

NHTCC 2007

Season Preview: The Captain's thoughts

By Jon O'Shea

For Northowram Hedge Top Club Captain, and newly-appointed Chairman, Andrew Gardner, the 2007 Townergate Halifax League season marks his 24th year in senior cricket, only five of which he has spent away from the club. Having inherited the captaincy from team-mate Gary Rodger during a rocky patch in the middle of last summer, Andrew led the team to safety from the drop into Division Two. This year will be his first full season as skipper since a brief spell back in 1990, as a raw 22-year old, and it promises to be an exciting time for both Andrew and the club, as he attempts to steer a youthful 1st XI onwards and upwards.

Joining the club as an 11-year old and then going on to work his way through the ranks into the first team by the tender age of 15, Andrew has been pretty much synonymous with Northowram Hedge Top during the past three decades. Soon after that 1990 season, in which he was made Captain despite his relative inexperience, he moved up the cricket pyramid to nearby Lightcliffe CC of the Bradford League, enjoying some success while he was there. Then, in the mid-90s, Andrew returned to cricket in Northowram – only with Hedge Top's neighbours Northowram Fields (also of the Bradford League) – as he'd agreed to play "over the wall" in order to help out an old friend from his days in amateur football.

Fortunately for Hedge Top members and followers, two seasons later, Andrew chose to return to his roots after a five-year hiatus – and he's been a permanent feature of the team's bowling attack ever since. Now, aged 39, he has re-assumed the captaincy and feels more than ready to take on the established 'big boys' of the Halifax League this year. He feels it's vital for a captain to have both the respect of his players and the respect of the opposition, something which he himself has undoubtedly earned over an extensive period of time in local cricket.



Andrew outside the new pavilion

In the intervening decade since returning to the top tier in 1997, Northowram have concentrated primarily on consolidation and avoiding demotion. There have often been commitment issues – a number of former Hedge Top players lacked discipline when it came to attending nets on weekday evenings; preferring to just turn up at the weekend and, not surprisingly, found themselves under-performing. Andrew also feels that enthusiasm has, in some quarters, been lacking somewhat over the last couple of seasons, with some less dedicated players showing an abject lack of the necessary grit and determination it takes to succeed in the hard-fought Halifax League, where the top sides can regularly select the same XI week-in and week-out.

This summer though, Andrew plans to implement a more stringent approach to attending training on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. And though it's not practical for a club of Hedge Top's size to drop people from the team should they fail to show up for net practice, he will be expecting a better turn out this time around – and, so far, he's been pleased with the results.

All teams from the youth set-up to the first XI will also be afforded the opportunity to get some much-needed practice out on the square, rather than being confined to the two practice nets at the far end of the Club's ground. Andrew has taken this step in order to improve the intensity of training by attempting to replicate full match conditions. This decision should hopefully pay dividends; as the batsmen can work on their communication and running between the wickets, bowlers can rehearse their run-ups, and those out in the field remain directly involved rather than hanging about forlornly, waiting in the queue to have a net. All of which should offer Hedge Top's predominantly youthful team some valuable experience to take into the League campaign.

The overriding theme in the first XI this year certainly will be one of youth. Several promising young cricketers are now "another 6 inches taller, another 6 yards quicker" than 12 months ago, explains Andrew. At least three or four will, this season, take on the challenging step-up from youth and Sunday cricket to fully-fledged senior action, and Andrew believes they'll tackle the task with relish. They will surely need to, as Hedge Top have seen something of an exodus of experienced cricketers in the last few months – most headed for the Bradford League or moving elsewhere altogether.

Although the summer ahead could prove a tough one, Andrew is of the opinion that his team is more than capable of pulling off some surprise results, saying: "With some of those that have left, a lot of people will think that Northowram are a weak team this season – but we'll be out there to prove these people wrong." He also thinks that the quality of those progressing into the first team may shock one or two who "don't know their pedigree".

Two such young cricketers are Adam Wadsworth and Sam Gardner. Adam, who last season averaged 19 from 7 first team innings and managed a fine 56 at Bradshaw, has "come on leaps and bounds in the past year", according to his skipper; adding extra pace to his bowling and fielding, and looking even more solid with the bat. Andrew's son Sam, who took 5-21 against Warley last year, has progressed so well that he is now line to open the bowling with his dad.

When asked who he fancies to be Northowram's star this summer, Andrew reluctantly replies: "Me!?" But more seriously, his and many Hedge Top followers' hopes will partly rest upon the form of explosive right-handed batsman, vice captain Ben Harvey. Ben has, in the main, excelled for the first team in the past few years, but has occasionally got himself out when threatening yet another big score. Nearly midway through the 2005 season, after he'd regained his place in the first XI following a poor run of form, Ben went on a run-scoring spree: plundering over 600 runs in the second half of the campaign – a true indication of the latent talent at his disposal. With Ben on top form, Andrew believes that Hedge Top will always be a force to be reckoned with.

Despite the squad somewhat lacking strength in depth, Andrew is sure that the abundance of team spirit present at Northowram Hedge Top will be sufficient to pull them through any sticky situations; pointing towards Bradshaw's success in the 2006 Townergate Halifax League season, which was primarily based on organisation and belief rather than a reliance on star names. "Above all," he says, "we must enjoy ourselves and go out there and be competitive". A sentiment that will, without doubt, stand them in good stead between now and mid-September.