

# It's a great day for being a boy

David Walker

One September Sunday in 2004, Almondbury Casuals CC, a very friendly cricket club, visited Upperthong. The match was not about a result or performances, though there were some. All that really mattered were the upper reaches of the Holme Valley, bathed in warm Indian Summer sunshine, and playing cricket. It has to be said that balmy weather and Upperthong do not often go together, exposed as it is to vicious storms that sweep down from Holme Moss.

Two youngsters played for Upperthong that day, one on the pitch with his dad and the other in the car park. It got me thinking of all the young lads over the years who have knocked about at cricket. Strange games reminiscent of those informal pastimes played before rules were invented and written down.

Such impromptu occasions are part of the preparation for formal cricket. They are also important lessons in the art of growing up. Take the average domestic backyard or school playground. It is here where juniors sharpen their competitive edge against marauding older brothers and pale fifth formers with nicotine-stained fingers.

At school, a minimal set of kit is essential and old and knackered is preferable. Don't take that dark brown heirloom, signed by Len Hutton, discovered after days of rummaging in the attic, or you will never see it again. Balls must be bald. Stumps are dangerous and on no account must they be used; wall and chalk is quite sufficient. The track will vary from rough and stony to hard uneven clay and there must be no fear of body contact as several hundred matches are played simultaneously, side by side. Bad light and rain-stopped-play are rare. Indeed a wet ball can be an advantage as it leaves a distinctly visible trace on chalk and clean bowled cannot be disputed. Lbws are, however, extremely contentious in this style of cricket, as they can be in the more orthodox forms. It's a battleground, where a talent for survival is swiftly rewarded. Being able to play with a plank for a bat and a ball that barely bounces is clearly valuable, but think of the benefits accruing from attempting to retrieve a square cut from an irate *5-Remove* psychopath whose knuckles scrape along the floor.

In the back garden, the object of the game is not to lose the ball. It's all about defence and occupying the crease, much to the frustration of older brothers. They in turn respond by changing the rules to suit them.

"Owzat?"

"Not out, you dollop."

"How come, it 'it off stump."

"It never, look here there's a mark on't door frame."

"We said t'door frame were going to be off stump."

"Did we 'eck."

Another nine year old stamps his feet and walks back to his mark next to the clothes post. Apart from batting for days, his main weapon is the donkey drop, lobbed as high as his bedroom window, pitching as a half-volley some thirty seconds later, just outside the line of off stump. But he must choose his time carefully. He must wait for the moment when older brother's eyes wander and glaze, that instant when concentration has moved internally to Maxine Hargreaves, her with the big charlies down at number seven. What did he see in her?

Got 'im. The ball sails away to long-off, into Mr Grumps' potato patch, where it will stay until autumn, that bit of the year when the harvest gives birth to hundreds of chewed moth eaten tennis balls.

“Six an' out, you're out.” The nine year old does an impression of an aeroplane in an acrobatics display. Older brother stands bemused, wondering whether he's been had. This is chess, where tactics and planning, capitalising on strengths, minimising weaknesses, patience, a strong nerve and sheer native wit are cultivated. And, when there are no more balls, David and Goliath will go and find another game to play.

That September Sunday in 2004, two boys played for Upperthong. One played on the pitch with his dad; a bowler of promise, a first-ball duck and a steep learning curve. The other, fully present and correct in whites, helmet, pads and gloves played in the car park between two sets of full-sized metal stumps that came up to his shoulder. A left-hander, he played alone during the Casuals' innings, straight driving, blocking, square cutting and taking quick singles. Every so often he would pause, and turn and look at the action out in the middle. After a minute or so he would turn away and get back down to the business at hand.

And the match result?

Upperthong more than 250 for 6 off 35 overs

Casuals 190 all out in 34 overs