

# BANTER ON AND OFF THE FIELD

## The Matchday Experience

By Ian Hirst

The day was Saturday April 25th 2009. Three years out of cricket and I went to watch Elland take on Clayton West. Walking into the ground, seeing the teams knock up before the game and go through their pre-game training routines, it was amazing how many memories came flooding back of when I was part of the Broad Oak team.



You certainly miss the banter both on the field when fielding and off it when you are getting ready to bat, though I did not do much of that to be honest. It was a not really a shock to the system but a sort of acceptance of what the future has in store. After three years not playing any cricket it has become easier to accept that the chances of playing on a Saturday again are slim because of the career path that I have chosen. I suppose the real eye-opener will be when I hang up my football boots. That will be a real jolt to the daily routine of my life around sport. However, the past few months have taught me that it will not be all bad.

I may not be out on the field of play but I will be doing the next best thing, reporting on sporting events. Watching from the sidelines, taking in the occasion of the match, feeling the emotion of players and fans alike, reporting on that will be my job and it is the next best thing.

It was the case at Elland that day. Notepad and pen in hand, sitting on the bench next to the regulars, I was ready for what was going to unfold before me and how I was going to report the action in my own style. There was no better place for writing a report. The sun was out, casting the clubhouse's shadow on the pitch, the banter in the middle of the field was always lively and what made the day pass by was the friendliness of the people at the club.

Being able to talk to the regulars, who have probably seen matches dating back to before I was born, made the day really enjoyable. I would look up at the clock on top of the clubhouse, then look up again, and an hour would have passed. It is amazing how quickly the time goes once you get drawn into a sporting match-up. This will probably not be the case in soccer matches that seem to have 0-0 written all over them or where there is no emotion or life in a game.

However, at Elland there always seemed something to be happening and not necessarily on the pitch. You start to notice what happens around the club on matchday during the breaks in play. One of these is seeing how members of the club go around to keep everyone happy and involved. I noticed this with Derek Gledhill or 'Mr Elland' as he is sometimes referred to. He would go around selling programmes and collecting gate money. However, on this occasion there was no fee necessary due to the visitors travelling a fair distance so there was not what you would call a 'sell out' crowd. I suppose it may be one of the perks of the job getting in to report on games for free. Downside is you have to write an enthralling story and meet the deadline.

It is amazing how little things in the game that would drive you mad on the pitch seem to be quite humorous on the sidelines. This happened on Saturday when Greg Buckley and everyone on the pitch thought the batsmen had clearly edged one to the keeper. The batsmen stood his ground and the dreaded finger was not raised. Of course, everyone and his dog on the sidelines had no idea as to whether the batsman had edged it. It is what makes the matchday experience so special. Little moments in the game that can be talked about for hours on end and reported on. It did not have a great effect on the result but it was a fantastic talking-point as everyone went in for tea.

This kind of thing is a regular occurrence at tea at this time of the season in the clubhouse. You have the teams coming in talking about what happened in the game and what the plan of action is in the second innings. The bar staff are kept busy serving the regulars who like to come and watch the game. They may not be playing the game and helping the team out that way; however, they are providing the club with a steady income in exchange for 'beverages'. The tea ladies are rushing about making sure that everyone is

catered for and there is enough food to fill the bellies, and in some cases larger bellies, of the players.

Once the game is over the players can relax and have a drink together. There is a real openness at Elland on matchdays. They welcome all-comers and this is reflected in the team - as they picked up the David Boulton Trophy for the most sporting team in 2008.

The players' day is finished but for the rest of the club, and myself, the work continues. The bar staff, the regulars, the groundsman, the tea ladies and committee members are the heartbeat of the club and keep the club ticking over. The players are there to take part in the sport but without these other people there would be no club. They are the ones who make the matchday experience such an enjoyable one and one I would gladly sample again.

However, once the match has finished, my job continues. As everyone enjoys their post-match drinks, I am off writing and preparing the story. Sport throws up many challenges during the game including one-on-one battles that you have to win. However, there are other challenges away from the sporting arena. I may not be taking part physically in sport in the future; however, the challenge of writing sports stories after the game is a battle that I am looking forward to. The matchday experience at Elland made me realise this further and I cannot wait to go back and face the challenge of reporting the next story.