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## FODEN'S TRIO OF OLDHAM WICKETS CAPS A MEMORABLE WEEKEND

Monday, 22 May 2017

It was warm and extremely pleasant as I walked into Towncroft at 1.20pm last Sunday. Over at the Pavilion I noticed the Oldham lads were taking batting practice so I assumed that they had won the toss and elected to bat. Rash Hussain was leading the team from the Pollards for the fifth year in succession and would be able to call upon quick bowler Imran Khan whilst Tala Tufhail was the man for the runs, having scored 650 last year. Other quality players included Nadeem Ashrad, whilst joining from Radcliffe were Malik and Ahmed. Competition in the Oldham Borough to recruit and build teams is tough with there being 18 other teams playing top flight cricket in a number of local leagues.

I took my place underneath the scoreboard and relaxed in the quiet surrounds, a million miles away from the frenetic and boisterous atmosphere created the previous day at Shaw. It had not properly sunk in that we had comprehensively beaten a team tipped by many to win the league. A team constructed from some of the best players operating in the local leagues, plus an ex England bowler and an impressive overseas amateur who can bowl seriously quick with a speed of over 80 miles per hour.

A hero from the previous days battle, Chris Williams, was given the new ball which he appears to relish. Taking the new ball is a special thing and something not every bowler enjoys. Chris appears to enjoy the challenge of standing up and being the person the team looks to for wickets. Physically fit and capable of bowling over after over, Chris has an attacking mindset and is on the spot from the word go. Hours of practice means that the required length and action has become ingrained in him. With the ability to make the ball swing and move off the seam, batting against Chris can be very difficult.

It's all well and good having a top bowler, but you need to work as a unit and that means constant communication. Chris often does this with team mate Steve McGuinness at mid-off, Jones at slip and Walker also close in. These three appear to convey to Chris what the ball is doing, thus it is a team effort to get that early breakthrough. With his all round ability, his excellent coaching sessions and attention to detail, Chris Williams appears to be an old head on young shoulders. I am impressed by what I have seen so far and Middleton have done a canny piece of business in acquiring his services.

Chris's partner heading the attack is total clubman Mike Pritchard, who, when not heading the attack, can be found coaching juniors, umpiring or even writing match reports. Mike builds up a fair head of steam and together with Chris he is forming a lethal partnership. Mike got record figures in the opening match of the season with 7-7 against Ashton and continues in good form. Together Williams and Pritchard have taken 33 wickets between them at a mere strike rate of 9 runs per wicket. On Sunday they ripped out the heart of the Oldham team taking 5 wickets.

If the two quickies don't get you, then there are plenty of other bowlers coming along who can. Harry Gee who was deputising as Captain for the injured Walker, decided to introduce the steady Tom Rutter who was still on cloud nine from the previous days performance. Tom bowled his reliable seamers, no doubt benefitting from the years of training from his father and Blackley stalwart Tony. At the Towncroft End, spinner Steve McGuinness was introduced to give a slice of variety to the attack. Again another useful acquisition from the Bury area, Steve has played in the top echelon of the Greater Manchester League and is regularly chipping in with wickets.

Another bowling change saw fellow spinner Matt Foden introduced at the Hollin Lane end, and there is no question Foden has been the surprise package of the Towncroft season so far. Returning to the club after a couple of years at University no one expected him to slip so smoothly back into the groove of quality spin bowling. Normally it takes a

spinner weeks to get the feel of the wickets, perfect the run up, and have the confidence to vary the flight and turn of the ball. Not so with young Foden, hours of practice on the training ground have got him firing on all cylinders.

Three wickets on Sunday and 10 for the season so far at the rate of 4 per wicket is incredible. Against Shaw he was the first person this season to get the prized wicket of Stuart with a deceptive floated ball that clean bowled the batsman. Stuart is ripping apart the League's bowling this season and together with Chiggy from Royton and Middleton's own Grant Jones, these are the batters to watch. Foden had his three Oldham victims, lbw, caught and clean bowled to leave them 45 all out. This was a clinical performance in the field from Middleton with some accurate bowling and great work in the field. Particular mention should go to Le Carpentier behind the wickets and the athletic youngster Connor Callaghan who saved several boundaries with his athleticism. Whoever is training these youngsters at Middleton deserves full credit for some amazing emerging talent.

With a relatively straightforward run-chase, skipper for the day Gee decided to rotate the batting order giving some of the youngsters much needed time in the middle. Opening for Middleton were Tierney and Callaghan to be followed by Rutter and the older Jones brother Reece. Le Carpentier had deserved his chance following a magnificent 120 not out against Shaw seconds. This included 12 fours in a faultless innings that had his watching family glowing with pride. This is one Middleton youngster who is definitely worth keeping an eye on for the future. It was also good to see Rhys Tierney opening the batting especially after his match winning performance against Werneth earlier in the season. Knocking off the runs was relatively straightforward with the ever reliable Rutter taking his average to over 50 whilst Reece Jones again looked very comfortable with the bat as he stroked a glorious four. I have been very impressed with what I have seen from Reece upon his return from Canada after a couple of years out there. A confident batsman and he steps up to the plate as a bowler when required to do so. This was especially evident when called upon against Shaw, and I was particularly impressed watching him give 100% in the nets last Thursday.

Another victory kept Middleton top of the table on a glorious sunny day. The only downside was the sight of Overseas Amateur Harry Nichols sat clicking his heels in front of the pavilion. Harry and the club are still waiting for the authorities to ok his paperwork from Australia, thus enabling him to play. This is a major frustration as Harry still holds the amateur record of 151 not out and is a tremendous talent that I am very much looking forward to seeing in action.

Oldham left Towncroft for the final time on Sunday after playing well over 100 League matches against the Moonrakers having joined the CLL two years before Middleton in 1892. With Middleton leaving to join the Lancashire League together with four other clubs at the end of the season, it now appears that six clubs have shown an interest in joining the Greater Manchester Cricket League. The remaining fourteen clubs, including Oldham are now deciding whether to try and keep the Pennine League going or look elsewhere. Middleton wish them all the best for the future.

Thanks to Phil Hamnett for submitting this match report