

Middleton Are Champions

Wednesday, 13 September 2017

With both games being washed out over the weekend, this gave Middleton the necessary points required to be crowned Champions of the Pennine Cricket Championship Division.

A fantastic achievement for skipper George Walker and his young team for whom the average age is 21.

Not only young and enthusiastic but the first team squad are virtually all local lads apart from the Professional who originates from Bury. Skipper Walker is from Boarshaw, the Jones's from Hollin and Alkrington, whilst Pritchard from Middleton Junction. All products of the excellent Middleton youth system.

The week had begun with Middleton 14 points clear of rivals Royton with Moorside and the much improved Uppermill close behind. On Tuesday evening Royton failed in their appeal to reclaim points from the Friarmere abandonment meaning the gap remained at 14 points with three games remaining. Only two points were needed to claim the title and once Captain Walker turned up at Towncroft at 8am on Saturday morning to see the pitch underwater, he knew the title was his. Not even the valiant efforts of groundsman John Foden would be enough to get this fixture on and it would be remiss not to mention the excellent work done this year by Foden on producing an excellent deck every single week.

The two points meant that Middletons long time rivals Royton could not catch them, neither could Uppermill or Moorside and one of the first to offer congratulations was the exceedingly sporting Royton skipper James Maurice-Scott. One of the games true gentlemen.

Other teams were quick to offer congratulations including the Ashton President Dave Mellor and the Moorside Skipper Rick Harrington. Harrington one of the most knowledgeable and respected local cricketers of the last 20 years was full of praise for the Middleton team as he commented,

“this is a great achievement for a team so young, who have stuck together, and will need to stick together for the new challenges ahead. There are some really talented lads in that team. They have a very good professional in Chris Williams and an enthusiastic Skipper in young Walker who is learning all the time. The opening bowlers are very good who put teams under pressure right from the off and in Michael Pritchard a player who deserves in my opinion special praise. You can tell by his body language that he is a winner who gives it 100% at all times, he is driven and a fine competitor on the pitch. Off the pitch he is always first to shake our hands and have a beer with the opposition. A great player”

Nice words especially when they come from someone so respected as Rick Harrington and indeed it has been a remarkable achievement for a team so young. However, major factors were the return of the Jones brothers and Skipper Walker. All three are class batsmen, none more so than Grant Jones and it was not surprising that the one defeat out of 21 matches came in the one match he was unavailable. With almost 800 runs at an average of 45 he is Mr Reliable and his two centuries this year were a sight to behold.

Professional Williams did the job he was brought in to do, score runs and take wickets. With over 900 runs and 45 wickets in all competitions, this was an excellent debut season for Chris. Reliable and a match winner on numerous occasions, more importantly he has settled well into this group of players and his development of several of the youngsters will prove a major asset in the future. The news he has signed for 2018 was greeted with joy from the players and supporters that I have spoken with.

With Rick Harrington providing a fitting tribute to Mike Pritchard the other player I would like to single out is young Harry Gee. With 683 runs at an average of 43 the young left handed bat is quietly going about his business. With coaching and encouragement from his parents young Harry is improving all the time and will be a major asset in the Lancs League. I know he is relishing the challenge.

The other members of the team all provided valuable contributions and space does not allow me to go into detail, but they are all great prospects. Some have had Lancashire call ups and some have League representative matches and I feel several are destined for great things. The rest of the squad comprised Tahir, Reece Jones, Fodens , Rutter, Tierneys, McGuinness, Le Carpentier, Holland and anyone else I may have inadvertently omitted, and not forgetting the scorer Francis.

Let's not forget too that this was achieved without our classy Overseas Amateur Harry Nichols, where red tape stopped him playing. When he did get on the pitch as in the Tom Hardman challenge match he showed what we have missed with a classy half century.

So a fitting finale to the last ever season in the Pennine League before it folds, with the Second Eleven winning their Division plus the Burton Cup. So a winter now lies ahead with preparation a plenty for the Lancashire League, new challenges and teams to visit. Out to the West there will be a trip to Darwen, North to Clitheroe and East to Todmorden. Exciting times.

Phil Hamnett