

## **SCHOOLS CRICKET IN 2017**

REVIEW BY DOUGLAS HENDERSON

For the first time, *Wisden's* schools averages include Twenty20 matches. Some see this as a step too far, as though equating a song from a musical with a three-act opera. Others welcome an acceptance of what, especially for smaller schools, is the reality: that many, or most, fixtures are 20-over games. Even in some larger schools with a strong cricket pedigree, the pressure to perform in academic league tables – whatever happened to the idea of a good all-round, liberal education? – has endangered all-day games. Saturdays used to offer a bastion, but more and more have become 35-over affairs. It remains quite possible to fit two 40-over innings into an afternoon, yet young players see so much faffing about from the professionals that 20 an hour (built into the regulations for the last 60 minutes of a declaration game) seems almost laughable. Another consequence of the relentless drive for examination success is that schools can struggle to field their strongest XI; some masters are forced to resort to complex spreadsheets of player availability, even for weekend matches.

*Douglas, are you happy with this musical/opera image?*

If exams – and the pressure they exert – remain the biggest headache for those in charge of schools cricket, there are welcome signs of an analgesic. A-level grades are now determined by one set of final exams, rather than two. The fact that papers taken in Year 12 no longer count towards the final mark should, in theory, allow greater participation. No one pretends organising schools cricket is ever painless, but this might reduce the discomfort a little.

Last October, a fundamental redrafting of the Laws came into effect, and one change was to give umpires greater powers to deal with poor behaviour. Previously, they were unable to apply any onfield sanctions – a quirk apparently shared only with Aussie Rules football. Conduct has become an issue in schools cricket in recent years, and the old saw “It’s not cricket” has lost much of its relevance. The claim that the new penalties smack of sledgehammers and nuts is misguided: while it’s true the umpires can, in the last resort, send a player from the field, the point is that such powers should rarely, if ever, be applied. But the sanctions need to be there to act as a deterrent.

Unusually for a British summer, the part of it shared with the schools cricket season (April–June) was distinctly better than what followed, which allowed some striking performances. It was remarkable that eight players passed 1,000 runs, and six took 40 wickets or more. Many batsmen broke school records. While the inclusion of Twenty20 might have swollen both aggregates a little, its effect on the averages is to bring them down, the batting slightly more than the bowling. Even so, five managed over 100 with the bat; 17 under ten with the ball.

Of those five, however, only Will Jacks, from St George's, Weybridge, did so from at least five completed innings. Bancroft School's Haaris Sohoje proved almost impossible to dislodge, remaining unbeaten in seven of his eight innings and gaining an average of exactly 150. At Llandaff Cathedral School, bravely playing their first season of competitive cricket in recent years, Richard Sen was not far behind. Undefeated in two of his three knocks, he managed 142. There were similar achievements from John Oliver (of The Glasgow Academy), who averaged 122 from three completed innings and Ben Sidwell (City of London Freeman's School), 107 from four.

[Douglas confirms Haaris is correct.](#)

St Edward's, Oxford, benefited from two heavy-scoring batsmen: their skipper, Brandon Allen, and Ben Charlesworth both passed 1,200. Billy Mead hit 1,000 for Marlborough, just like his great uncle, the former Sussex captain Mike Griffith, who had made 1,070 back in 1961. Four others to reach 1,000 were Jack Davies from Wellington College, Sam Perry (The Manchester Grammar School), Charlie Scott of St Albans and Joshua Smith (Kimbolton).

The highest innings of the summer came from Will Jacks, as St George's ran up a scarcely believable 531 in 50 overs. Jacks's monumental 279 eclipsed the 263 made by Solihull's Chris Williamson in 2010 as the highest score recorded in a one-day schools match in the UK. Reading Blue Coat answered with a respectable 330, yet lost by 201. That same day, Teddie Casterton of RGS High Wycombe struck an unbeaten 267 from 153 balls in a declaration game against John Hampden Grammar School (and 24 hours later he crashed 109 not out against Radley in a National Schools Twenty20 match). It was the high-water mark of an astonishingly productive summer that brought 1,423 runs from 21 innings, and an average of almost 90.

Around the country, there were some talented wicketkeepers. Leading the field, perhaps, was George Lavelle, though his appearances for Merchant Taylors'

School, Crosby, were limited by call-ups to Lancashire Seconds. At Arundel, on finals day of the National Schools Twenty20, Millfield's Finn Trenouth made two brilliant stumpings, one standing up to the brisk Brad Currie. Meanwhile, Brandon Allen (St Edward's) added 43 dismissals to his 1,234 runs, and Bryanston captain Ollie Thomas made more stumpings than catches – often the sign of fine glovework. Will Thomson, from St Albans, is another keeper of great flair.

All-rounders' performances can be trickier to gauge, but two who achieved the feat of appearing in the tables of highest run-scorers *and* wicket-takers were Harrison Ward of St Edward's (964 runs and 45 wickets) and Clifton's Prem Sisodya (918 runs and 39). Ben Charlesworth, another of St Edwards's talented crop, combined 1,263 at 54 with 22 at 11.

**NB: We need figures for Ollie Thomas's (and ideally Will Thomson's) dismissals.**

**What do Harrison Ward, Ben Charlesworth and Prem Sisodya bowl?**

Sedbergh were the deserving winners of the National Schools Twenty20. Even though they had to negotiate finals day without their captain and outstanding player, Harry Brook – he was playing for Yorkshire in the County Championship – they rattled up scores of 221 for five against a robust Merchant Taylors' (Northwood) side, and 200 for five against Millfield's strong attack. Max Silvester struck 111 from 61 balls, the first century on finals day. Sedbergh's triumph was overdue: in five of the competition's eight years they had reached the last four, but this was their first appearance in the final.

A major plank of Sedbergh's success – they won 23 of their 26 games – was the leg-spin of Kyme Tahirkheli, whose 58 victims made him comfortably the country's leading wicket-taker. Cranleigh managed a better win rate by prevailing in 16 of their 18 matches, but there was precious little in it. Five other schools finished with a success rate above 80%. Now that *Wisden's* results include the National Schools T20 (the knockout competition entered by the majority of establishments in this section), it is exceptionally difficult for a team to go through a season unbeaten. None did in 2017, though the table below lists six schools who were beaten just once.

Tahirkheli, Allen, Ward, Jacks, Mead and many others all made a compelling case for being named the Wisden Schools Cricketer of the Year, but the 2017 winner is Teddie Casterton of RGS High Wycombe. [short para to come]

*Douglas Henderson is editor of Schools Cricket Online, where all the schools reports from past Wisdens can be searched.*