

Wisden review 2019

*[NB This is the review as I originally wrote it, so it is not exactly the same as what was printed in Wisden; it also omits the section on the Wisden Schools Cricketer of the Year, which was written by the co-editor]*

Two important pieces of academic research were published in 2019 which are of particular interest to followers of cricket. Both concerned the question of whether exam performance is affected by participation in sport in the run-up to exams themselves. **Both unequivocally determined, with a huge amount of data, that either it had no effect at all or, more commonly, taking part in sport had a beneficial effect;** that is, those taking exams actually did better if they kept up their other – especially sporting - interests than if they didn't.

The first was commissioned by the Sports committee of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference Schools (HMC) and was carried out independently by a distinguished Professor of Psychology. The second was carried out at Cambridge University. These two reports may be read in full at [www.schoolscricketonline.co.uk](http://www.schoolscricketonline.co.uk).

Various stratagems have been adopted by schools to combat the recent absurd revision mania whereby pressure to do absolutely nothing but revise is very widespread. The most effective seems to have been to adopt a simple school rule: that if you don't have an exam the very next day, you play. That at least takes care of Saturday matches. Once again, some schools in these pages say that they never once put out their full 1<sup>st</sup> XI because of exam pressures.

Another ploy has been for Heads to write to parents laying out the evidence (as above) and the school's policy of maintaining a reasonable programme of activities, including sport, during the exam season. That relies, of course, on the Head (and SMTs/SLTs) being generally supportive of the notions expressed here which, indeed, many are.

The other factor causing headaches for Masters /c is the ever-decreasing length of the summer term, what with the actual length and the never-ending stream of exeats, revision weeks and even "post-exam stress exeats".

It's a wonder that any schools cricket is played at all in the circumstances, but here is the good news: over half the schools featured here managed to complete 14 or more matches, though nowadays that does include 20-over games, including the National Schools Twenty20 competition, of which more anon. A fair number played 20 or more and one school, especially noted for its academic prowess, played 27! There's a moral there somewhere.

Finally, though it still remains very difficult for even distinguished cricket schools to maintain their fixtures and coaching programme for boys, there has been very remarkable progress in the girls' game, which is flourishing. Next year sees a new Under-18 T20 competition for girls' cricket, run by Schools Sports magazine; also a new 100-ball competition for Under-18 girls as well as the existing successful Under-17 (boys') competition, promoted by The Cricket Paper, but run by Shrewsbury School, especially by Andy Barnard the Master i/c and Gwen Davies, Head of Girls' cricket, with the assistance of Rob Morris who also formerly taught there.

Though in general it seemed to be a fine summer, it was not always so and certainly not everywhere. Many reports in these pages lament that large numbers of matches were abandoned (without a ball bowled) or rained off as a draw. Once again we had the strange phenomenon of some Fridays and Saturdays being particularly wet in an otherwise dry spell, and there was a period of about 10 days in June – just when exam pressure was easing off - when it rained over most of the UK every day.

Sevenoaks had the most impressive record, winning 92.80% of all games played, while 10 schools recorded 80% or more of wins.

Only one player (Joe Gordon of St Edmund's Canterbury) averaged over 100 (though one, Michael Williams at The Oratory, had an average of 290, but that was somewhat freakish having been once out in only four innings). Only three achieved an aggregate of 1000+ (Johnny Figy of Winchester, Joe Burslem at Felsted, and Tawanda Muyeye, Eastbourne). There is only one double hundred recorded in these pages (Muyeye). Whereas it used to be practically impossible to achieve the feat in a one-day declaration game, once 50-over cricket became widespread some 15 years ago, double centuries became much more common. I suspect that the number has reduced again because so many fixtures have also now been reduced to afternoon games rather than all-day ones.

Of the bowlers, no fewer than 32 averaged under 10, but only three (Alex Rennie at Bedford, Tom Newby at Haileybury, and Flatt Winchester) captured 40 wickets or more.

Details of all these and more may be found in the statistical tables which follow.

The National Schools Twenty20 competition, nowadays seen as the pinnacle of schools cricket, was once again entered by the overwhelming majority of cricketing schools. There is some concern that such a competition is inevitably dominated by a relative handful of very strong schools and so in some areas, notably the South West, it is seen as exceedingly difficult to progress beyond

the first round. Options for combating this are currently being discussed such as having a Plate competition or two divisions.

The 2019 competition, **the Finals Day of which was held** once again in glorious summer weather at the lovely Arundel ground, was won by Malvern with two fine displays of all-round strength. In the first semi-final Sedbergh inserted Millfield, reduced them to 121 for nine and knocked them off comfortably. In the second, Malvern chose to bat and built a formidable 195 for five; Merchant Taylors', fresh from two nail-biters in their previous rounds, made a gallant attempt but it was too much. The final was an unusual thriller: Malvern were inserted but this time Sedbergh did not make the inroads they had in the morning and Malvern scored a healthy but not insuperable 155 for six. After a disastrous first part and arriving at 59 for seven, Sedbergh's number seemed up. But an astonishing fight-back found them needing only 19 from 18 balls, albeit with the last man at the wicket. Their plucky rearguard ended only with a simple error and Malvern were worthy winners by 13 runs.

More good news comes in the shape of comments by Masters i/c about outstanding players in schools other than their own. Several of these were mentioned more than once. In no particular order, as they say, they were Joey Evison (Stamford), Tom Mackintosh Sabater (Merchiston Castle), George Ealham (Cranleigh), Joseph Fielding (Shrewsbury), Tawanda Muyeye (Eastbourne), Jack Haynes (Malvern), Alex Rennie (Bedford), Kasey Aldridge (Millfield), Matthew Revis (Sedbergh), George Hill (Sedbergh), Ben Charlesworth (St Edward's), Fred Harler (Radley), Johnny Figy (Winchester) and Joe Burslem (Felsted).

It is quite common these days for players at school level to peak in the Lower Sixth and very commonly they are frequently released to play at a higher level (eg top clubs, county academies or county 2nd or even 1<sup>st</sup> XI). That was the case with several of those mentioned above. However, the award is specifically for the player who excelled for his **school** during 2019 rather than an outstanding player who may even have made his debut for a county (such as Sam Curran a few years ago) but maybe offered slightly less for his own school. The other criterion is that his school must appear in these pages.

He also took 23 wickets.