The Bushmen Captain’s log 2016

Chris Ancil

Many news events have changed the landscape of our world this year. In the public eye we’ve seen the passing of Muhammad Ali, David Bowie, Prince, the King of Thailand, Terry Wogan, Leonard Cohen, Victoria Wood, Caroline Aherne and Ronnie Corbett to name but a few. Fifa has replaced and banned its leader Sepp Blatter and many others – following widespread corruption. The UK voted to leave the European Union. Leicester City won the Premier League at odds of 5000-1. The US has elected Donald Trump to be President. France is soon to vote and the Front National is warming its engine for a decent polling and we continue to see a rise in the overt support of populist and single issue anti-immigration political groups across Europe. Ed Balls is also in line to win Strictly Come Dancing. Parts of Syria continue to be mauled. The Bushmen’s cricket season, in many ways, has seemed at times like an asylum in the midst of all that has gone on. And I call for this report to be read through the prism of the world in which we live....and thank you for an enjoyable season.

I for one, find almost any time spent on or near a cricket field to be akin to existing, albeit briefly, in a land a world away. Of course, those of you who have spent time on a Bushmen field will be only too aware that there is nowhere else really like it.

This season we won some matches (8/24). For a while it was thought we would come close to the record of most victories– results included winning 4 in a row and 5/6. We were heavily beaten in others including being all out for almost certainly a record low score of 26 at Great Missenden and the remaining games were enjoyably close. Results-wise we ended the season with 5 successive defeats; a thrashing of little purpose at Pinkneys Green, an enjoyable fixture against Hartley Witney, a close game at the quintessentially British ground of Ewhurst with their branded cakes in an exceptional tea and twice on tour against Central Brittany. Thanks to Lyndon Jones for organising the tour and to the opposition for hosting us once more, both for cricket and a fine dinner. It was a wonderful tour, made particularly special to have the newest recruit Dhilan Ancil (11 months) with us alongside his parents Bobby and Elora with grandparents Helena and Michael.

Once again on tour the side was able to stay in two communal groups- one in a charming b and b and the other in a large manoir style property, not far from the village of Sifiac where we played.

This year’s log comes fundamentally from memory and may I apologise to anyone who feels upset at my having missed a moment of brilliance.

At the start of the season we were told that chairperson Richard Heller had been taken ill – myself and batsmen around the world (© Kent Heller) were saddened to hear that he would never take the field again. I am happy to say that Richard has returned to the field and to his trips to Pakistan for his writing – which has seen a nomination for a sports book prize. May I say that a cricket field with Richard on is always a better one, so long may it continue.

The season also passed without scorer Bernard Jacobs being able to join us. We all hope that he is well and that he may join us once more on the field.

This Bushmen season saw three new players welcomed as regulars to the side, each bringing with them charm, enthusiasm and talent.

Zohaib Butt, scored more runs (401) than any other Bushmen. Batting with natural style, intelligence and power it was always a pleasure to watch Zohaib at the crease. He caught well and even kept wicket, for the first time, taking to the gloves as though he’d been doing it his whole life. Zohaib can also bowl with fine accuracy and swing. He was unlucky to not take more than his 11 wickets. In the process of scoring his first Bushmen fifty and leading the side to victory at the new fixture of Wivelsfield Green, he controlled the innings in a century partnership with Simon Marcus, who we were fortunate to have with us more than in recent history, giving us some real stability when he played making two fifties in 7 innings. At Wivelsfield Green Zohaib smashed the remaining 22 runs required from just one over. Given history, and that The Bushmen had been dismissed earlier in the season for I believe a record equalling low of 26 against Great Missenden (they bowled well, were too strong and we were a little unlucky) and would later in the season lose 6 wickets for 4 runs, this only further demonstrates Zohaib’s feat. Eighty-two further impressive runs came in a closely fought draw at Waldron, against an attack, which is always very competitive – including a six out of the ground, across the road and into the field.

Asif Farooqi, from BBC Urdu in Islamabad, was in the UK for an attachment in the newsroom. Asif plays for the Big Belly Cricket team in Islamabad and it was a pleasure to have him with us for the summer. Both he and Zohaib think cleverly about the game. Asif was astute and understated in his suggestions to the skipper and his wisdom was appreciated. His partnership with Pianki Assegai at Fernhurst saw him take us impressively over the line in a victorious run chase, with an unbeaten 70. His first massive six into the trees, after previously reserved stroke play, has been relived by the skipper many times. We hope Asif will come back and play for us once again.

Richard Levien, a big-spinning leg break-googly bowler (15 wickets at 20) and left handed bat (187 runs at 18.7) also played his first season with the Bushmen. Enthusiastic to the core, funny and talented Richard is a great new recruit. His military mettle came to the fore in a night-time game of ‘faceball’ on tour in Suffolk – his night vision and quick reactions were second to none. There is much more to the game than six hitting, but Richard hit one (he claimed it was his first ever) square over cover point at Frieth, early in the season as we started what ought to have been an easy run chase of around 80 to win.

We had arrived at the game to be told that the side, that had skittled us the previous season, had got only 8 players. Honourably, Lyndon Jones – who continues his remarkable travelling to and from Wales for matches, and Andy Popperwell – offered to play for the opposition. The skipper snaffled 5 wickets to see Frieth on the back foot, only for Popperwell to smite 29 runs in a ‘last man stands’ scenario and set a target of sorts. The Bushmen struggled, as only they can. But Javed Soomro, also as ‘last man standing’, held on tight for The Bushmen and led us home. Javed went on to top score the following week making 29 against Cobham helping us hold out in what is now an enjoyably annual one-sided draw and had a pleasingly safe pair of hands throughout the year.

Lyndon introduced Rob Davies to the side – a talented keeper and batsman. He will be welcomed into the fold in the future I hope. Lyndon continued to add valuable runs, most frequently against the odds, when the Bushmen were up against it.

Everyone has heard the saying ‘catches win matches’ – and it wasn’t just Javed who developed bucket hands this year. Pianki snaffled some corkers but Rob (Ron) Fanner is almost certainly the most successful poucher of the year – and it’s been quite a turn around. In his first couple of seasons, it could be said that maybe Rob thought too much about his fielding, so keen was he to do well. He seems to have learnt from other Bushmen – to think less about the game! Snaffling four catches in a match at backward point- arguably the hardest fielding position - at Barrow on the Suffolk Tour he contributed to fine victory. He caught more too.

Nick Norman Butler again proved to be the class act of the side and almost succeeded in scoring consecutive hundreds. His hundred at Groombridge led us to a rare victory against this opposition. He ended the season averaging over 50 with the bat and took an economical 12 wickets.

Also in the Groombridge victory, Pianki took an impressive 4-24 to go with 5-13 in his previous game at Kirdford. He ended the season with an impressive 20 wickets at 15. Every cricket match needs Pianki in it. P’s precious score of 41 with the bat against the Queens Head on the Suffolk tour helped set a winning total.

Bowling wise, this year the skipper believes we had one of the strongest and most consistent bowling attacks he has seen in a Bushmen shirt. The skipper finally listened to the oldest saying in cricket and bowled good line and lengths and regularly picked up early wickets swinging the new ball (23 wkts at 12.9). Top of the averages sits Steven Crossley (13 wkts at 10.7) who delivered a couple of magical spells – twice picking up four wickets with his wobblers to great joy from seasoned Bushmen watchers. But it was Clyde Jeavons, yet again, who cast a wizard-like spell on batsmen on his way to the most wickets (28 at 16.2). Clyde continues to be the man to turn to, whether it’s for a wicket, or to tie up an end and I also recall a fine slip catch. I feel that there are still runs to be made from a waft of Clyde’s willow wand – he started the year well and next year I feel that runs will flow once more. Clyde continues to play sometimes 3 matches a week, representing the Surrey Seniors.

Will Jones – when not travelling the world with Picasso(s) – performed well once more, a smart cricketer and gifted speed eater of a roast dinner and two pints 30 minutes before opening the bowling! He is moments away from a season of enormous amounts of runs and wickets. With some fierce spells he continues to be one of the most unlucky bowlers. Will started the year with a score of 73 at Farleigh Wallop when the only other player in double figures was Mowbray Jackson, who appeared far too rarely. Michael Cockerell continued to snare victims with his elastic length (oppa Gangnam Style) and his innings at Frieth helped drag us over the line as we chased down the small target.

Runs were a mystery to John Whitehead until he finally got back into gear at Steep and got himself a well earned 50. A quiet year with the bat – more to come next year – but some good catches behind the stumps – everyone likes to see a one hander above the head! The masterful Howard Owens again won the world’s loudest laugh competition, continued to have the slipperiest bat handle and took valuable wickets as always – bowling happily whenever and wherever requested.

If you have reached the end of this log, congratulations and thank you. The Bushmen continue to play at many of the finest grounds in the home counties and abroad, enjoying the game and the mateship both within the side and with the opposition . None of it is possible without the continued hard work of Peter Herrmann and Andy Popperwell. Appreciate them, for without them the team is nothing. I’ve very much enjoyed leading the side on the field, it’s unlike any team I have ever been a part of. I look forward to playing more next year.