

THE ARCHIVE

CLASSIC GENTS MATCHES

The 1995 Bob Ashton Memorial Cup did not proceed placidly. West XI had not won in six games before 21 May but deservedly beat the Gents in the first game at Surbiton. The hosts dropped the prolific Arthur five times, mostly off the bowling of new pace sensation Stuart Snelling. Arthur and Bignell (24) put up 73 in 20 overs for the first wicket, weathering the Snelling storm, Hill pasting Dhruv Patel for 18 off the innings' final four balls. Dhruv Patel and Mike Hughes raced to 55-0 off 9 overs but once they fell the Gents lost momentum, were pegged back and fell 11 short.

And so to the Battle of Brentford and reports and analysis from Andrew Burman and Steve Bignell.

West XI v. Gentlemen of West London

Sunday 23 July 1995, Boston Manor Park. Gents won toss. Sunny, 25C

Won by 5 wickets

West XI			Gentlemen of West London				
Bignell		b Snelling	30	†Hughes	c Seale	b Williams	10
Arthur	c Hughes	b Ashton	39	Townley		b Taylor	4
†Seale	not out		34	D. Patel		b Folley	0
Christensen		b Snelling	0	Thornicroft		b Folley	0
Folley	not out		25	*Ashton	c Williams	b Taylor	71
*Hill, Drake, Taylor, Rayner, Allerton and Williams dnb				Wright	not out		50
				Todd	not out		0
				Richmond, Snelling, Burman and Dolan dnb			
Extras	b14 lb1 w7 nb4		26	Extras	b1 lb13 w5 nb1		20
Total	3 wickets	35 overs	154	Total	5 wickets	30.5 overs	155
FoW: 74, 80, 85				FoW: 8, 9, 13, 27, 154			
Bowling: Snelling 7-1-16-2, Todd 4-0-24-0, Thornicroft 7-0-41-0, Wright 7-2-11-0, Ashton 7-0-26-1, Dolan 2-0-16-0, D. Patel 1-0-5-0				Bowling: Taylor 5.5-1-24-2, Folley 6-2-14-2, Hill 7-0-31-0, Williams 7-0-36-1, Christensen 3-0-20-0, Arthur 3-0-16-0			

To the Manor born – Gents heroes lay the jinx to rest

With perhaps the best partnership in the Gents' history, Mark Ashton (10 fours and a six) and Jim Wright (six fours) rescued a game that had looked lost when the visitors had struggled to 27-4. Their superb stand of 127 in 20.3 overs levelled the scores. Ashton then holed out but a scampered leg-bye two balls later saw them home. Both batsmen scored 50s, Ashton his first in this series and Wright his first ever. Earlier, the Gents had done well to restrict a fluent batting line-up, despite the usual bizarre fielding gaffes. The decider will be on 17 September.

With a green wicket, Ashton fielded without hesitation, a brave move if one that seemed misjudged for much of the afternoon. The helmeted Bignell took guard at 2.45pm and Snelling's first ball ripped and took the shoulder of the bat, landing beyond the backpedalling slips. Two overs later and Arthur reprised his escape. With a double change after six overs – West XI 28-0 – Wright, bowled through, gave his captain control. But the catches would not stick and the hosts were ominously 63-0 at 15 over drinks. Ashton asked for sharper fielding, Dolan for more support from the captain.

A slicker unit reassembled. West XI's openers struggled in draining heat, only 11 runs coming from the next five overs. At last a wicket fell as Arthur gloved an evil Ashton bouncer in a gentle loop to 'keeper Hughes. In the next over Bignell, having cover-driven Snelling for four, was bowled and Christensen yorked two overs later. Seale and Folley gave a few chances but posted 69 in the final 11 overs. The fielding had held up well, Dhruv Patel and Richmond tireless in the deep.

The final overs of the innings were enlivened by some cruel barracking of the fielders from beyond the boundary. Hughes lost his temper and unleashed his famous and very loud “Totally unacceptable” rebuke at West XI captain Hill, innocent on this occasion. The possibility of a Gents defeat had been acknowledged by the Secretary, who had brought along the Bob Ashton Memorial Cup. It was a motivational masterstroke. “They’re not having it,” bellowed Snelling.

Yet after the half-time bickering between the teams had subsided, another disastrous start ensued. Previous games – all won – had seen recoveries from 31-6, 63-6 and 36-4, so 27-4 was not game over but the Beggars were favourites, thanks to some excellent bowling with an illicit new ball that had been smuggled on to the pitch by Jolin and Hill. Townley and Patel were bowled half-forward, Thornicroft rooted to the back foot. Hughes pulled Hill for four but walked when glancing behind, umpire Dolan’s hands having remained firmly in his pockets.

From the moment Wright cut Hill’s third ball for four, he was in complete command. Elegant off-drives and cover-drives flowed from his bat while Ashton was initially circumspect. The running between the wickets was a revelation, ones being turned into twos and twos into threes as a matter of course.

The stand built slowly. At 16 overs drinks Gents stood at 54-4. Hill then turned to spin. Seizing his chance, Ashton struck five fours and a six, taking two fours and a six off Christensen’s final three balls. Wright played Arthur for singles and a three before Ashton clubbed two fours to remove him from the attack. Gents were 90-4 off 22.

West XI’s fielding had held together well but the bowling was now looking tied and ordinary. The openers returned to another barrage of boundaries, Wright’s cover-drive off Taylor the shot of the day. Ashton went to his 50 and Gents had progressed to 118-4 off 26, the away fans singing lustily. The batsmen were now racing towards the target. Williams’s final over went for four byes and four twos, the last of which brought up Wright’s 50. The scores were level.

Ashton finally pulled to deep square-leg but the 13th leg-bye of the innings saw them home at 7.21pm. The stand of 127 was 12 more than the Gents had ever managed in a total innings here. After the game Ashton was in fine fettle, even making political capital out of the extras column. The high tally of byes in the first innings was “Down to our bowlers being faster” while the unusual number of leg-byes scored by the Gents was “The result of our batsmen getting into line.”

Famous victory for Gents – but at what cost?

Steve Bignell wrote in Yes..No..Sorry 33: “The Gentlemen of West London CC duly levelled the Bob Ashton Memorial Cup 1-1, claiming their first ever victory at Boston Manor since the long-running series began on the very same strip back in May 1988. A superb partnership between Mark Ashton and the much-ridiculed James Wright of 127 in 20 overs effectively won the match after they had bled in deep doo-doo at 27-4, replying to West XI’s 154-3. Despite being the junior partner, Wright’s innings of 50* was generally agreed to have been the best innings at Boston Manor for many a moon. Ashton made a chanceless 71, his innings only ending when the scores were level, as the Gents romped to victory with four overs to spare.

Sadly, these games always seem to be tarnished by some controversy or other, and this was no exception. The West XI players were deeply upset by the visitors’ bowling tactics, which employed a good deal of intimidating short-pitched stuff on what is a notoriously dodgy pitch, which has placed the future of this series in doubt.

This season GWLCC have unearthed a genuine fast bowler in the fearsome Stuart Snelling. There is a body of opinion that he is too fast for our standard of social cricket. YSN does not go along with this theory. There is nothing wrong with fast bowling (West XI played him reasonably enough on the flat, slow wicket at Surbiton) providing it is employed in reasonable conditions. It is his action that causes the problem, bowling as he does off the wrong foot with no left-arm movement, and the ball being whipped over from behind his back. With his speed off the pitch it is almost impossible without sightscreens to pick up the line of the ball.

But it was not Snelling on this occasion who proved the greatest danger, though some of his antics were out of order, but Ashton and Thornicroft, who indulged in far too much short stuff. Had the aerial No ball law been enforced, West XI would have benefited by at least 20 runs.

Now this might all sound like a lot of whinging and sour grapes but there is genuine concern at YSN House over the future of the Gents, a club which has undergone a dramatic change in the last season or two. Gone are most of the hapless, neurotic but generally friendly and self-deprecating crew of the early 90s, to be replaced by a bunch of fierce, intense, ultra-serious and to a large extent humourless and unsociable characters. Do we really want to see, in a friendly game of social cricket, no matter how competitive, bowlers running down a pitch towards a batsman they have just dismissed, bellowing and waving their fists, or balls flying past batsmen's noses or over their heads, or having headmasterly lectures dished out at the end of the innings? I don't think so.

All great macho stuff, with bucketloads of testosterone: might we suggest that if this is the way the Gents' cricket is heading, then they should abandon the social cricket scene and seek entry in to one of the minor Middlesex or Surrey leagues, where this kind of cricket is the norm. Ashton appears to have been affected more than anybody by this change of character, or has he at last found his true role in life, Captain of a Very Serious Cricket Team?"

Postscript

There then followed in those pre-email days an exchange of letters in which views were forcefully exchanged. They are of such an incendiary nature that they cannot be released under the Thirty Year Rule. We will therefore add a statistical insight: three wickets is the fewest lost by an opponent in a game in which the Gents successfully chased the target. The Gents' record is two, in their 206-2 easily chased down by Close PF in 2015.

In the Wimbledon Park decider on 17 September, Nick Boddington's 54, his second fifty against West XI, was the foundation of the Gents' highest score in the series to date, 173 all out. Ian Maughan batted attractively for 32. Wright missed this game. *Beggars in White* chronicled that "West XI never remotely looked like challenging this total, the first five wickets going down in the space of nine runs. West XI were 94 all out. There was little socialising after the game and relations between the sides sank to an all-time low". *Gent 36* confirms that only four Gents (Burman, Burville, Hughes and Snelling) attended the Pig and Whistle for the after match slander session.

1995 – Gents 2 West XI 1

21/5	Victoria RG	West XI 171-7 (C. Arthur 70, Drake 25, Bignell 24) Gents 160 (Ashton 35, Hughes 29, Hill 3-18)	Lost 11 runs
23/7	Boston Manor	West XI 154-3 (C. Arthur 39, Seale 34*, Bignell 30, Folley 25*) Gents 155-5 (Ashton 71, J. Wright 50*)	Won 5 wickets
17/9	Wimbledon Park	Gents 173 (Boddington 54, Maughan 32, Hughes 21, Bignell 4-32, Williams 3-34) West XI 94 (Ashton 3-27)	Won 79 runs