

The Syndrome – 2008 Second Team XI Season Review by Paul Ellis

After a disappointing 2007, finishing bottom of the Cedar Court Conference with only five wins from 22 games, Clayton West were hoping for much better in 2008 under the leadership of Dale Baxter. Facing a season in the Frank Platt Conference, Clayton needed Andrew Thornhill to prolong the batting form which saw him pick up the E.C. Peel Trophy if they were to bounce back at the first attempt.

A.Thornhill became the only batsman to average over 50 runs a game in the Conference with a total of 52.64 from 17 innings; his highest score of 123 was only third in the overall standings with J.Greenway of Hall Bower CC taking that honour with a superb knock of 162 not out.

On a fine and clear April afternoon, Clayton West were given the perfect chance to start the 2008 season on the right note with a meeting of two relegated sides at Almondbury CC. Intent on making a statement, Clayton's arsenal of bowlers took just over an hour to skittle the hosts for just 41 all out from 18.1 overs with Simon Thornhill, Josh Scott and Pete Oxley each grabbing three wickets. Despite Ryan Baxter being caught lbw in the first over, Clayton West eased to victory by 7 wickets with Dean Rickson hitting an unbeaten 23.

In an unusual turn of events, the fixture list put Clayton up against Lascelles Hall, the other relegated side from the Cedar Court Conference, in their next match; unfortunately for the Back Lane outfit, the outcome was somewhat different. Having won the toss, captain D.Baxter elected to field with ultimate confidence in his bowlers to produce the goods again. His decision was vindicated as Lascelles were bowled out for 123 with Rickson ending with bowling figures of 5-38; it would prove to be the catalyst for an excellent season for the all-rounder. Zac Hodder, who ended the season as top wicket taker in the Clayton team with 30, ended with 1-15 taking the all-important wicket of opener Richard Shaw who top-scored with 46. After doing all the hard work in the field, Clayton threw away their control of the game with an inefficient batting display resulting in a score of 91 all out (26 of which were extras), and more importantly, a 32 run defeat.

The subsequent League matches against Emley and Marsden were dominated by two bowling displays of the highest calibre by Dean Rickson and Shaun Alderson. To take five wickets in one inning as a bowler at any level of the sport is a great achievement, but both men went one better. Rickson, who took one less wicket than Hodder during the whole season, secured bowling figures of 6-21 from 10.3 overs as Clayton secured a 6 wicket victory at Back Lane. Alderson, who only played three matches for the club, ended with figures of 6-38 from 10.1 overs as Marsden set Clayton a target of 208 to win the game. Fresh from his bowling exploits, Alderson showed his ability at the crease with the bat with a knock of 79, supported by captain Dale Baxter who fell one short of a half-century. Once both openers had been dismissed, only four of the remaining batsmen managed to score runs as Clayton fell to a 10 run defeat.

After returning to winning ways against Lepton by a significant 167 run victory thanks to a knock of 105 from Rickson and bowling figures of 4-12 from Ian Fisher, Clayton faced Drakes Premiership side Shepley in the 2nd Round of the Paddock Shield hoping to step up a gear against a higher division club. This was not to be the case as an unbeaten half-century from A. Brothers saw Shepley successfully chase the target of 96 set by Clayton to win by 7 wickets.

It was becoming apparent that, just like the 1st XI, Clayton West's 2nd XI was struggling to put together any consistent form together. For the first month of the season, a victory was followed by a defeat, and vice versa – although it remained important that Clayton were winning games, the consistency needed to gain promotion was missing. Following the exit in the Paddock Shield, Clayton suffered heavy defeats against Hall Bower and Barkisland to break the form book but returned to winning ways against Armitage Bridge. Shaun Alderson produced another all-round performance, taking 3-46 with the ball and scoring 86 off 97 deliveries with the bat in a 2 wicket victory.

The 'Win-Lose-Win-Lose' syndrome continued with a heavy defeat at Kexborough, followed a superb win against Thongsbridge at Back Lane and then an embarrassing defeat at Kirkheaton, who gained promotion in a play-off final against Lascelles Hall. Clayton elected to bat after winning the toss but suffered a capitulation as they were all out for just 24 runs from 11.5 overs, Martin Hallas and John Phayer ending with outstanding bowling figures of 5-4 and 5-20 respectively. Kirkheaton's openers took just four overs to reach the target in a day every Clayton player will want to forget in a hurry.

Such a devastating defeat appeared to revitalise Clayton as they managed to win not only once, but three times in consecutive matches – the first time in the season which back-to-back victories had occurred. Dale Rickson's superb knock of 130 not out, which was the highest score from any Clayton batsmen in 2008, started the ball rolling with a victory over Rastrick; it was soon followed by wins against Paddock and Lascelles Hall. The good run was subsequently halted by two defeats, first by an Emley side inspired by Simon Sykes' 5-32 bowling figures and an unbeaten 51 from Richard Hickling. The second defeat came at Back Lane in a close match against Almondbury with the bowling of Madden proving pivotal in taking out Clayton's tail end, finishing with figures of 4-12.

The remaining three games of the season reverted back to the syndrome as Clayton finished on a winning note with a narrow 3 run victory at Thongsbridge. Although the 2nd XI will be pleased with their 4th place finish in the Frank Platt Conference, they have the players at their disposal to go one better in 2009 and challenge for promotion. The challenge they face is not so much 'can they do it?' but 'can they be consistent?'