

Walker Leads Middleton to Top of the Table

Monday, 15 May 2017

George Walker, Middleton Captain, led his team to the top of the table with a courageous batting performance against Shaw on Saturday 13th May. It was a great team performance with several individuals stepping up to the plate when the going got tough, none more so than Walker a serious injury doubt earlier in the week.

Indeed changes had to be made from last weeks team, with the unavailability of Steve McGuinness and James Tierney badly injured in practice on Thursday. In came local Middletonians Tom Rutter and Reece Jones, all rounders who graduated through the Middleton youth system. Shaw had a much changed team from last year, Steve Whiston back as Captain, ex England International Saj Mahmood and his brother Rak from the Bolton League. Tom Brimelow from the Liverpool Competition, Tharshan Thayalan from Sale. However the Ace in the Pack was undoubtedly Jameel Stuart, overseas amateur a batter whom no bowler has dismissed this year.

Due to damp on the square it meant a late start reduced to 48 overs as Shaw came out to bat. Middleton Professional Chris Williams opened the bowling and was soon finding his line and length, five of his overs were maidens and this was putting pressure on the Shaw batsmen to up the rate. With the score on 34 Mike Pritchard got his just reward for a tidy opening spell having Keaveny caught by George Walker. Mike followed this soon after with the key wicket of Saj Mahmood for 10 to cap a fine opening spell, leaving Shaw 51-2. That wicket brought to the middle Jameel Stuart, fresh from his demolitions of Hollinwood and Royton, a batter in form, with the short boundaries looking very inviting. Walker sensibly reserved his spinners for later, and brought into the attack Tom Rutter, who immediately found a great line which Stuart found difficult to get away. At the car park end Reece Jones replaced Mike Pritchard, who had a deserved rest after a great opening spell. Reece's career has taken him abroad for several years, but now back in the fold this hard hitting batsman and medium paced swing bowler has given the team some depth. Before being replaced, Chris Williams got the vital wicket of Captain Whiston caught by keeper Foden for 32. Jameel Stuart was looking to get into his stride and offered a couple of difficult half chances.

The match was now at a key moment, for an in-form Stuart could easily take the score above 250 as he began to find the boundaries with regularity. There then came two masterly run outs by Chris Williams and Rhys Tierney, the hard hours on the training ground paying off as the middle order batters Tom Brimelow and Rak Mahmood were dismissed. This meant that the Moonrakers had the option of either becoming the first team to dismiss Stuart or clean up at the other end. It was tantalisingly in the balance as the loquacious Walker introduced spinner Matthew Foden into the attack. A small ground, with Stuart waiting to explode as he goes after spinners, it was game on. Foden began to weave his magic and was pinning down both batsmen when Stuart was clean bowled by Matt. A key moment, as Stuart had reached 46 and had his eye in. Chris Williams was re-introduced and his pace accounted for Partington and Chiappe. Foden ended his fine spell with the last two wickets including a truly sensational caught and bowled off the last man, to leave Shaw 159 all out. An interesting score and one which Shaw felt they could defend.

The Middleton openers Williams and Harry Gee strode out to bat to face the opening bowling duo of Saj Mahmood and Jameel "Salty" Stuart. These guys have serious pace and are capable of destroying teams. However, Gee showed his class by dispatching Mahmood for a couple of early boundaries with Williams himself finding the boundary with a glorious four. Stuart showed his flexibility by switching from his traditional spinners to fierce pace bowling. The noise levels had

increased in the ground as the Shaw crowd bayed for a wicket, however the openers had moved smoothly to 27 when Mahmood broke through taking the unfortunate Williams with a caught and bowled. This brought Grant Jones to the wicket and the Shaw players made it clear that this was the wicket they wanted and were determined to get it. Grant meanwhile had other ideas and his forward defensive proved impenetrable as he battled to silence the crowd and the Shaw team. Grant has been in majestic form in recent weeks but the hard working Gee was showing true grit and determination at the other end as he stroked seven magnificent boundaries including a majestic six which was lost in an adjoining field. This seemed to frustrate the Shaw team who had been used to blowing teams away with their fire-power and they seemed determined to make life uncomfortable for Gee in all manner of ways. Appealing at every opportunity, throwing for run outs and Aussie style banter, Shaw used all methods available to them. Just a pity that Middletons own Aussie, class bat Harry Nichols watched on in frustration whilst he awaits Government and Cricketing regulations clearance to allow him to play.

The temperature in the middle was getting red hot, but Gee kept a cool head as he led the team to 65 of which he'd made a faultless 37 when he was caught off the bowling of Stuart. Harry had knocked off a quarter of the Shaw score himself and though he has scored more runs in other matches, none have been done in such tough conditions. For me it was his best knock so far this season, a vital innings of real character.

The wicket brought the garrulous Walker out to the middle to join Jones. Both still relatively young these two have been the mainstay of the Moonrakers middle order for some years. Despite injury early in the week this proved to be George's best knock this season. Grant was moving effortlessly through the gears and taking Middleton to the significant milestone of one hundred when Stuart claimed his second wicket. A pull from Grant looked like it was heading over the ropes for six when Chiappe took a good catch. A foot either way and it would have been a six. Whenever a wicket fell this only encouraged the Shaw players to raise the tempo.

There was no time to settle for the new Moonraker bat Zain Tahir and he was soon in the thick of the action. With 20 overs remaining and 50 required Shaw knew they had to bowl out Middleton. Walker knew he had to time the run chase to perfection. Between them George and Zain hit eleven boundaries and would have had more with the ball stopping dead, inches from the rope on several occasions. Zain is a class bat and his defensive abilities saw off the speedy Rak brother of Saj and all rounder Doherty. Shaw also tried to run out Zain for backing up on several occasions to no avail. Meanwhile Stuart had switched to his usual delivery style of spinners in order to mix it up a bit. The Shaw fielders raised their game in an attempt to unsettle George and the focus of their banter strangely seemed to focus on George's sartorial elegance. Thankfully George has great concentration levels and was determined to play a Captains innings.

Zain and George had a simple policy, block the good balls and punish the weak ones. This they did and one particular massive six from George was last seen heading down the road to Royton. As the winning total came ever so closer this seemed to reduce the noise levels and towards the end both batsmen found the boundary on several occasions thus deflating the Shaw balloon little by little. Speaking regularly between overs, George and Zain encouraged each other to withstand the intense pressure. This was a shock to Shaw who had worked so hard during the Winter months to build this team. I was surprised that Spinner Jay Virpura a recruit from Newcastle wasn't brought on sooner, he came on too late, George and Zain had their eyes in, and he caused them no problems whatsoever.

As the winning run was hit there was relief from the travelling Middleton fans and this for me was their best win of the season. Eleven local lads had mastered a talented Shaw team. The Middleton lads as always came out onto the pitch to shake the hands of the Shaw players who had been well beaten with 15 overs remaining. A special mention to the Umpires who were absolutely first class. Middleton returned to Towncroft to prepare for the visit of Oldham the next day, now clear at the top of the Championship. It had been a true team performance and it feels wrong to single out any players , however George Walker showed what a class act he is under intense pressure. Superb performance.

As for Shaw, they will no doubt remain there or thereabouts at the top of the League and next year anticipate to transfer to the Greater Manchester Cricket League. I wish them all the best.

Scorecard

Keaveney ct Walker bowled Pritchard 16.

Whiston ct p Foden bowled Williams 32

S Mahmood ct Gee bowled Pritchard 10

Stuart bowled M Foden 46

Brimelow run out Tierney 7

Mahmood run out williams 0

Partington bowled Williams 10

Chiappe lbw williams 0

Vipura lbw Foden 0

Doherty not out 7

Swann ct and bowled Foden 3

Extras 28

All out 159

Middleton bowling

Williams 15 overs 5 maidens 3 wickets for 45

Pritchard 12-2-2 for 42

Rutter 7-1-0 for 31

R Jones 3-0-0 for 26

M Foden 7-3-3 for 18

Middleton Batting

H Gee ct Partington b Jameel 37

Williams ct and bowled Mahmood 5

G Jones ct Chiappe b Jameel 27

G Walker not out 43

Z Tahir not out 28

R Tierney did not bat

T Rutter DNB

R Jones DNB

P Foden DNB

M Foden DNB

M. Pritchard DNB

- On the Sunday Middleton entertained Oldham at Towncroft with Rashid Hussain taking the captaincy reins for the fifth season at the Pollards . Rashid's motto is that he and his team will always give it their best shot and this they did. Batting first the Middleton bowlers restricted Oldham to 45 with the wickets spread. The winning runs were hit for the loss of two wickets and it was good to see youngsters Le Carpentier and Callaghan getting a run out in the first team. It was the final visit to Towncroft by Oldham our rivals and friends for over 100 years as founders of the Central Lancashire League and we wish them all the best for the future in whatever league they end up playing.

Report kindly submitted by Phil Hamnett