

## Profile: Len and Paul Gravenor By Jon O'Shea

In their two decades of service to the club, Len and Paul Gravenor – father and son – have both become firm fixtures at Northowram Hedge Top. The genial pair are warmly valued by all at Hedge Top Lane, and Paul's many achievements, despite his hearing disability, only serve to demonstrate their worth to the Club which has treated them so well.

Len Gravenor moved, with his family, to the village of Northowram in the early 1990s, and though he'd retired from playing cricket some time earlier, his 16 year old son Paul was keen to take up the game. Because of his lengthy playing career in the Halifax League, Len was already very familiar with several Hedge Top members and was well acquainted with the Club's then captain through local football. Therefore, when he introduced his young son to the Club's under-17 team Paul was almost straight away accepted as "one of the guys".

Because the youth set-up at Northowram was flourishing at the time, competition for a place in the under-17 first XI was intense. Len sensibly took the step of bringing Paul over to nearby Shelf CC of the Bradford League, who were then struggling for youngsters, in order to earn valuable playing experience, though he still trained primarily at Northowram. Paul's time at Shelf was short but certainly very sweet. In just seven youth team matches at Carr House Lane, he won a remarkable three trophies.



**Paul, top right, celebrates another coaching success**

Before he'd been given the opportunity to practice with Hedge Top, Paul had encountered some prejudice towards his unwieldy hearing aid (which was, at that time, no more than a primitive box worn around his neck) – particularly from his peers in the Boys Brigade. From birth, Paul has had only five per cent hearing in one ear and none in the other. In fact, he was never even expected to be able to speak, let alone to communicate as effectively as he does today.

A Halifax-based specialist had pronounced this to be the case, but Paul's parents were convinced otherwise by the second opinion offered by Manchester University's Professor Taylor, who was then considered the leading hearing specialist in the country. With this encouragement, Paul's mother dedicated herself to developing her young son's communication skills, and their combined

efforts paid rich dividends when Paul was transferred from a school for the deaf into mainstream education because of his excellent progress.

He declined to learn Sign Language as he felt that, to integrate fully into society, he needed to fully concentrate on improving his speech. Paul then later went on to attend Calderdale College – without any dedicated disability support; achieving a hard-earned distinction in graphic design.

Upon his return to Northowram from his time at Shelf, Paul was brought into the newly-established Sunday XI, which had been set up with the express aim of providing opportunities for young cricketers to gain experience alongside older members, and subsequently remained a fixture in the team for the following decade. For five consecutive years he topped the Sunday selection batting averages (from the lower-middle order, he adds!) and was named the team's Captain at one stage.

His proud father, Len, fondly recalls Paul's first ever century in senior cricket; in a Sunday game against New Riding. As Northowram's Sunday umpire, Len was in prime position to see his son's outstanding achievement against the odds and took a break with protocol to congratulate him. He remembers: "I couldn't get down that track fast enough. If it'd been a League game I wouldn't have done it, but because it was a friendly I shook his hand and gave him a pat on the back. That was a real thrill for me; it was a thrill for a lot of people at the Club". Indeed, the Club members framed the scorebook from that day and presented it to Paul as a memento of his success.

Paul had also made numerous appearances for the second team before cricket took something of a back seat during the last couple of years, as he focuses on setting up his own decorating business with the help of his dad. While off the field, Paul has taken on numerous roles within the Club – from a short spell as Assistant Treasurer to working behind the bar (where his lip-reading skills are put firmly to the test in the hectic, noisy atmosphere) – not to mention his informal position as all-round Club decorator and handyman.

Commendably, Paul has also taken the first steps into coaching – having qualified as an ECB Level One coach – as he aims to put a little more back into the Club that has offered him so much, and with his help the under-17s have achieved considerable success. Although Paul needs to make an extra effort in his communication with the youngsters (as he needs to be face-to-face in order to pass on instructions), they have all grown to appreciate Paul's admirable contribution. In the future, he would enjoy the opportunity to develop as a coach, work commitments notwithstanding, and continue to give the Hedge Top kids the benefit of his wealth of experience.

Paul himself considers one of his most treasured memories at Hedge Top to be his selection in the Chairman's XI for the pavilion-opening visit of the Bradford Bulls in 2002 – though he understandably has mixed feelings about the day, owing to the tragic passing of the much-treasured Mark Oldman. However, his proudest moment yet came when, in 2004, he was unexpectedly named Northowram Hedge Top Clubman of the Year on his return from holiday in the Dominican Republic. Paul now says of the award: "It showed that the Club appreciate what I've done for them as much as I appreciate what they've done for me. This Club's been like family to me."

Though some may consider him unfortunate to have been confronted with such a disability as his, Paul is now philosophical about his hearing difficulties. His total acceptance at Northowram Hedge Top has shown him that anything can be achieved, given sufficient will and courage. Given the depth of his achievement at the Club, Paul believes that: "life's too short to worry about disability – just get on with it!"