However, some of the information is incorrect and there is a list of contacts that is missing.

The occasionals are players who say that they think they might be available, or simply can't admit they are past it or have a terminal case of being unable to say no. They are each issued with a fixture list and, like other potential players, they are kindly asked to contact the relevant match captain to say they would like a game. Like current players, they very rarely do and captains rarely phone them either. In contrast, we've had guys who've played occasionally, like friends and relatives, available at odd times only, but who are not on the occasionals' list. It doesn't get discussed and if it were it would be difficult to explain. A gallic shrug maybe, 'That's how it is'. The list missing from the "The Book" is thus the occasionals who are not on the occasional list. For pedants' sake, Dan Smith and Simon Hooson are exceptions.

Around the time I retired from playing cricket, I had a short association with the giddy heights of The Casuals' administration. Perceptively, I noted that the membership list had not been updated for several years and the occasional list really needed sorting out. There had been

the odd phone call. Someone had moved and vaguely thought they'd better tell Bill, or a grieving widow phoned thanking Bill for the fixture list, but thought she let the subscription lapse.

So I thought I'd have a go at modernising the membership information. I had a look at the bank statements first. Quite a few were on standing orders, four of whom had no contact details but the money was still coming in. Quite a few were not paying anything, but were still receiving the fixture list. I then got on the phone to confirm the details we had - I hadn't a clue who they were or how old they might be. Their responses varied.

No reply.

Answerphone.

'Hello no he died five years ago.'

'Hello, I'm his mum. He's moved to Cheshire. I'm sure he'd love to play. Do you want his new number?'

'Hello, I'm his dad. He's an idle sod. He should play. Use this number for contact.'

'They moved away years ago. Somewhere near Ripponden. No idea of their number.'

'I'm his wife. Yes he'd love to play. We took the kids to The Carribean last summer and played a bit of beach cricket. Richie Richardson said he was a natural.'

'How old do you think I am? Put me on the non-player list.'

'No, I've a bad knee. I'm well over fifty.'

'Hi. How's so-and-so. Gosh we had some great times (followed by a detailed account of a catch, or an innings, or a wicket or two). Yes course I'll play. I'll have a look at the fixtures and see when I'm available. Remember me to so-and-so.'

'Erm, I haven't played for years why not? Yes, put me down, I'd love to turn out for the odd game.'

Everyone was polite and tried to help. The 'no replies' sort of tallied with some of the non-payers, so the list was rationalised a bit. However, a lot of the non-payers turned out to be recent occasionals who'd become sort of regular but had not been signed up. Thankfully, not difficult to correct. I said I hadn't a clue how old some of the members were, but that was not quite true, because their subscription fee was the clue. The smaller it was, the older the player or ex-player. £2 per annum for the fifty, sixty and seventy year olds, many of the names recognisable from The AGM. Quite a lot of Taylors for some reason. The amount then jumped at random, depending if anyone brought it up at the biannual committee meeting.

'Didn't we ought to increase annual subs?'

The answer was straight forward. Either, 'No.' or 'Yes.'

'No' was the better answer, avoiding a three hour discussion as to what the fee should go up to.'

Did we have any ringers? There's no ringer list in "The Book" and they certainly don't call and ask for a game. The dictionary defines ringer as a contestant who is entered in a competition under false pretenses. This would be harsh on our captains. They do select their personal choice, but I doubt there is a deliberate attempt to deceive the opposition. Since their foundation, The Casuals have shared out the captaincy. Depending on interest there are up to nine weary volunteers who undergo the highs and lows of getting a side together. Rupert, Bill, Will, Ken Jagger, Marc Davis, Mark Windale and Marcus Longbottom were captains when I started. Ken restricted himself to the touring team fixture, nevertheless eagerly awaited because of his wife's, Jean's, cricket teas. Then the three Mar....'s stood down. Marcus left for Somerset. Mark had to hand over because he was mostly in Thailand, developing educational programmes.

I think he would also admit to running out of fitness. Marc felt someone else ought to have a go. In came Sam and Umbers, along with Paul “Nozzzer” Brown, Duncan Cleave and Ian Cooper. Nozz and Dunc made their debuts against The Rugby Club, in 2003 and 2004 respectively. Ian was also recruited in 2003. A great trio to keep The Casuals fresh.

Captains and their matches are doled out at the Spring committee meeting. In February or March, they have no idea of their personal commitments on matchdays, so who is captain on the Summer Sunday can be a lottery. They nevertheless discharge their responsibility to get eleven players at a certain place by a certain time. The first three games of the season could be covered by those attending The AGM? A good idea, but some players are not there. Another good ploy is to select those who played last week. In other words one captain has to ring up the next on the rota. It sounds easy enough. And then there is the Caythorpe factor. Will the usual suspects be enough for strong opposition? So its fair that the captains have some slack, and again its fair to say some have more slack than others.

The week before the ‘1 in 12’ game, I waited patiently by the phone. The call never came, so I reverted to plan B which, as it says in “The Book”, is to give the captain a ring.

‘I’ve already got my team,’ he said and paused.

‘Oh, right,’ I said and that was it. A kick in the stomach. Not even thanked for calling.

This was a unusual experience. I’d never had a problem getting selected. Right from school, nearly always first, second or third on the team sheet. Wanting to play in the first place was a different matter. I had to feel at home, sharing an understanding of how the game and the world worked; being ‘one of us’ in other words. This sense of belonging can’t be there all the time and most people will have had the “Kes” football moment. The sports master was Brian Glover, ‘Line up on the half way line, quickly. I’ll have first pick.’ The weedy and the fat are left to the end, ‘Casper I’ve got to have you, come on’.

But at least Casper was there. School games periods are inclusive and you play with what you’ve got. There is no chance of importing a the first team centre forward if he’s in a geography lesson. So inevitably I asked the question, ‘What about the purpose of The Casuals? Are we there to win or to take part? Which captains are on which message?’ There were no answers coming from a disconnected phone. I recalled a sort of mission statement from Greg, ‘The Casuals were set up specifically to give hopeless cricketers a game.’ Not the case this week then. We were normally two or three short. What had happened?