

## 2020 – Taking the Positives

For most of us 2020 will be a year we want to forget. In writing this article in no way do we want to diminish the terrible loss of life and the way the pandemic has touched everyone. We are sure that there will be many in the Herts cricket community that have suffered personal tragedy and we extend our heartfelt sympathy to all those affected.

Cricket is, and shall always be, a release from everyday life – a chance to come together and enjoy a game we love in the company of friends, irrespective of ability or age, race or gender. Consequently, we thought it would be good to celebrate some of the positive developments that happened at our club during the summer of 2020 and then look forward to the summer of 2021 when we can all hopefully be reunited on the field of play.

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### **“Vector of Disease”**

In April 2020 the prospect for any sort of cricket looked dismal as COVID took hold and the country entered its first lockdown. Clubs the length and breadth of the UK were hanging on information from the ECB and Oliver Dowden MP at DCMS about when we could start playing and many thought the whole season would be written off. It got even worse when PM Boris Johnson announced that the cricket ball was “a deadly vector of disease” – a phrase that will live long in the memory and will be forever captured in Hansard.

As we moved into early May the mood began to change – we got the go ahead to commence 1-2-1 training outside and this coincided with around 3 consecutive weeks of blissful, blue skies and warm temperatures. We are lucky in being situated in a beautiful part of the Chiltern countryside and the sight of that gorgeous field and cut squares seemed to inspire our members into action. Suddenly we were deluged with requests to pay annual subs and attend coaching and in response our coaching staff commenced a whole month of individual training sessions for our junior and senior members – basically 9-5pm Monday to Saturday with Sunday off for good behaviour. Ironically as our nets were being refurbished this took place on the squares which seemed to make it even more enjoyable for both coaches and players.

At the same time, we also had some good news from the government and ECB – we could apply for a £10k local authority grant and also apply to the ECB for a 5-year interest free loan to refurbish our nets. For once, the admin to do all this was straightforward and both were secured (and paid) within a few weeks – this together with fantastic support from our junior parents and adult members was a great weight off our minds and meant we were not going to be destitute!

In June, the restrictions were relaxed again and we were allowed to coach in groups of 6. With a junior membership of around 350 boys and girls this proved to be a big logistical challenge however we introduced an online booking system and it was soon running like clockwork. It was hugely rewarding to see the joy on the faces of the children and we received countless compliments from parents for making it happen and allowing kids to meet with their friends and have fun. Another positive we noticed was the coaching sessions had to be very strictly timed with social distancing rules so our young coaches had to be both disciplined and organised – this was a great learning curve for them and we believe many of the practices that worked well can be carried forward into future seasons. Coach availability was incredible – no-one was on holiday!

## **Game on!**

Towards the end of June we finally received confirmation that matches could start. There would be no promotion and relegation, no changing rooms and (shock horror) no teas. So, on July 11<sup>th</sup> we finally played our first friendly matches – of course it wasn't the same – changing outside, sanitisation breaks, packed lunches and socially distanced beers – but we were outside playing the game we love and it finally felt like the season had started. Earlier start times seemed to be appreciated by many of our players and the sanitisation breaks got quicker and didn't really slow down the games, especially with shorter tea breaks.

On the following Tuesday our selection committee met after training to pick the teams for the first league games on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup>. Hello, what's this – 44 places up for grabs and 67 people available – er – how many Sunday games have we got booked?? To our embattled captains this was certainly a fresh challenge as with no-one disappearing to the Algarve (or for that matter Glastonbury or Reading Festival) availability continued to be excellent right into late September. And with no school cricket going on some of our more promising juniors were gaining great experience in our higher teams. What's more, people wanted to play on Saturday AND Sunday – something we thought had gone completely out of fashion!

In parallel we started to organise junior fixtures against other clubs. The response from our age group managers was amazing and when fixtures finally started in July there were matches taking place every afternoon and evening for the next 8 weeks. Many of the junior teams played more games than in a normal season – and did they care that they were all friendlies – not one bit!

Our Women & Girls section increased in numbers again (now well over 100) and had some excellent matches against other clubs – we are starting to see girls transitioning from juniors to seniors as they can see a clear pathway to continue in the sport after finishing school. It would be even better if there were more Hertfordshire clubs with women's teams so we wouldn't have to travel so far.

We also trialled a new initiative – the Sunday Development league – and although due to some clubs dropping out we only played 3 games the format worked well and provided a great opportunity for 13-15 year old boys to get their first taste of senior cricket. 30-35 over games felt like the right duration for a Sunday afternoon and hopefully we can do more of these in 2021.

## **Community Power!**

Recently in the Cricketer Magazine Tanya Aldred wrote a superb article about the importance of cricket clubs to local communities – referring to them as “the green lungs” of the community. In 2020 we saw this in full flow with increased spectators at both junior and senior matches. And although watching our 2s take on Radlett 4s isn't exactly the IPL the decking and boundaries were regularly lined with spectators enjoying a beer or glass of wine in the sunshine - it was a lovely sight to behold and we also saw many more parents and grandparents supporting their kids in senior matches. Our bar staff also adapted to giving table service and did a brilliant job.

And it wasn't just spectators – some people gave up their time to help maintain the grounds and clubhouse and one lady who ran a cleaning company donated a big box of hand sanitiser which we used at every game and training session.

The final law of unintended consequences happened in August when our summer junior camps sold out in hours – 60 kids a day for 3 solid weeks in beautiful weather – attendance massively up as the local schools were not doing their usual competing summer camps.

### **Pointers for a brighter future**

Recently Sport England set out some fresh strategy objectives – they said that sports clubs had a vital role to play in offering solutions to the 5 'Big issues': recover and reinvent; connecting communities; positive experiences for children and young people; active environments; connecting with health and wellbeing.

From what we saw in 2020 cricket can do all this and more and we hope the same optimism we saw last year can be carried forward into 2021 once this terrible virus has been wrestled to the ground.

Mark Lewarne

Berkhamsted Cricket Club – Feb 2021