

Hughie Evans on a good year for Umpiring

Date: 20th September 2011

A Paul Edwards copyright exclusive for L&DCC Official Website.

The latest edition of "Tom Smith" dropped through my letter-box with a dull thud last week. It is a weighty tome and, like most standard works on a subject, it has become known simply by the name of its original author: Crockford on the clergy; Bradshaw on train times (although, if you're travelling on the Parbold Flyer from Southport to Manchester, I think you'd be better off with a ouija board); Tom Smith on umpiring. It is a vital work too, though, and one which all players would be well advised to read. Good umpires are vital to the overall success of a game of cricket. We all know what can happen if players lose respect for the officials whose job it is to manage the match: the whole affair can become an unseemly, unattractive mess.

So it was good to meet up with Hughie Evans, chairman of the Merseyside Cricket Umpires Association, just after the final of the Bridging Finance Solutions Knockout Trophy and ask him what sort of a year his organisation was having.

"It's been a good year for umpiring," he began. "We've had good feedback from clubs, and while you're always going to get one or two little glitches, in general terms it's gone well. It's been an especially good year for the MCUA in that we've had most games covered, including the First Division of the Merseyside Competition and, very pleasingly, we've had a lot of new umpires coming through.

"The development of new umpires is very important to the MCUA.," said Evans, warming to his theme. "There's probably ten or twelve new umpires come through in the last couple of years. We're not a training organisation, we rely on the ECB/ACO to do that but it states in our constitution that we have a duty to help umpires' development.. So the things we do in the winters like match management seminars and then the boundary assessment we do in the summer are all about helping umpires' development."

That's bearing fruit now because you're getting good umpires coming through. We've a few who are emerging and it's putting pressure on some of the old hands because the

captains' marks for the newer umpires are good. That's pleasing for us because we should be encouraging some of the older members to move down a bit maybe."

Evans's analysis is predictably shrewd and is born of a great deal of experience and a lot of thoughtful observation. He plainly sees umpiring as a developing skill and the MCCA as an organisation where complacency, about either standards or membership, is dangerous indeed. He still has new plans he would like to put into operation, some of them taken from the first-class game.

"One of the things we're looking is mentoring whereby an up and coming umpire would stand with an experienced colleague who can help him develop and I think we'll bring that in next year," he said. "Then, if something happens in a game, they have someone to talk to. It's not a question of spotting errors, it's more helping umpires to develop. We want to help our umpires and identify those who might want to move up and do multi-day games at age-group level, which would give them more experience and take them out of the comfort zone a little bit. We want to help umpires progress if they are up to it.

"The challenge is and always has been having enough members," he said simply "We've had a good two years but the majority of our members are over 60 and it doesn't take much for us to lose a few umpires. We have to have these younger umpires coming through by which I mean late thirties, forties or even fifties. The ECB/ACO are running the courses this winter and that could give us a regular supply coming through.

"I think we also have a very good panel in terms of what we do during the year. We have four or five winter meetings, plus two in the summer and you won't find many umpires organisations running a six-week seminar session on match management as we did this last winter. It's all aimed at supporting our members. We are ahead of the game in many things."

And then we touched on the thorny issue of discipline - except how thorny is it in the Liverpool Competition these days? Not very, to judge by the efficiency with which punishments are doled out by clubs, or the standard of behaviour seen on the field these days. To some degree, spectators wanting to watch a well-contested game in which the players' behaviour is of a high standard could do little better than watch a game in the area covered by our league. As ever, though, Evans's attitude is one of watchful satisfaction.

"Our discipline is good," he said. "There are things that come up but if you go and umpire in other leagues you'll see how well-behaved some of our players are. The Liverpool Competition has worked very well with the umpires and if you report someone on a Saturday, he's usually had his sanction applied before the following weekend's fixtures. It's done with quickly and that helps.

"Five or six years ago we lost umpires because of bad behaviour and we had to take a stance but we've done that now. I remember reporting somebody and the club delayed it so that when the player was banned he was on holiday. The clubs have been really supportive. The MCUA has a good reputation in Lancashire and that's why our members are appointed to big games outside the Liverpool Competition."