

SCHOOLS CRICKET IN 2016

Review by Douglas Henderson

What glorious cricket weather it was! But how sad it didn't arrive until the autumn term. Those with long memories of schools cricket know May is often wet, and September lovely. So it was in 2016, when spring resembled late winter more than early summer.

Perhaps that explains why the ECB have been promoting cricket in September. For most schools, this is unlikely to involve first teams, whose players will doubtless be needed for rugby or football – sports that have the luxury of long seasons largely untroubled by exams, weather or parental pressure. September cricket would primarily be for those who enjoy the game, yet who are unable to pursue it in the examination term (that part of the calendar formerly known as the cricket season). There may be other problems to overcome, since many schools press their main ground into service for other sports. A rugby pitch certainly demands grass that would be too long for a cricket outfield. However, some enterprising schools have circumvented the issue by hiring local club grounds.

September fixtures would doubtless appeal to those parents, reportedly more prevalent in or near London, who are unhappy with the amount of time summer cricket takes up – time that, in their thinking, should be devoted to exam preparation. There is truth, though, in the proverbial wisdom that all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy – and probably hinders his academic performance too. Exams loom large over most of the season, and are one reason why headmasters and directors of studies may/ sometimes try to make Twenty20 the norm, even for major schools fixtures on Saturdays.

The weather was disruptive, though mercifully not as much as in 2012, when the qualification for inclusion in the schools' averages had to be reduced to reflect the paucity of cricket. If that wasn't necessary this time, there were **over 400** matches abandoned without a ball bowled. Doubtless many of the **more than 300** draws – declaration and overs games – were rained off before a conclusion could be reached.

One upshot was that A. J. Woodland (he is known by his initials rather than his first name) of St Edward's, Oxford, was alone in scoring 1,000 runs. A year earlier, ten had reached the mark. In all, he made 1,026 at an average of 85.50, including five centuries, and was one of only two to hit a double-hundred, the other being Sam Evison of Stamford. Four batsmen averaged over 100: George Groenland of Wellingborough, and Tom Banton (formerly of Bromsgrove but now at King's, Taunton) did so from at least six completed innings; Jadon Buckeridge of Portsmouth Grammar School and Arjan Bath of King Henry VIII's did so as well, though with just one completed innings.

Similarly, only one bowler reached 40 wickets. Oliver Mann, from **The King's** School, Canterbury, is a seamer, and his achievement all the more remarkable since ECB regulations deny faster bowlers prolonged spells. Mann totalled 43, while Felsted's Ben Waring – a slow left-armer who was named Wisden Schools Cricketer of the Year in 2015 for taking 68 wickets – found conditions less helpful, and finished with 33. All told, 15 bowlers took at least 30 wickets, while 30 managed ten or more at a cost of under ten. Oliver Rhys-Jones, from **The Harvey School**, took nine at just 4.88.

George Lavelle of Merchant Taylors', Crosby, was perhaps the leading wicketkeeper-batsman, and for the second year running he made more stumpings than catches. He has two more years at school, and is an exciting prospect.

The National Schools T20 Cup remains a popular competition (though Twenty20 matches do not contribute to any of the statistics recorded here). Four strong schools made it to finals day at Arundel, where the weather might have been kinder. Millfield edged past a powerful Cranleigh side in the first semi-final, and then Felsted comfortably beat Sedbergh, who fell away after rocketing to 61 for one in six overs. In the final, Millfield chose to bat and, in a formidable display of clean hitting, raced to 224 for four, thanks to two breathtaking innings: a 50-ball 93 from Joshua McCoy, with eight sixes and six fours, and a 48-ball 79 from George Bartlett, with two sixes and nine fours. Felsted began well, but couldn't quite keep up with the rate, leaving Millfield victorious.

Perhaps the most astonishing performance of the year by a schoolboy batsman came in a three-day Under-17 fixture between Hampshire and Somerset at Basingstoke. Somerset captain Fin Trenouth, a highly capable wicketkeeper who moved from Clifton College to Millfield for his sixth-form years, hit a mammoth 332 not out from 302 balls, with 13 sixes and 33 fours. The next-highest score in a total of 477 **all out** was 84.

There was another extraordinary performance in an Under-13 game in Yorkshire. Oli Tomalin of St Olave's (the junior school of St Peter's, York) took all ten wickets for seven runs in just 23 balls. He began with a hat-trick from the innings' first three deliveries, missed out with the next, before removing batsmen with the last two balls of an astounding over. All ten wickets were bowled – a feat famously achieved by John Wisden in 1850 (see the note on page XXXX [1270 in W2016]. Almost as remarkable were the efforts of Henry Wines, a 14-year-old exchange student recently arrived at Haileybury from the Sydney suburbs. Not considered a frontline bowler, he scattered the Aldenham Twenty20 batting line-up to finish with eight for 15 from four overs of highly skilled leg-spin.

If there were fewer gargantuan totals in 2016, the highest nevertheless broke records. Led by captain and Hong Kong international Anshuman Rath – he hit 171 from 102 balls – Harrow made 442 against Hampton. Seemingly undaunted, Hampton set off at breakneck speed before the Harrow spinners wrested back control, steering their side to victory by 117 runs. Harrow's 442 is thought to be the highest by a school in overs cricket, surpassing the 427 made by Caterham in 2014.

One other effect of the dreich (a bit esoteric?) weather was that it made the selection of the Wisden Schools Cricketer of the Year trickier than usual. Had Sam Curran not been a Surrey regular, he might well have made a convincing case. Others were called up for Second XIs or representative age-group sides. But for his ability to overcome unhelpful conditions and score runs by the sackful, day in, day out, the Wisden Schools Cricketer of the Year for 2016 is A. J. Woodland.

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