

# 'BIG FOUR' AMBITIONS

2008 Review & 2009 Preview

By Ian Hirst

Elland are one of the most established clubs in the Huddersfield Cricket League and will want to be one of the frontrunners this time around. If you were comparing them to one of the current Premier League football teams then they would certainly be one of the 'big four'. Having joined the Huddersfield League in 1926, they have always been in the top flight apart from in 1962 - the only time that they got relegated.



Last year, Elland were pipped to the title by four-time winners of the league, Honley. However, despite finishing second, their final league standing didn't tell the whole story of the Hullen Edge's club 2008 campaign. Last year also saw Elland's title bid disrupted by a crippling injury crisis during the summer. With the chopping and changing during the season, it was incredible what they achieved in finishing second.

Their campaign saw injuries to several key members of the squad.

Former Micklehurst teenager Greg Buckley missed the majority of the season as he broke his ankle while playing football. This was a huge blow to the club.

Big things were expected from a player on the books at Lancashire and who had been playing cricket in South Africa. He had made the perfect start to the 2008 season, making 62 in his first game against Lascelles Hall and then taking a five-wicket haul against Holmfirth. However, this was only the tip of the iceberg in terms of injuries to key members of the Elland side.

Ajmal Shahzad is a familiar name in these parts. Last season the Yorkshire second teamer was another to be hit by an injury. He played just one game for the Hullen Edge club before he picked up a hamstring injury that ruled him out for both Elland and Yorkshire for six weeks. It would have been quite easily to conclude that there might have been some sort of injury curse at the club as more players were struck down and put out of action.

Current captain Ryan Robinson was struck with a back problem following a bowling spell. And Rob Laycock pulled a hamstring before the start of the season which came back to haunt him later on in the season.

The only mainstays of the campaign were captain Gary Jakeman, Richard Blakey and Australian all-rounder Cameron Borgas but even he picked up a side strain when fielding in a match against Delph and Dobcross just as soon as he started to find his rhythm in his bowling. Another positive came in all-rounder Jimmy Thornton returning after shoulder surgery to give the team the spin option and more batting depth.

It was down to the two senior players to try and guide Elland through this difficult patch. Blakey joined Elland as a boy before moving on up into the county game and representing England. Blakey, born and bred in Huddersfield, returned to the club in 2007. Last year he turned out again for his first club where it all started for him, and was able to add some much needed experience to a side that was in desperate need of players.

It was interesting to notice that the two senior players were the ones who avoided injury. In this difficult situation it was a chance for the youngsters to gain some much needed experience at first team level. It was certainly a no-lose situation as the youngsters would have no fear as they had nothing to lose and not much was expected from them. They didn't disappoint as the youngsters proved that there was talent waiting in the wings.

Craig Fletcher and Danny Rhodes opened the bowling on what proved to be a superb learning curve for them. Greg Finn also came into the frame. He had been opening the batting for the second team and was thrown into the first-team mix. Despite batting at number eleven for the first team, the wicketkeeper was now learning from Blakey and Jakeman in the art of form behind the stumps, which would eventually prove to be very good.

In terms of the amount of injuries that Elland sustained during the season and the success the juniors had in coming to terms with first-team cricket, it was a major success for the club in finishing second in 2008.

This season it is all change for Elland. Ryan Robinson takes over the reins as captain and Stuart Fletcher replaces Dennis Midwood as club chairman. For the first time in many seasons they go into the campaign without an overseas player. Due to the credit crunch and the ECB and Home Office's lengthy deliberations on entry qualification processes for overseas professionals, the club have decided against bringing in an overseas player. It's not just a problem for Elland as many Rugby League teams have found it difficult in recruiting players from further afield.

It's a huge blow for the club, especially after the success that Aussie Cameron Borgas had last season. Not only did his bowling become a major asset to the team but he finished second in the averages for the Huddersfield Drakes League for his batting. He finished the season with an average of 74.08 with a highest knock of 109 not out. For a club not to be able to recruit a player who is almost likely to score a half-century in every match, it leaves a massive hole in the team.

The departures of Rob Laycock back to the Halifax League as well as the uncertainty over the availability of Richard Blakey means that the club may be off the pace in terms of numbers.

However, there are a number of positives for the forthcoming season, most notably a full season of availability for Lancashire youngster Greg Buckley. After missing all but five games last term, the return of the all-rounder means that he is one of the likely candidates to fill the shoes of Borgas. It seems like he is already rising to the challenge after taking eleven wickets in his first two matches in 2009 including 7-79 against Honley - which contained four wickets in four balls.

The club have also recruited Sam Scott from Shelley. However, his availability and the number of games the club will get out of him is in question as he signed a professional contract with the Wakefield Trinity Wildcats Super League team. The club are also in talks with Andrew Clarke but he is currently recovering from a knee operation.

Despite the air of doubt over these two players, the experience the youngsters got last term will stand them in good stead for the 2009 campaign. Craig Fletcher and Danny Rhodes will lead the attack again, while Greg Finn has taken the gloves to try and emulate Blakey. Another youngster that the club is excited about is Jack Pulley.

With the experience of Jimmy Thornton, Lee Baxter and, if the situation calls for it, Stuart Fletcher strapping on his spikes, it proves that the youngsters will have a lot of guidance to help them steer them through difficult patches.

Veteran secretary Derek Gledhill, who has seen the club grow and grow, believes that they might not be challenging for the title this season. He said, "In terms of numbers it may be difficult in mounting a challenge. Despite beating them last week, Honley are going to be a strong outfit especially with former Yorkshire player Matthew Wood returning".

As Alan Hansen famously said about the Manchester United team in 1995-6, "you don't win anything with kids". Look how right he was. The case might be the same with Elland. They might not have any overseas talent but the homegrown products and the experience they have may be the perfect ingredients to mount a challenge for the title without anyone expecting it.