

TOM  
HICKS

The  
Life  
of a  
Cricketing  
Also-Ran



BOWLER'S  
NAME?

*'If you take one cricket book on tour, make it this one.'*

Simon Jones

### Child Okeford CC

My fledgling cricket education was not confined only to school, however. During these years, my dad was captain of a village side in Dorset called Child Okeford. On weeknights, the junior side played a version of pairs cricket, in which each pair could face four overs each. I only remember these games vaguely, except for one encounter I had with a lad called Karl who was one of the only 'local' lads in the team, most of whom were my mates from the 'posh' school. On padding up, I noticed that Karl wasn't bothering with a box. Trying to help, I asked him if he thought it may be a useful thing to pop on, just in case. 'No it's all right, Tom, I've got a stiffy!' was his response. The mind still boggles when I consider what was going through young Karl's mind.

But the club came alive on Sundays. This was real grassroots stuff, and the motley crew of builders, truck drivers, sparkies and whoever could be persuaded to turn out at last orders on a Saturday night became my first real heroes. Every Sunday, the local rec became the field of dreams: men of seemingly epic scale bestrode the sward like colossi, emanating from the inner sanctum of the minuscule changing rooms, all odour of Deep Heat and Silk Cut. There was Jonah – Dave Jones – groundsman-cum-opening bowler. As he was the one who cut the pitch, his was the right to the new ball and the downhill slope. He approached the crease with legs working like pistons and a left-arm over whirlwind action which my young mind imagined was faster than Botham or Willis. Like several in the team, he sported the classic 1980s moustache and open-necked shirt combo and swore and cussed like a sailor on leave. He was also something of a local hero when it came to the annual village fete, or 'Hey-Day' as it was known, when the welly-throwing, hoopla and tug-of-war gave way to a live band in the beer tent. For Jonah was the drummer in 'The Hurricanes' (later the T-Birds), whose lead singer, Deano, gave such a performance every year that he was Elvis, Tom Jones and Danny from *Grease* rolled into one. The village wives would be aflush as Deano serenaded them from halfway up the pole of the marquee, whilst the blokes swilled pints of Badger Bitter, their teenage kids rolling around on hay bales and behind the football dugouts, drunk on White Lightning and the first flushes of young love.

Up the hill, Statham to Jones's Trueman, came Martin 'Ollie' Oliver, whose family ran the famous Great Dorset Steam Fair every August and whose old man, Michael, sticks in my mind as the caller at the Christmas village bingo. Everyone in the village knew his schtick and as children we loved the sauciness of wolf-whistling at his 'Legs Eleven', giggling at 'Two Fat Ladies', and being downright confused why we had to ask 'Was she worth it?' at 'Seven-and-six'. I still miss the thrill of walking home with a box of Danish butter cookies under one arm and a bottle of Liebfraumilch under the other. It was just a part of Christmas. Ollie – the son – was happy enough to play in a white t-shirt and although he bowled with no front arm and always from the worse end, everyone knew he was more effective than Jonah, but no one would mention it as it would mean likely fisticuffs and no pitch prepared the following week.

The seam attack was completed by Dave 'Sid' Hall, who had two false knees and played in an England rugby shirt. Lovely bloke that he was, I couldn't understand a word he said, which was awkward as he moved in next door to us and loved a chat.

The undoubted hero in my eyes was Anthony 'Lewie' Lewis, whose moustache-mullet-and-medallion combo marked him out as an Achilles. On weekdays, a run-of-the mill builder; on Sundays, and on those glorious Tuesday nights when a cup fixture meant the bonus of watching a 16 eight-ball-over smash (we were doing T20 in Dorset long before it became a thing), Lewie transformed into a Goliath of the game. To my rose-tinted view, he batted and bowled like the great I.T. Botham himself. I was just delighted to score the book and record his exploits.

The other real stalwart was Mike 'Spuddy' Murphy, a long-distance lorry driver who was the whole package: he kept wicket, bowled medium pace 'as tight as a gnat's arse' and had an effective, if idiosyncratic, technique when batting. Left-handed, his front foot would typically splay in the opposite direction to the ball whilst his keen eye and beefy forearms would launch it over point, often into the school field next door or the stinging nettles. The irony was that Spuddy was the past master when it came to finding lost balls in the stingers and would happily retrieve them and hand them back to the hapless bowler ready for more destruction. Like half the team, he also turned out for the football team in the winter, and his missus made the best teacakes and jam in the business.

Among the other key characters were Phil 'Chevy' Cheverton – a crabby, selfish batsman and local Bobby; Alec Angell – chain-smoking darting legend; Joe Cooper, who drove a car with a Status Quo banner across the windscreen; and Alistair Underwood – umpire of dubious repute who was known to don the whites when a late drop-out occurred. I awaited the day that a drop-out would see dad turn to me and say, 'Do you fancy batting at 11 and fielding at fine leg?' But for years, it seemed, I was too young to put into harm's way, even if the alternative was a bloke sure to get a duck and drop everything that came his way. Then there was Dave Coley – my prep school PE and pottery teacher, one time Harlequin, who had warmed the bench at Twickenham and our next-door neighbour before Sid moved in. Later there was my real hero Graeme Owton, whose school batting records at Clayesmore were only eclipsed by Swarbrick; and also my Uncle Mark, who had the audacity not only to hail from Essex but also to bowl leg-spin. As far as Dorset was concerned, he may have been introducing alchemy or Ouija, so arcane was the art of spin, let alone of the wrist variety, this being before the advent of Shane Warne. Mark's first claim to fame was that he had been on the books of Wolves, and once was offered a contract ahead of Pat Jennings; his second was later playing for a social team known as the 'Two Hopes XI' with one Jofra Archer.

And there were others in this cast of legends, bit-part players in the weekly drama which enthralled my cricket-obsessed brain.

Jane Austen had it right when she wrote, 'Three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work on.' There was enough drama in our particular parochial backwater to fill the pages of several novels (and I was only a child; imagine the sorts of comings-and-goings which were going on after hours and once the Saxon Inn and the Bakers Arms had kicked out after last orders).

As skipper of this fine federation, my old man was quite the Mike Brearley figure. Indeed, his ability actually to set a field marked him out as one of the sharpest cricketing minds in the lower divisions of Dorset cricket. The fact he knew the names for all the positions was just showing off. Having a wife who was happy enough to score most weekends and would collect the match fees just sealed his position.

I'm being a little unfair. Although dad was perhaps not the most talented of cricketers, he did have genuine tactical acumen. He loved to rankle oppositions by setting unorthodox fields and his major stroke of genius was opening the bowling with a spinner, which was tantamount to the devil's own work, even within his own team, who just couldn't get their heads around it. But it certainly worked, and he took this motley crew from a nondescript village in the northern reaches of the county to the brink of the Premier League, where the likes of such big clubs as Weymouth and Dorchester awaited. Granted, the club never got beyond the second tier, but it was a rise to rival dad's (and my) beloved Wimbledon FC – latterly AFC Wimbledon. The romance of the underdog features heavily in Hicks family mythology. I mentioned he liked to open the bowling with a spinner, and in the days before I was deemed big enough to play, this role fell to the eldest son of our neighbour Dave Coley. Lee was a tall off-spinner, who was just finishing his sixth form at Clayesmore, and another hero of mine for his knowledge of *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Highlander* and *Lord of the Rings* as much as his ability to spin the ball. He won't thank me for mentioning it, but poor old Lee had one particular drama during his time at the club when he ended up staying in the spare bed at our house, not wanting to waken his parents next door after a lengthy celebration in the boozier one Sunday. It so happened that the spare room happened to be the old master bedroom until we had an extension built. It also so happened that my dad had a penchant for sleepwalking, especially when he had been on the whisky (he had once been found starkers on a sun lounger in Gran Canaria in a drunken attempt to outdo the Germans for the best beds). On this night, my mother found herself being shaken awake by a pale and anxious Lee, who had found his old Classics teacher hopping into bed beside him, grunting and snoring away in a malty stupor. 'Kick the bugger out!' was my mum's no-nonsense response. Dad woke up none the wiser but I'm not sure Lee ever looked him in the eye again.

Eventually, my time came, and I was allowed to take my place in the pantheon. I'm sure I did OK, and I remember my younger brother even taking four-fer when he couldn't have been more than 12. Looking out for our names in the *Western Gazette* (you were mentioned if you got 20 or more, which shows the quality of the pitches) was my first sense of 'fame'. I do remember batting out to save the draw to avoid relegation for the last wicket with Lee (of the sleepwalking incident) and running off as if we had won the NatWest Trophy. As with the hero-worship, all these things really did mean that much at the time.

Sadly, like a great many small village clubs, Child Okeford CC has gone the way of the church, the post office and the pubs. I don't want to get all Prince Charles about it, but I do think something about England is lost when rural communities are forced to shut down. Occasionally, when I revisit Dorset for old boys' weeks, I will take a trip down memory lane. Everything is smaller, and Spuddy's sixes don't seem so massive after all; the scoreboard has gone, as has the playground, and there is no sign of a 'square' to speak of, not even a miserly rope to cordon off a space which would offer the hope of Jonah coming back on his roller, or the sound of leather on old Duncan Fearnley.

***Bowler's Name?* is a tale of a life in cricket's margins. Tom Hicks is no household name, but he often rubbed shoulders with cricketing royalty, going from the village green to walking out as captain at Lord's.**



As an ambitious youngster, Hicks dreamed of reaching the top. But trying to make it big and balance the demands of university, family, a full-time job and a penchant for post-match fun was no easy feat.

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Through the eyes of a cricket nut, *Bowler's Name?* takes us on a journey of success, failure, hilarity and often sheer madness. If you've ever wondered what it's like to face 90mph bowling, to have lunch with Mike Gatting or to infiltrate an England post-match party, Hicks is your man. *Bowler's Name?* is for fans of cricket idiosyncrasies, lovers of the underdog and anyone who has tried and failed.



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