

“I THINK EVERYONE WANTS TO KEEP IT AS VILLAGE CRICKET, LIKE IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN”

Professionals – or not? – in the Halifax Cricket League by Sam Smith

The year 1914 was momentous in British history with the outbreak of hostilities in Europe marking the start of World War One. In West Yorkshire, on a happier note, a small, little-known piece of cricketing history was in the making with the launch of the Halifax Parish League.



Among the founding rules of the new league was: “that all playing members must reside within a radius of five miles of the ground, or have played four successive seasons with that club, unless they gained special sanction of the league committee.”

The sentiment behind the rule, of ensuring the league was for local cricketers to enjoy, is still very much alive and kicking in the running of today’s Halifax League. And to that end the league and the member clubs have steadfastly resisted the temptation to follow other leagues – like the Huddersfield League – and allow the introduction of professional players.

Blackley club captain Dave Townsend said: “I think everyone wants to keep it as village cricket, like it has always been. It’s about your local community getting together on a Saturday afternoon and playing a local standard of cricket against fellow villagers.

“This is a league for players who want enjoy a game of cricket and, obviously, play to win. But at the same have a good crack and a few beers and a laugh after the game.”

Dave believes the league is fairer and the clubs better off for being a “no-pro” set-up. “Professionals are of a standard where they are a great deal better than the local players. Bringing them in isn’t fair – it’s a case of which clubs can afford to pay the most get the best pros and they win them the matches,” he said.

“Instead of using our money to finance professionals, we are able to invest in our grounds and equipment. Our facilities at Blackley are as good as any team in Yorkshire and this is surely more beneficial than paying one player hundreds of pounds a week. Not having pros in the league certainly does not put off good local players wanting to play in the Halifax League. There are plenty of young cricketers coming through and there are many players from other leagues wanting to come into our league.”

However, Dave does acknowledge that there may be a role for professional cricketers in the Halifax League – as coaches. “If they are not playing and being paid for coaching then I haven’t got a problem with that. Having professional coaches would rub off on the younger and older players alike and would improve the standard of cricket. But my view is most definitely they should not be paid to play.”

On a darker note, Dave revealed that he has on occasions suspected the presence of “ringers” – players obviously from a higher standard of cricket who are being given a cash “backhand” to turn out. “I’ve seen players come in to bat and you know they are of a higher standard and should be playing in a different league,” he said. “You never know if they are being paid or not. It is virtually impossible to prove.”

So maybe the odd “professional” may have slipped Halifax League’s “no-pro” security net. The founders of the Parish League would turn in their graves!