

“Nothing to Play For”

May: A New Cricket Writer on the Block

Yapham at Yapham

Winner of the toss unknown. Casuals fielded anyway

Yapham	121 for 8 off 40 overs (Rob Hunter 4 for 18 off 9 overs)
Casuals	123 for 3 off 26 overs and 4 balls (Rob Hunter 52 no)

Midweek, I e-mailed a draft of the Stainborough report through to Bill.

‘Bill, will you look at this? I would hate to contravene club policy. Will you make sure it gets through the committee?’

‘They’ll ‘ave what we write,’ he said.

This was straight talking, so I dutifully e-mailed my final report. Unfortunately Bill, the man for figures and organisation, found difficulty opening it.

‘DAve, are you uuusing an old version of Word? jMore recent ones save with the file extension .doc, rather than .word which yours does. Net result I still can't open it!!

I’m not sure what I did with it, but it was better the second time,

‘Finally opened it and its a cracker - well done, a good start to your new career!’

Which was nice.

Sunday, match day, did not start well. The wickets were pitched at two o’clock when I was happily on my way to Bridlington, and still would have been if I hadn’t seen a sign saying five more miles to Driffield. I haven’t a clue who won the toss, but as we were fielding when I arrived, I think we’d lost it? Six overs had been bowled and they were already one wicket down.

I parked at deep squarish third man, where Rupert was standing, allegedly fielding,

‘Ah, the scribe,’ he said. Oh, I thought, Bill must’ve already passed round the Stainborough article.

Now the Oxford definition of scribe includes “person who writes or can write”. I could join up letters so okay there then. Next was “ancient or mediaeval copyist of manuscripts” and “ancient Jewish maker and keeper of records”. I was uncertain about the ancient, and Jewish was definitely out. But I was happy with writing some sort of permanent account. The final definition “pointed instrument for marking wood or stone” lost me completely. Mmm, I wondered. What would people be expecting from my pieces?

I was told to field next to the hawthorn bush. Sam Wilkinson was skipper and adorned his instructions with wafting movements, bit like one of those blokes who help aeroplanes around airports with big lollipops.

‘Which hawthorn bush, there are several.’

‘Just go to fine leg and if you see a red ball, pick it up and chuck it at the idiot with the big gloves. Come back in two hours when you’ve finished.’

It was a thoughtful spot from where I could assess our strengths. Ten men this week. Dom had gone to watch Norwich AFC at the playoffs in Cardiff. Roy of the Rovers was not here. Who is? The skipper’s brought half of Uppertong CC. with him by the looks of it. Then there’s Rupert and Marc.

The farmland around Yapham in deep East Yorkshire was lovely but flat and there was nothing to break a brutal May wind. At three thirty the sun went in and a series of requests followed,

‘Sam fetch us me sweater. Its third on the left.’

‘’arry gerus me sweater, will yer?’

‘Tom, yes, will you, good lad.’

It rained cricket pullovers. Last year the sun shone all afternoon, and cows grazed on the boundary. Had the foot and mouth stopped all that? Still, batsmen don’t need cows ambling behind the bowler’s arm.

After 18 overs they were 58 for 1 and looked comfortable. Skipper decided on a bowling change.

‘Thanks Bill, have a blow. Rob, next over down the hill please.’

‘Well bowled Bill, unlucky.’

It all went quiet. Rob marked his run and stood waiting, twenty yards behind the stumps. Then suddenly the team were baying,

‘Come on Rob, fire ‘em in.’

‘Give ‘im your throat ball.’

‘Let ‘im ‘ave it Rob.’

And he didn’t disappoint. Whilst most of the deliveries pitched just in the batsman’s half, there were also full tosses, yorkers, wides, and those not to be trusted, not quite on a length. Such variety demanded breathless concentration from both batsmen and fielders, especially the keeper. And there was his Chris Cairns slower ball. The one that the batsman thinks is going to knock his head off, so he ducks to avoid it, only to see it dolly gently onto middle stump. Well Rob’s was nothing like that. His was a slow no-ball that gave a good impression of a hand grenade. The batsman had no need to get involved and it was a lottery who fielded.

Wickets fell. The first to go was a stout gentleman in his fifties, who we learned later had a rather loud broad North Yorkshire accent. He had little, or rather no backlift, and pulled a long hop to Bill at short midwicket, who I thought saw it rather late. I must have fallen asleep when the next lad went, but you can get out of touch down by the hawthorn bush. Rob’s last two victims were clean bowled, stumps splayed about, bails all over the place.

Rob’s spell removed the heart of their batting and they slumped to 96 for 5 off 33 overs. Rupert had kept the other end going with no luck. White haired, portly some might say. Played competitively for years as a medium pace bowler. Recently he’d acknowledged, publically and presumably privately, that the physical demands of cricket had overtaken him. It was his eyesight he said. Still, he was capable of a few overs.

Then skip made a bowling change at both ends. Marc Davis came on with his hitchkicking run and little wobblies. Marc was twenty when he started playing for The Casuals in the late nineteen seventies. He’d worked in the family textile business since leaving school, a rugby league fan and golfer at the same club as Rupert. His hair was thinning at the front, whilst flowing and curly toward the back. He could’ve been mistaken for a philosophy don. Well, not really. Greg bowled from the other end. He simply stood at the crease and popped up deceptive lazy driftly outswingers. Greg was recruited by the same guy who suggested I play, Tim Beaumont, and despite a humble Oxfordshire beginning, he had many of the attributes Tim would have been looking for. Putting himself about would be the main one, or networking as the modern jargon has it. Something to do with selling and the communications industry. Being in the army would have helped. He could certainly persuade people to do things they didn’t want to

do. A key skill for Chairman. He'd also taken up golf, but his influence hadn't stretched as far as Marc and Rupert's exclusive institution.

Greg's first ball went for four. Sam did some more aviation semaphore.

'Shall I move out deep, skip?' said Marc.

'Yes. I didn't realise he was going to bowl crap.'

It's a good job Greg was not sensitive. His second and last over was a wicket maiden. They finished on 121.

I went for my notebook. All writers carry one at all times, when they remember. Everyone was relaxing on the boundary edge.

'Do you really need all that paper, Dave?'

Bill made a request, 'I notice we had a cowboy genre last week. Can you do us a Caribbean one?'

Was he serious? I'd edited references to 'the older craggy bald mildly embittered leader rides off alone into the sunset to who knows what more adventures' but it could return. Perhaps 'slaphead who bowls a bit' could get in somewhere. What was Caribbean genre anyway?

The tea interval was not a time to drop the guard.

'Where did you get lost, Holmfirth?'

'Ha, ha.'

'I knew someone who was going to Liverpool and finished up in Hull.'

'Oh, did you?'

'My wife rang me at home once to ask the way. She was due in Edinburgh at lunchtime and was lost. Where are you ringing from? Birmingham, she says. She'd only gone the wrong way on the M1.'

'Hum,' a traffic jam of getting-lost stories.

Then Marc wanted the Yapham report to be precise, 'You missed the best bit. I took a spectacular catch.'

'After an equally brilliant delivery,' added Jim, beautiful coiffure for one so hairless. Had Jim bowled? I'd obviously completely lost touch down by the hawthorn bush. The account of the wicket was corroborated by the chairman. I began to realise that the guys would do anything to appear in the match report. The pressure was beginning to tell, unrelieved by the skipper as he sauntered about,

'Dave, will you open for me, please.' Very polite and formal, just as I was enjoying a ham sandwich. How could I refuse?

I'd a new partner. Skipper Sam Wilkinson, he of the mood and movement school of field placing. Another of the senior regulars, a Charterhouse man, sturdy and rubicund, comfortable in both league and fashionable friendly cricket. I was sure I'd seen him on GNER posters depicting the front at Skegness or perhaps it was on adverts for baby soap.

He faced first and their opening bowler was called Flint. Now Flint was handy. Medium fast, accurate, moving it away from the right hander. Sam liked to get on the front foot and drive, so it was a series of plays and misses outside the off stump. Enter loud stout North Yorkshire party who was fielding at slip,

'Keep it there Lenny, he's doing his best for yer,' sarcastic or what. Neither of us thrived at that end, but there was the odd glance for one and leg byes. The other end was more fruitful and Sam's off drive brought him four boundaries, before the inevitable, caught behind off Flint.

Rupert, a left hander, then came to the wicket. Flint promptly began to move it away from him as well. Quite a talent, our man Flint. It was Rupe's first game and he scratched and jumped around. His only scoring shot was off an inside edge, or it may have been the bottom of the bat, which did several Chinese cuts before scooting down to fine leg. He was Flint's second victim, caught behind. Rupert was all praise for Flint,

'You won't come across better bowling than that this season. I enjoyed that.'

What a strange and disquieting way to enjoy oneself.

I relieved Sam as umpire when the Uppenthong duo of Rob Hunter and David Knight, right and left handers, were in together.

Rob's batting was successful and consistent and, like his bowling, mean and moody. I would say though, that as the ball arrived, he was a tad immobile. The back foot was firmly rooted and any movement was restricted to how far his front foot was up the track. Then there was that little problem of not using the bat. Our man Flint bowled one at full speed right onto Rob's left big toe as he pulled his bat away. He was smack in front,

'Owzat!!'

'Not out,' I shouted. I've found, that when giving my side not out, its best to do it quickly and loudly, conveying the confident impression of a thorough knowledge of the LBW laws. We'd all been on the wrong side of Rupert's LBW decisions and I always gave my fellow sufferers at least one chance to redeem themselves. Rupert took MCC coaching qualifications and so must have known something of the laws of the game. But what about his eyesight?

Between overs Rob and I had a frank exchange of views,

'Rob, you'd best get some bat on it, or I'll be giving you out.'

He looked straight at me. His eyes widened ever so slightly. And that was it. I'd expected a bit more of a response. A thankyou maybe? Had he heard me? I repeated my advice.

'Hey, man, wasn't it going down leg side?'

Now he wasn't getting the point was he? A PhD student in business and computing and I had to spell it out for him,

'You only get one chance, alright?'

As I walked back to square leg he nodded darkly and prodded the wicket with the toe end of his bat. He kept his cool and his wicket and scored 52, ably supported by David Knight.

The fielders were forever changing as each batter took guard, one left handed, the other right, accompanied by a running, in his case ambling, commentary from North Yorkshire stout party that could be heard in Bridlington.

'Come on lads, left hand, keep thinking.'

'What you doing Lazer, right hander?'

We overhauled their total within 27 overs and Rob was man of the match.

This at least, was an accurate account of what took place. But I did have, in addition, a more literary intent. Would I join the great cricket writers, extolling the virtue of the summer game? Where does God come into it and what about the British Empire? Was cricket a metaphor for all that was honest and wholesome? An antidote to the cynicism of the 21st century? Who was I writing for? The players, the supporters. Hmm . . . what would Rupert say? Hmm . . . so was that what it was all about - struggling for inspiration up in my garret wondering what Rupert would like to read? I don't think so.

In the opposition's local after the game, I sat next to Greg. Would I get a sensible direction for the Casuals' journal?

'Is there a Casuals' policy or anything?'

'Like a mission statement, you mean?'

'Yes.'

'No.'

'Oh.' This is going well.

'The Casuals were set up specifically to give hopeless cricketers a game,' he said.

My goodness, I hadn't realised, it was a refuge for uncoordinated middle aged dreamers who haven't got gardens and pimply faced blind youth whose parents want them out of the way after Sunday lunch. We did have a few league cricketers as well.

'Oh, by the way Dave, the Stainborough article should have ended, "and the following morning there was snow on Holme Moss".'

So he wanted to get in on the act as well. They all wanted to shape and influence. It even affected my life outside cricket. Tuesday night, Rupert collared me at choir practice,

'Dave you haven't e-mailed me yet. I want to read the article and send you the pictures I took in the pub, and at the barbecue.'

'What barbecue?' I missed a lunchtime do? Shoot.

And blow me, on Wednesday, if I'm not on Leeds Station and if Marc Davis isn't lurking on platform two, 'What you doing here, Dave?'

'I've a conference at The Queens Hotel. Its an awayday, bit of a kip.'

'It'll give you chance to write up your match report,' he said.

He may have played for The Casuals again, but I for one never saw Roger Knight again.

Had I come to any conclusions as to who I was writing for, about what? Keeping a record is for dusty books. We needed heroic cricketing deeds that rose above the ordinary statistic. But, I conceded, the average Casual was more likely produce comedy rather than drama. Still Rob was going to supervise a web site, so whatever happened, players and camp followers could read all about it.

I received my first e-mail the following week. "Enjoyed the report but where were the cowboy allegories beloved of aficionados of the Stainborough missive? - Bill."

Banging on about cowboys again. I replied, "Only one 'f' and one 'a' in aficionados and strictly speaking they are lovers of bull-fighting."

Note to self. Must stop confusing cricket with other sorts of writing.