

Time For Solidarity – 2008 First Team XI Season Review by Paul Ellis

Following their play-off success at the expense of Broad Oak in 2007, even the most ardent members of Clayton West Cricket Club's fan base must have been hoping they would see Premiership cricket played at Back Lane for the foreseeable future.

A club that gained promotion in 2002, relegated in 2005 (finishing bottom with only two victories under their name) and promoted again last year seems a shadow of a side who won the Central League 'Double' in 1990, 1997 and 1999.

Captained by Simon "Foxy" Lockwood until his untimely illness with Guillan-Barre syndrome, the club not only gained promotion over Linthwaite-based Oak in a 3 wicket victory under stand-in captain Steven Glover, they were also joint winners of the Hopkinson Trophy with Linthwaite CC, collecting 31 points from the last six games of the season. Although neither received accolades at the Roll of Honour, all-rounders Stuart Rank and overseas player Paul Van Den Berg both enjoyed excellent seasons. Rank excelled with bat and gloves, coming fourth in batting averages with 49.56 from 19 innings and third in wicket keeping, claiming 29 wickets (27 catches, 2 stumpings). 26-year-old South African Van Den Berg, who joined Clayton West in 2002 following their promotion to the Premiership, finished a respectable eleventh in batting averages with 41.47 from 19 innings, and fifth in the bowling charts, taking 85 wickets from 393 overs with 106 maidens, averaging 13.35.

With both players hoping to match their achievements of the previous season, the 2008 campaign kicked off with a tough home fixture against Skelmanthorpe who finished runners-up to Premiership winners Honley. In windy conditions, Clayton won the toss and elected to field; Glover's decision appeared to be justified as the visitors were limited to 156 for 8 wickets from their 40 overs with A.Dani top scoring with 79 and Van Den Berg collecting bowling figures of 5-51 from 25 overs. In response, the home side's top order was blown away by the bowling of Dani and Scott Dyson, which left Clayton at a precarious 30-5. A sixth-wicket partnership between Rank, who ended unbeaten on 59, and Rob Kaskiewicz of 40 showed signs of a comeback but the game was effectively over when Danny McDermot retired injured after a knock of 28. It meant that Clayton's first game back in the Premiership ended in a 33 run defeat, although the taste of victory was just around the corner.

A 5-wicket victory over Emley Clarence was soon followed by a comprehensive 9-wicket win against Lascelles Hall, no thanks to the explosive bowling of pace bowler Van Der Berg who was showing the form that won him the Huddersfield Examiner award last season for the first bowler to reach fifty League wickets. Figures of 6-42 and 5-48 respectively illustrated the South African's ability to tear through opponents' batting order. However it was another native who was attracting media attention – 6ft 4in fast bowler Pepler Sandri who signed from the Cape Cobras club prior to the away trip to Lascelles. The 25-year old, who became the 12th player worldwide to take an all-ibw hat-trick in first-class cricket, made figures of 0-55 and hit 72 runs in

his first game but the prospect of playing alongside Van den Berg in a bowling attack puts Clayton West in good stead for the future.

Van den Berg continued his superb form with the ball as his figures of 6-31 was instrumental in a 6-victory triumph over Shelley, who ended the season with six points chalked off for playing an ineligible player. Unfortunately, this win proved to be the last in a barren spell lasting for nearly two months as the Clayton began to find life hard in the Premiership. The catalyst for the 9-match losing streak came from a 2nd Round tie against Elland in the Romida Sykes Cup after defeating Primrose Hill in the previous round. Clayton West set a target of 177 off their 40 overs with Van Den Berg top-scoring with 76 - enter Elland's player-coach Richard Blakely who treat the Back Lane crowd to a superb unbeaten knock of 130 which included 24 fours and a six on the way to his side's 8-wicket victory. From there, Clayton struggled for form and consistency with bat and ball, which inevitably led to their slide down the Premiership table.

It seemed that Clayton West had a liking for playing Shelley as another victory against their Westerley Lane opponents at the end of June ended the rot. Half-centuries from Mark Firth and Stuart Rank aided with a four wicket haul for Van Den Berg and Jonny Butterfield resulted in a 58 run victory which brought much-needed confidence into the team and fans alike. The next game saw Clayton come up against Elland looking to avenge their elimination from the Cup – although Van Den Berg found some form with the bat to hit an unbeaten 82, Elland took control of the game with opener Ryan Robinson hitting 61 off 51 deliveries and Ajmal Shahzad scoring 73 off 75 balls in a successful run chase to win by 7 wickets. The victory extended Elland's winning run to seven consecutive matches, but Clayton took encouragement from their performance in an effort to stay in the Drakes Premiership.

Three consecutive wins on the bounce against Skelmanthorpe, Emley and Lascelles Hall boosted morale within the team and, more importantly, put more points on the board towards survival. A batting average of 235 over the three games was evidence that Clayton had turned the corner from their lengthy losing spell and was beginning to score freely with the bat. Evidently, three batsmen hit their highest score of the season during this spell – Robert Kaskewicz (53), Paul Van den Berg (89) and Mark Firth (108 no.), the latter being the highest in the Clayton team.

Pepler Sandri was also excelling in his first season with Clayton West, often supplementing excellent bowling displays with some fine innings with the bat. Cricket legend Geoffrey Boycott and coach Stephen Oldham both spoke fondly of Sandri's talent during his move to Clayton West, and he showed why he is so highly rated in a game against Holmfirth in August. His superb bowling display led to season-best figures of 7-45 in 8 overs as Holmfirth only managed to score 112. Not finished there, Sandi went on to hit an unbeaten 31 off 26 balls to lead his team to victory by 4 wickets. He finished the season with the highest batting average of 40.67 from just 15 innings, plus joint-third highest score of 86 with Peter Hird who returned to the club after a spell with Nortonthorpe in the Central League.

The 2008 season came to a close in the same manner it began – a defeat to Shepley by 74 runs. Good bowling displays by Van Den Berg (4-37) and captain Steven Glover (3-80) left the home team a target of 142. The South African finished the season as top wicket taker for the second season in a row, claiming 57 victims. Unfortunately, his three wicket haul was in vain as the batsmen only scored a measly 77 runs.

Clayton West finished the season in a respectable 9th but with talented players at their disposal, they will look to push on to bigger and better things in 2009.