

## SCHOOLS CRICKET IN 2020

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The last time outdoor school sport was cancelled for an entire term was the Big Freeze of early 1963. Cricket, spared back then, was not so lucky in 2020, when coronavirus struck. As always, though, those running the game in schools rose to a challenge – in this case even more daunting than revision mania.

September, more often the last gasp of summer than the first stirring of autumn, came to the rescue. Students returned after months and, for four or five weeks, enjoyed an array of cricket practice, plus a few games. Most were internal: as well as the usual house matches, there were a few arranged by “franchise”, perhaps in imitation of the IPL. Some, though, were against other schools. They tended mainly to involve boys, with hockey taking precedence for girls. The 100-ball format proved popular. MCC did their bit by arranging 56 schools fixtures. With the weather not always obliging, and several falling prey to Covid-19, not all made it to the square. One, against St Peter’s, York, was cancelled on the morning of the game because of a small outbreak.

The unluckiest players were the 2020 leavers, deprived of the climax to their school cricket career. In a bid to rectify that injustice, some in charge of cricket ensured leavers played at least one match. It was a bittersweet experience for Ben Spink, Marlborough’s captain: bowled for 99 in his only innings.

A few head teachers understandably chose not to risk external fixtures, leading to late cancellation. Clifton, however, had ten in September, even if they were shorter matches than usual. And while most schools organised bubbles by year group, several in the West Country opted to select a first team from a mix of years, and make them their own bubble.

Every establishment made use of technology. Some hosted Q&A sessions with alumni who had gone on to England careers. Eastbourne College, meanwhile, created their own app (Preview/Prepare/Perform) to teach skills, such as how a batsman should judge line and length.

There was a welcome rise in links with local clubs, with several providing venue and opposition. These games began late in the summer term – such as it was – and continued in the holidays. Skinners’ School, in Kent, played 16, and Cheadle Hulme, in Cheshire, ten. Groundstaff also worked non-stop, maintaining a usable square for months when cricket was impossible – as well as weeks in September when winter preparation would normally begin.

The ECB have long dreamed of schools cricket in the autumn, but conflict with rugby, for example, which demands long grass, has militated against it. Yet 2020 has shown it is possible, and one school described the deep feeling of regret when cricket training yielded to rugby. Eton played cricket seven days a week, while others believe Sunday matches in September can work.

With the announcement in January that GCSE and A-level exams were cancelled in 2021, there is the prospect of a summer in which schools cricket can flourish. The longer-term future remains uncertain. But, at least in 2020, September cricket helped foster *mens sana in corpore sano*.