

JUNIOR CRICKET - IS THE BALANCE RIGHT?

By Peter Redding

Golcar Cricket Club places great emphasis on its youth teams, so much so that the number of junior teams at Swallow Lane has increased in recent years. The introduction of under-9 and under-11 teams has allowed the Lilies to have a larger pool of young talent. As with most sports, if you attract the interest of somebody early on you are likely to keep them interested in that particular discipline for a long time. One of the major questions that needs to be considered, however, is the way that junior cricket is run in terms of the rules of the game.



In the early levels of junior cricket the rules are designed to give opportunities to as many players as possible - the most obvious example being that when a batsman reaches 25 runs he must retire. There is a flip side of the coin with a rule like this and this is that perhaps it doesn't offer the chance for a young player to build an innings, an asset that will be important for batsman to learn as they work their way through the various levels of the game.

One can understand the necessity of providing as many youngsters with the opportunity to play as possible but in all fields of life it is the elite who succeed. There is a case for young players to be given the chance to showcase their talent as early as possible. Giving them the opportunity to play the game to its fullest extent is one way of doing this. This theory is worth considering further given that cricket loses many of its youngsters to other sports such as football, which is played with professional rules at 11-a-side level from the age of 10.

Josh Woodhead of the Golcar Under-11s is among those who would like to play the game this way. "I would like to start playing cricket with the proper rules in place, the rules that we play at the moment aren't really disciplined enough. One of the rules we play is that when you get out you switch with the batsman at the other end rather than going off".

Until recently the world-record partnership in schools cricket was held by Vinod Kambli and a certain Sachin Tendulkar, who amassed a staggering stand of 664. It is no coincidence that the same Sachin Tendulkar is now widely recognised as the best batsman since the Don. It is his ability to build an innings that is one of the key contributors to this; he is the most prolific century-maker in the history of both Test and One Day International cricket.

Players around the world such as Ricky Ponting, Rahul Dravid, Jacques Kallis as well as Tendulkar now boast averages in the mid- to high-fifties in Test cricket. This has largely been due to their ability to make big hundreds and capitalise once they have established themselves at the crease. Unfortunately England fans, if they are old enough to remember, have to look back to the days of Hutton, Barrington and Hammond to find players who hold records that mirror those of the players mentioned above.

The players that score the big hundreds are not only those with immense ability but those with strong powers of concentration and an insatiable hunger for runs, those that are taught to value their wicket highly. It is a mental skill more than one that is associated with pure talent; after all we are often told that the game at the highest level is played out more in the mind and that talent on its own is not enough to succeed. Concentration is another skill that can be learned from an early age but with the rules as they are currently, young players are not given the opportunity to do this for long periods.

Golcar under-11 coach David Thorpe recognises the limitations of the rules currently in place. "At under-11 level we play what is called pairs cricket where you bat with a partner and when you get out you switch ends; in many ways this doesn't really teach the kids everything about batting because they know that if they smack it up in the air they lose eight runs rather than actually being dismissed. So there is the temptation for some kids to just try and smash every ball".

Another of the dilemmas that junior cricket faces is the need to balance out the ambitions of those that play the game. Some play for excitement without the desire to try and go further in the game; others play it with an iron will to win. This can create problems when it comes to team selection for junior matches as David Thorpe explains, "It is difficult to please everyone because you want to pick your strongest team for games but you also want to give everybody chances to play as well. Otherwise they will lose interest in the game". Chris Chapman of the Golcar under-13 team is among those who are looking to progress in the game but understands both sides of the argument. "My goal this season is to get promoted and then in the future try and get in the Golcar first team. The game is about enjoyment as well as winning, though, because if you don't enjoy it then you won't keep playing".

While it is important to encourage as many youngsters as possible to play cricket it is also important to try and provide them with the opportunity to play as competitively as they desire. There is no better place to learn about the game than out on the field; match situations can't be replicated elsewhere. It is noticeable that cricketers from abroad appear to mature at an earlier age than in this country; they are more technically gifted and more adept at handling pressure situations. Players like Tendulkar, Sir Garfield Sobers and Waqar Younis were playing international cricket at 16 or 17 and while this is largely due to the fact that they are immensely talented, it is also due to the fact that they were given the chance to experience the game in its purest form at a young age. Listening to Duncan Fletcher cite inexperience for England's failings over the past six months only serves to promote this theory. It is something to think about....