

Ethnic Minorities

Huddersfield, and West Yorkshire in general, is known as a very multi-cultural place. Therefore, you would be forgiven for thinking that Kirkheaton Cricket Club would be a very ethnically diverse club. However, this is not the case. Of the 32 members registered for Kirkheaton, only 6 hail from ethnic minority background. For a sport so popular in the Asian community, this is a very low percentage.

Whilst taking a tour of Kirkheaton's Bankfield ground I came across one of these 6 players. Naved Akram was sipping a soft drink in the ground's bar and when I explained the topic I was researching was only too happy to add his thoughts. He mused, "It's really disappointing to me, being from India, that more Asians do not turn out for us. It's not just Kirkheaton; no club in the league has more than a handful of ethnic minorities in their teams. I have plenty of friends and family that love cricket but for one reason or another do not want to play. A lot of them feel as though they would not fit in and may be racially abused. But they couldn't be further from the truth. I've been at the club for 3 years now and my ethnicity has never been an issue." So this begs the question, why do they feel this way?

There is some justification for them feeling like this. It was not that long ago that racism was rife in all walks of life, including sport. However, cricket may have been tarnished with the same brush as sports like football. Former Kirkheaton CC Chairman, Philip Earnshaw, explains, "Yes I think it's probably true that many Asians feel as if they will be subjected to racist abuse, particularly if they start playing badly.

The truth is, though, that I have been involved in cricket for 40 years and have never seen even one example of racism. If anyone ever was racist to any of the players then I'm sure they would be dealt with accordingly. More than likely banned from the club for life."

As Naved revealed, it is not just Kirkheaton that has a low proportion of ethnic minorities. However, they do seem to have fewer than most clubs in the league.

Treasurer of the club, Eric Hepworth, explains why this may be the case. "We are a very tight-knit community in Kirkheaton. It is only a small village and everyone knows each other. I'm afraid a lot of the residents just don't like to welcome outsiders. It's nothing to do with where they're from, they could be from just down the road in Kirkburton, the people of Kirkheaton in general just like to stick to their own."

What makes Kirkheaton even less ethnically diverse, which is not immediately evident, is that only one of the 6 players from an ethnic minority background actually plays for the 1st XI. Zahid Muhammed is a regular low-order batsman for the 1st XI but Abdul Hafeez, Shadab Kabir, Muhammed Saleem and Ibrar Younas all play for the 2nd XI. Naved himself occasionally plays for the 1st XI but is more of a 2nd XI player. He is quick to absolve Kirkheaton of any responsibility for this however, "It's a coincidence. It just happens to be the case that the ethnic minority players at the club are not as good as the white players. I'm sure in time there will be more Asians in the 1st XI."

All teams in the league are allowed one overseas player. More often than not these players come from India or Pakistan, but sometimes from Australia or New Zealand. These players are obviously of ethnic minority background because they come from another country. They have had a really positive impact on cricket in Huddersfield. Not only do they raise the standard of the game with their own ability, but they also teach the players already at the club new things such as new methods of spin bowling, for example. They also help the other players to mature off the cricket pitch by teaching them about other cultures. They can often really help the team spirit at the club as they bring the players together.

The most successful overseas player that Kirkheaton have had is Asher Zaidi, a left-handed batsman who played for the club in 2003. He came over from Pakistan and was voted the best overseas player in the league in his one season at the club.

Unfortunately he only had one season at Kirkheaton as his performances were so impressive that a more high profile club signed him. He was offered more money and a better standard of cricket. However, he enjoyed his time at Kirkheaton so much that he went back numerous times last season to watch their matches. The club are hopeful of tempting him back if they win promotion. It is not surprising that they are so keen to bring him back as he scored over 1700 runs and had an average of 78 runs a match in his season at the club. He also scored a century in the Sykes Cup Final. He also settled in very well off the pitch. All the players liked him and unlike some overseas players he really made an effort to integrate himself in the community. He is a prime example of the benefits of overseas players.

The situation has certainly improved in terms of ethnic minorities in cricket and in Kirkheaton, but there is still more work to be done. Only when the amount of ethnic minorities playing reflects the amount of ethnic minorities in the community will Kirkheaton be able to say they are a multi-cultural, modern cricket club. If they want to attract more people to the ground, this is what they will have to do.