

## Brooklands CC 1<sup>st</sup> XI Report 2009

After promotion back to the CCCL in 2008, our main aim for the team this season was to consolidate and avoid an immediate return to the Meller Braggins League. Following the departure of overseas player Vishal Sharma, we were unable to find a replacement of a similar level to make up Vish's runs and wickets. However, we were optimistic that with such a young side, the players who had shown promise last year, albeit at a lower standard, would be able to step up and become 1<sup>st</sup> XI match-winners.

We started at Sale, where despite a season's best 117 from John Birchall, we lost our way in the middle of the innings and only posted 185-6 after being inserted, when 200-plus should have been on the cards. We still thought we had a chance, but our bowling was worryingly wayward, with only Malkit Singh (Chan) able to string together any dot-balls, and we lost by five wickets.

For the second match, at home against Birkenhead Park, Chan was unavailable due to the work commitments that restricted him to just eight league matches this year. However, AJ Hart returned from Australia, but unfortunately he brought with him injury problems that would blight him for the majority of the season. Birkenhead batted poorly to only post 143, with Mike Roberts taking 4-39, and we coasted home with eight wickets to spare, thanks to a quick-fire 71 from John.

Availability issues were already starting to surface, and by the third match at Tattenhall we had selected 16 players, compared to 18 in the entire 2008 season. We bowled well to restrict them to 168-8, with AJ and John (4-49) being particularly economical, and our reply looked well on course after John scored 69. But regular loss of wickets in the second half of our innings pegged us back, and we ended up scraping home thanks to a leg-bye off the last ball.

Although we had won two of our first three games, it was clear that the side was relying heavily on John, especially with the bat. So it was perhaps unsurprising that when John failed for the first time, against a mediocre Mobberley side, we collapsed to 97 all out and an embarrassing 94 run defeat.

This was to start a poor run of six consecutive league defeats, interspersed with 2020 defeats against Urmston and Mobberley, a Cheshire Cup defeat at Birkenhead Park and a rained-off league game against Burnage. A major factor in the league defeats was a lack of batting application (we failed to bat 50 overs in all of these games), although the lack of consistency in our bowling also remained a concern.

A significant improvement to the side came in the fifth of those league defeats, at Bredbury, with the arrival of Paul Vesey, promoted from the 2<sup>nd</sup> XI. Paul gave our bowling attack a much needed boost, showing superb control as well as taking wickets regularly – his first two spells of 15 overs, 3-32 on the short boundaries at Bredbury and 9.5 overs, 5-35 against eventual league champions Bollington were exceptional, and helped turn our season around.

The defeat at home to Bollington was followed by a crucial home game against bottom-placed Oakmere. We had slipped to 11<sup>th</sup> place in the league, so it was vital that we stopped the rot and started finding some positive momentum. Wicket-keeper Rob Wood, promoted to opening on his return from a successful spell in the 2<sup>nd</sup> XI, scored 77 and Chris Hart added a run-a-ball 57 to allow us to declare on 232-5 after 48 overs. We were unable to bowl out Oakmere on a flat wicket and they closed on 196-5, but at least we were moving in the right direction.

We followed this with a losing draw at Stockport Georgians, where we did reasonably to keep Stockport to 239-6 on an excellent batting wicket with short straight boundaries. Despite Woody scoring 54, we lost too many wickets early on and closed 26 runs short, eight wickets down.

Our third victory of the season finally came, over two months after our second, in a Cheshire Shield game against a much weakened Bredbury side the following day, when we stumbled to a four wicket victory, chasing 182.

An additional boost to the team came ahead of the visit of Middlewich the following Saturday with the arrival of former Pakistan bowler Shahid Mahboob. We were in trouble at 72-4 batting first, before an exceptional partnership worth 116 between Chris Hart (a superb 81) and Tom Holloway helped us reach 232-6. Shahid then showed his quality with the ball, conceding just 37 runs from 22 accurate overs as Middlewich limped to 124-7 in reply.

We carried this momentum into the visit to Birkenhead, where we totally dominated after winning the toss on a damp track. John bowled superbly to return the remarkable figures of 22 overs, 13 maidens, 5-21, and with support from Shahid (4-25) we sent them back for 91. John rounded off a brilliant performance with 58, as we strolled home by eight wickets.

The visit of Tattenhall the following Saturday provided our fourth league win, on this occasion by seven wickets. John (5-26) again starred with the ball as they posted 171, before he (87\* from 74 balls) and Shahid (63 from 32 balls) entertained the crowd and took us to victory in less than 25 overs.

The next league game, at Mobberley, was abandoned due to a waterlogged pitch, but the following day we travelled to Cheadle for the semi-final of the Cheshire Shield. We had booked our place in the semi-finals thanks to Paul Vesey's brilliant under-

pressure dart-throwing in a 3-2 sudden-death bowl-out victory over Marple the previous Sunday. Sadly, on this occasion, we bowled and fielded terribly, allowing the side from the league above to reach 192-8 on a poor wicket, and our reply fell 55 runs short.

With six games remaining in the league season, we lay 8<sup>th</sup>, but certainly not completely free of relegation worries. The local derby against Sale ended in a draw, although their decision to bat past half-way may well have cost them a victory that could have given them a real chance of promotion; we closed on 143-9 from 46 overs, chasing 199-8.

What turned out to be our final win of the season came the next week at Oakmere, where Shahid's 5-56 helped restrict them to 190-8. We were in some trouble at 39-3, before an excellent partnership worth 125 between Chris Hart (100, his first 1<sup>st</sup> XI century) and I appeared to put us in the driving seat. However, we lost two further wickets on 173, and three with the scores tied, before a wide off the first ball of the last over handed us victory.

A disappointing batting performance on a superb wicket at champions Bollington the next Saturday resulted in our eighth and final league defeat, this time by 78 runs. We had earlier kept them to a below-par 238-7 thanks to tight bowling from Paul (5-88) and Shahid.

Batting first on a poor track in our penultimate home game, against Bredbury, we recovered from 92-8 to post 144-9 thanks to useful contributions down the order from Elliot Woodage and Dave Clifton. We nearly pulled off a remarkable victory when their last man was caught off a no-ball, but instead had to settle for a winning draw as they closed on 118-9, with Shahid taking 5-28.

Our last away match was cancelled by Burnage, due to their pitch being unfit, and by the time we came to our final game, at home against Marple, we knew we were safe. We posted 222-9 thanks to 74 from John and 64 from me, before they replied with 204-8, leaving us with a winning draw.

A seventh-place finish in the league represented a good recovery given where we had found ourselves half-way through the season. It's difficult to explain quite why we went through such a poor run early in the year. For me, it seemed that some players were very complacent in their attitude early in the season, expecting to get picked in the side on the basis of reputation, rather than taking responsibility and working hard to improve their games and put in the performances that would earn them their places. This is why it was particularly pleasing to see Paul Vesey and Rob Wood move up from the 2<sup>nd</sup> XI and make such vital contributions that helped turn our season around. It was also good to see Chris Hart and Tom Holloway taking responsibility by playing crucial innings in difficult circumstances later in the season.

John Birchall again showed what a great all-rounder he is, scoring six 50's and one hundred, and taking 29 league wickets. The arrival of Shahid Mahboob, who took a remarkable 28 wickets in just eight matches, certainly also helped in taking some of the pressure off John and allowing him to play in the way he does best – with the freedom to play his shots when he bats and to experiment and try to make things happen with the ball.

As a team, we should thank all those that have supported us this year, especially those who watched regularly – the Birchalls (and Merv), the Roberts and the Johnsons. Thanks also to Mike Woodage, who has been ever-present in the score-box, and to Jeff Marland, who has added words of wisdom to matters of selection and our on-field performance. Last, but certainly not least, thanks to Roy Higginbottom for all the hard work he has again put in to help-out the team in many ways. The number of hours that Roy spends watching cricket and making sure things run smoothly is only matched by the number of hours he spends on the phone to me on Monday afternoons discussing what I did wrong on Saturday!

Looking forward to next year, I am hopeful that, having now found our feet at this level, we can progress and look to be challenging at the top of the division. I believe that everyone who played for the 1<sup>st</sup> XI has room for improvement on what they produced this year, so if people work hard over the winter and come back with the right attitude we will definitely have a real chance.

Dave Madden