

SCHOOLS CRICKET, 2014
REVIEW BY DOUGLAS HENDERSON

The summer term has been emasculated. Most independent schools justify an early-July finish by teaching six days a week, but the upshot is that much of the term falls within the dead zone, also known as the exam period. Maintained schools do continue late into the month but, as every teacher knows, motivating any student post-exams can prove tricky, and attendance patchy.

If an early end to the summer term – or a period of half-hearted study – makes little academic sense, it is even worse for those trying to organise schools cricket. The 21st-century has seen the pressures become greater thanks to the introduction of the AS-level: nowadays, the last three summers of a student's school career are all blighted by public exams. In that respect, though, there is light at the end of the tunnel. Those starting their A-level courses in September 2016 will be examined just once, at the end of their second year. This will help, even though for many schools, the problem of a short summer term will remain.

Younger readers may be surprised to learn that it has not always been thus. It was once possible to fit the entire exam period into a fortnight or so towards the end of July. That left all of May and June available for teaching – and cricket.

This arrangement, like so much, began to change in the 1960s. A greater number of candidates, a wider range of subjects on offer and the use of multiple examination boards all contrived to make the time spent beneath the invigilator's gaze spread into four weeks or more. And with it taking longer to mark the burgeoning exam papers, that period edged earlier and earlier in the summer. Where once the academic year had three terms of roughly equal length, there are now two – and a runt of a third into which summer sports must be fitted.

The current mess is for the benefit solely of Year 13s – and the further education institutions where they hope to study. A solution is badly needed if cricket in any school is to survive.

The summer of 2014, weather-wise, will be remembered as one of the finest of recent years. But, by a meteorological quirk, it often rained heavily on Fridays and Saturdays in much of the UK. Even Bede's, a keen cricketing school in Sussex, completed only seven regular fixtures. A late Easter didn't help. (It is amazing that a couple of schools managed as many as 22 regular fixtures – and 53 played at least 15, excluding knockout competitions and suchlike.) In total, though, Wisden records 335 matches abandoned without a ball bowled, and another 251 drawn. Given the predominance of limited-overs cricket, it is a decent bet that a large proportion of these were rained off after play had started. In context, 2,228 matches are recorded as reaching a positive result.

Despite the unhelpful timing of the rain, one batsman did manage to make 1,000 runs in the school season (in 2011, ten did so): Neil Brand hit 1,008 at King's Taunton from 16 matches – the weather did for another four games. Brand and five others averaged 100 or more. Of those, three (Adam English at The Harvey Grammar School, Ryan Klein at Wrekin and Martin Andersson from Reading Blue Coat) had fewer than five completed innings, making an average less significant. That leaves Brand, Eben Kurtz of Loughborough Grammar and Dylan Budge of Woodhouse Grove at the top of the heap. Indeed Budge, with 121.83, comes

at the very top, comfortably above the others.

Don Bradman's 99.94 is the most celebrated average in cricket – famously one more boundary would have seen him finish on three figures, as he so often had. In 2014, Mark Eteen from the Royal Grammar School, High Wycombe, had a similar experience: one more run would have taken him to the magic 100-mark. Saif Zaib, a team-mate of Eteen's at High Wycombe, hit what was head-and-shoulders the highest score of the year: 230 against the Royal Grammar School, Newcastle. No one else managed a double-century, though 14 made 150 or more.

School bowlers have had a raw deal for a while. In all but declaration games, amounting to less than 25% of all matches, they are, unlike their batting team-mates, limited to a maximum of ten overs. Fast bowlers also face the understandable restrictions aimed at preventing injury, making it even more difficult for them to rise above the crowd. The relevant ECB directive does not apply to spinners or slower medium-pacers – defined as “a bowler to whom a wicketkeeper in the same age group would in normal circumstances stand back to take the ball” – and so they are the ones who have most opportunity to stand out.

The upshot is that just four managed 40 wickets. Feroz Baig, a leg-spinner from St Edward's, Oxford, took 48, five more than anyone else, to top the table as he had 12 months before; next came Shrewsbury's off-spinner Henry Blofield (note the “I” in the surname) with 43; Anshuman Rath of Harrow (a slow left-artermer who has played for Hong Kong Under-19s) claimed 42; and Finn Hulbert took 41. The highest-placed seamer in the table, Hulbert benefited in part from Cranbrook's extensive fixture list, which ran to 22 games. In all, 20 bowlers finished the season with 30 or more wickets, while 24 took at least ten wickets at a cost of under 10. The averages achieved by Mason Crane, a leg-spinning all-rounder from Lancing, were especially eye-catching: 284 runs at 56.80 and 38 wickets at 6.60; he also hit a century.

The most extraordinary feat of the summer was an explosive innings of 208 not out by George Haley of Eltham in the National T20 Cup. He didn't come in until the end of the fourth over, and faced just 56 balls, launching 22 of them for six and 16 for four. In another Twenty20 match, Ampleforth's Joe Lush made a 33-ball 100, which included successive sixes from the first five balls of an over. And in a remarkable display of swing bowling, the Wellington pair Sam Curran – only 16, but perhaps the leading all-rounder in schools cricket – and Virain Kanwar skittled Marlborough, fresh from defeating Eton, for 22. Despite the evidence of the scorecard, it was a perfect day and a good wicket.

Malvern, for whom Alex Milton scored four successive centuries, rattled up 302 for three in a 50-over game against Millfield, but lost by five wickets. One hundred years after their first encounter at Lord's, Clifton and Tonbridge returned to St John's Wood in a commemoration game. In 1914, Clifton had won by nine wickets; a century later they won by seven, though the statistic that stuck in the mind was that precisely half of the 22 players from that original encounter would die in the First World War.

Two schools, Bede's and Churcher's, from Hampshire, enjoyed a 100% win-rate in regular fixtures, though Bede's did lose to Tonbridge in the National T20. Bromsgrove were also unbeaten, though they tied with Clifton and Malvern. St Edward's Oxford had a wonderful season, winning 17 and drawing five of their 22 matches.

Woodhouse Grove, near Bradford, enjoyed a similar record, winning ten and drawing three of their 13 fixtures, though they cut things fine against a determined Huddersfield New College team, whom they defeated by one run. Perhaps the pinnacle of Woodhouse Grove's season was becoming the first northern school to win the National T20 competition, beating off strong finals-day competition from Millfield, Tonbridge and Bedford. Their victory was due in no small part to their captain, Dylan Budge, who failed to reach fifty in only one of the tournament's seven rounds. He set school records for most runs in a season, and in a career.

Budge has worked hard on the technical side of his game and, possessed of fine cricketing nous, is capable of constructing long innings. At Lord's in September, he top-scored for MCC Schools against the English Schools Cricket Association. Originally a wicketkeeper-batsman, he has developed his deceptively quick seam bowling, and in July he claimed five wickets for Scotland Under-19s (for whom he also has a century) against Ireland Under-19s. If batting remains his major suit, it was, according to Ian Frost, the master in charge of cricket at Woodhouse Grove, his all-round potential that prompted Durham to offer him a contract for 2015. Budge, the eighth Wisden Schools Cricketer of the Year joins an illustrious club: in 2014, all seven of his predecessors played first-class cricket, with the first three having appeared in Tests for England.