

## LORDS OF THE OVALS

### I. *The Fellowship of the Oval*

It's amazing how much you can look forward to an event. This was no exception and what better way to spend an evening than with a group of mates at a fine public house on a sunny summer's evening. The only downside, some of those friends couldn't make it and on arrival at the watering hole, would you believe it, my favourite Cornish Doom Bar ale had been substituted for the Kentish Spitfire.

There's nothing like a few good mates though to get you through the tough times and it wasn't long before we were jostling and joking at the bar, bevies in hand and an unmistakable light-heartedness in the air. Subjects ranged from Michael's imported drugs wagon and Chris's Audi hearse to dream jobs, wives that earn the money and of course, wine. England's oenological merits and the joys of viticulture were only interrupted briefly by the appearance of a particularly curvaceous female form on the TV screen.

The evening was warming up nicely and the conversation louder and more animated with every sip of golden lubricant. It was at that point that the bar staff, bless their blouses, took it upon themselves to bring forth sustenance of a rare and unexpected kind. Scampi and chips! Of course, most of us assumed immediately that we were being dished up the usual chicken nuggets of Jamie Oliver fame, but after some careful prodding it was declared that we were indeed to enjoy a seafood dish. I was, truth be told, initially a little disappointed not finding Tartar sauce amongst the condiments however, I quickly brushed this minor grievance aside as Michael, clearly not a seafood fan, added his scampi to my plate.

The food slipped down very nicely and I was just about to head over for seconds when I noticed a bunch of chaps tucking into the leftovers themselves. My indignation rose but as I moved to rally some support it struck me that these foreign chaps didn't look so unfamiliar after all. In fact they reminded me of a curious incident that occurred on the way to the pub earlier. I do believe one of two of them may well have been involved, but not wanting to provoke a further incident I withdrew behind my pint.

I must admit the evening had started in a most peculiar fashion. I have been party to one or two awkward social moments but I think this evening may be up there at the top. There's always a chance someone will have shopped at the same store and bought the same outfit and there's always a chance that they too will decide to wear it on the very night you choose to do so. But I ask you, eleven blokes all dressed the same and in white to boot! Not only that but, as if to snub our party in some sick gangland stand-off, another group of wannabees pitched up all wearing the same garb!

I really thought things were going to get dicey and it would all end in fisticuffs but the apparent leader of the offending group stepped forward and declared that they were 'Crabtree' and wanted to challenge us to a game of wits. 'Crabtree,' I thought. 'Definitely something fishy there if not a lous(e)y name.' Keeping my distance I watched as the opposition slowly spread out across a wide area of grass, their leader apparently powerless to control their movements. Like dozy zombies each paused around a worn

central square of grass in which were stuck 6 sticks. I wondered at these small totems, perhaps put there last night by some local youths or maybe, more sinister, a secretive coven. Either way, the guy who cut the grass should be fired: fancy mowing one patch to oblivion in what was otherwise a pleasant grassy space.

Anyway, after a few quizzical looks at each other, we sprung into action, not willing to be outdone by this strange impediment between us and our planned destination. James and I, not knowing what manner of evil we were about to face, padded ourselves and grabbed wooden flailing arms and strode forth to align ourselves with the totems and face whatever pagan doom greeted us. As I say this, and pause to examine the bottom dregs of my pint, I feel a little ashamed that it was at this point that my initial bravado crumbled. I had taken up a casual stance of defensive indifference with my weapon poised for combat when all of a sudden one of the challengers moved swiftly towards me, uncoiling as he went and unleashed a furious assault with a small round leather ball.

I hastily swung out at the projectile missing it but luckily it missing me too. As ball after ball rained in I kept swinging wildly not knowing what would happen should I not dispatch these spinning devils. After what seemed an age, it was declared 'over' and I breathed, 'Thank God, it's over'. I was all for heading off and calling it a day, after all a drink was beckoning, but something told me that James needed me and I should stay, if only for his reassurance.

I'm very glad I did, for you should have seen the magnificent onslaught that James unleashed on the foe. Our enemy fell silent only crying out occasionally, "Six!", "Four!" and "Six again!", in what must have been their own language of pain and despair. The cries of "Over?!" seemed to take on a pleading quality as the bludgeoning continued. The sigh of relief amongst the wearying hoard was audible as James, weapon in hand, showed mercy and retired from the battlefield. His replacement was quick to the field – Simon Wilson, a fellow brave.

Fired up by this expertise in battle, I rallied my spirit. I lashed and lunged aiming for whatever opponent I could see. I hit a couple but each in turn got back up. At last I whacked a ball away and it seemed to imbed itself in an opponent's body. "Aha!" I cried inwardly. "David has struck Goliath!" But alas no, it seems that the rules of warfare dictated that it was I who was out and my opponent, to prove it, raised the ball aloft for all to see that he had caught it. I sulked back to my comrades, glancing round half hoping the ball would explode in some grenade-like way and restore my pride.

I would like to say that at that point we reached a truce and were allowed to go on our way but the truth is the evening continued in the most bizarre manner in which it had started. I was replaced by David (who reputedly sings at night) and who proceeded to whittle away at the opposition gaining what I now understood to be 'runs'. (At first I had been wary of the runs fearing they were the result of being too close to the Crabtree but I settled into the concept quick enough once the connection was disestablished). David demonstrated what it means to be in something for the long haul and I admired his tenacity and commitment in the wake of my short thrashing about in a mist of fear and frustration.

It was at this point in the proceedings that Simon was 'caught out' in what can only be described as totemic ritual gesture by the wiccan-keeper (pronounced *wicket*, I think). The incoming missile bounced tremendously as it seemed want to do. Simon, in an attempt to dismiss this cunning, deflected the ball upwards off his protective mitts only to be caught out in right fine fumble next to his head. He could however, leave the battlefield head intact and held high, a noble 9 runs to his name.

His successor, Bertie Wooster, who I shall affectionately call Chris, now faced a mounting assault by the enemy. I alluded to the bounce of the ball and this seemed to pose the greatest threat throughout our campaign. No doubt that nitwit who mowed the grass thought he'd be clever and roll it repeatedly too and now we might as well have been fighting on compacted rubber. Not to be subdued, Chris, in a kind of batting<sup>1</sup> morse code sent a clear message to the enemy: 1-4-4-4-1. I have no idea what he said but it obviously gnarled them somewhat as their reply was to shatter his wiccan<sup>2</sup> totem and declare him out.

All this time Tim had been observing the play closely and doodling in a red book. I assumed some latent artistic talent was surfacing within the context of the somewhat creative cauldron we found ourselves in. However, he suddenly looked up with tension in his voice and advised that runs is what we needed if we were to prevail. I glanced at the red book and was surprised to see an ordered set of dots and squiggles interspersed with numbers. Inwardly I started, as I realized that this was no doodling but an insight into the mind of the enemy. "What a coup!" I thought. "We've only gone and mastered their language". I have since looked at Tim with a new respect quickly dismissing the dark fears that question the source of his knowledge and suggest a conspiracy within our own ranks. His fine contribution later as we turned to bombard the enemy with a number of red balls laid rest this mistrustful notion.

Runs is what we needed so who better to take to the field than Michael, known for his measured pace and inexhaustible speed. It wasn't long before we sought to boost his performance with a militant chorus of yells from the boundary line of "Run, run, faster!" Unfortunately, this tactic back-fired and Michael was run out being forced to watch the wooden totem at his end smashed to pieces in front of him. We cannot know the pain that he went through out there but a respectful silence was held as he walked back to our muted assembly. His innings was not without worth with solid additional 7 runs in our favour.

With a growing sense of the battle turning, Simon Knee bravely stepped into the zone of the curse<sup>3</sup>. Now all eyes were on him and the immortal David. We rejoiced in each run and Simon responded with a variety of ones, twos, a couple of fours and a magnificent six. Sadly, a sudden end then came for Simon as he was apparently caught out the very next ball and indeed the last ball of our 20 overs. I was none the wiser having responded to a

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<sup>1</sup> Apparently the 'l' in battling is not pronounced in this instance.

<sup>2</sup> Again, pronounced '*wicket*'

<sup>3</sup> Pronounced '*crease*' although an early English translation has it simply as '*arse*'

call of nature which resulted in me delicately and hastily reversing out of the bush having aimed slightly too close to the resident bees.

We sat licking our wounds and considering our innings. In all 145 runs with 5 men down, one retired and one still standing. However, we knew now we could draw on the as yet untapped and unscathed talent of Peter, Tim, Graham and John who had patiently observed the battle from raised ground like any true generals would. Tactics were discussed briefly, field positions adopted and Graham assigned to be the wiccan-keeper<sup>4</sup> despite his protestations that he too would like to hurl missiles like the foot soldiers.

And so the battle re-commenced with John and Tim launching a suitable volley of missiles at the cowering opposition. At the end of his two overs John had only conceded 6 runs while Tim, at the end of his, had 'bowled out two players'<sup>5</sup> – one by destroying his wooden totem and the other, finding his leg before his wooden totem, suffering an equal demise. It was at this point in the battle that we strongly sensed we might win.

How fleeting a sensation that was.

All of a sudden, 'Ben N', from the enemy camp, appeared before the totem arrayed in white and capped in blue. Who or what he was will remain a mystery but transfer negotiations have begun. Each new ball was met with equal contempt and dispatched for six after six. When he reached 42 it seemed somehow that any unresolved questions (and everything else) had been answered.

The battle raged fierce and we all felt its sting. Who can tell of the bravery and gallantry of those hours? Who can recount the skirmishes and clashes of leather on wood that filled the air that fine evening? A day when men became heroes and legends were made to be told another day. Who can speak of Peter and his dive away from the ball; of Michael as he kept them guessing; of Simon Knee and James who terrified the living daylights out of cowering batsmen; of David and Chris with their timely finesse and of Rupert and his wide balls? And of Simon Wilson who nobly finished the job, never wavering despite the looming loss.

The loss it came and heads were bowed in shame. What manner of witchcraft had beguiled us so that we lost by 4 wickets (I use the colloquial pronunciation)? The wooden totems were uprooted – but not before Graham had torn off his constrictive wiccan-keeper paraphernalia and hurled one final missile at the wicket to vent some deep frustration. The wicket stood calmly and secure, perhaps, like me, more disturbed by the pink protective box cast off on the ground than by any flying missile. "Why have a flesh-coloured box I mused?" Shocking images traversed my mind and I resolved to think nothing more of it.

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<sup>4</sup> Pronunciation as per Note 2. Traditionally a role given to an individual who, through extraordinary magical powers possesses either the ability to artfully dodge the most high-speed of missiles or the ability to take one hell of a bludgeoning. Protective clothing is more ceremonial than effective.

<sup>5</sup> A sanitised translation of the phrase "*disemboweled two slayers*"

What I needed and had always needed was a good cold pint of beer. I started out but only to be way-laid by a the commanding figure of Michael. "I say old chap," said he. "Be a good sport and write up the evening's proceedings will you?" Well now, you don't say no to Michael and I do believe at that moment I jumped to attention as if I was a young foot-soldier about to obediently go over the top over the trenches. "Oh well", I thought. "How hard can it be? After all the evenings proceedings haven't started – we haven't even made it to the pub yet!"

I sighed contentedly as I joined the company of Simon, Peter, the other Simon, James and John and the other disciples, watched over by Michael, in the pub. Although we had lost what turns out to be a simple game of cricket en route to the pub, I took comfort in that fact that I had participated in something quite sublime – a fellowship.