

MATCH REPORT

V&A v. STONOR

STONOR, Sat. July 30 – **MATCH ABANDONED**

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V&A v. The PRETENDERS

STONOR, Sat. July 23

WHAT A DIFFERENCE a week makes. The previous Saturday's V&A team of lethargic and creaking outfielders, was transformed into a brilliant unit of focused athletes who could run and bend and throw venomously, something quite alien to last week's geriatrics.

Even more importantly our fielding was punctuated by three extraordinary catches that dismissed their best batsmen, catches which rivalled Rob Noble's recent effort at mid-wicket.

Richard Cowley captained for The Pretenders and was uncharacteristically only ten minutes late (our skipper Martin Bowden, with Adam and Shaun arrived promptly at 12.23). We compromised on a 36-over game (they had wanted 40, too much for those with a drink problem and a pub to go to). They won the toss and elected to bat.

Olly Betts and Andy Sharp opened the bowling and kept them down to about three an over. They had some decent batting but the ball popped up menacingly, particularly when Olly was bowling. As they struggled somewhat they took risks to advance the run rate. Which led to three of the best catches seen at Stonor. First a full toss on the leg from Andy Sharp was whacked towards the square leg boundary – but Ed Churchwood dived majestically to his right and grabbed a one-handed catch. Remarkable, and unlike Rob's catch, there was no hint of chance. Then Olly Betts' tempted a batsman into skying one between Ed and Olly Bamber at point. The ball looked sure to drop between them but Olly running and falling backwards held it cleanly with his right hand. Ed Tupper, bowling accurate in-swingers very like Martin (who selflessly did not bowl), enticed a low, very hard shot towards point where Freddy, 16 and Radley-trained like Strauss, was standing. He caught it with the merest whisper of a juggle. A marvellous catch. Ed also bowled a Pretender and had another caught by Olly Betts at square leg. Shaun deserved better than just one caught behind. Roger Smith, back to fast-medium after last week's spinners, bowled one batsman who threatened a quick 30 or so. Despite a few wides, Adam's length continued to keep the runs down.

Pete McClaren bowled his first ball temptingly wide, the batsman snicked it and Bird N – now behind the stumps – actually caught it. He did miss a tricky fast deflection but it made no appreciable difference as The Pretenders struggled to a total of 146.

Our innings started badly when Olly Bamber was bowled first ball. Olly Betts heaved a few before holing out to long off, having found a fielder who could catch. Martin selected a better candidate when he smacked one to a bloke at square leg who dropped

it, partly perhaps because Umpire Bird was exchanging Chaucerian banter (smut) with him at the time.

But Freddy arrived and crafted some elegant shots out of the manual. His was a nicely judged innings, his only technical flaw being to go back to spinners, although he plays excellent back-foot attacking strokes to medium pacers. When he was out (for 37) we looked to have sewn the game up. But Mark Fellowes, their crafty and voluble spinner, had us reeling with quick wickets, Adam a surprise victim of a controversial LBW, and Ed Churchwood succumbing to a ball he doesn't like, a straight one.

Thank God in such circumstances for a couple of veterans, Martin and Roger Smith. Martin pulled and drove loose ones but – there being no hurry – defended the rest, and eventually saw out, to much relief, Mark's 8 overs. Two on-drives for 4 were memorable. Roger's strength is through mid-wicket and mid-on and though he offered a chance that was put down, he advanced the score steadily with a succession of pulls.

We won with 7 wickets down, and Bowden on an invaluable 57.

The Pretenders are always delightful opposition and are used to losing gracefully. David Forester, their Chairman, who probably remembers Bradman's last match, shows few signs of wear; he still throws over-arm and was their top scorer. A year or so ago they struggled to raise a quorum but an influx of itinerant Australians saved the day. The Aussie contingent were agreeable and tactful, not once gloating openly at England's downfall.

A good, dry day, and a jolly evening in The Rainbow afterwards. Next Saturday is the game against Stonor. We must be on our best behaviour, on time, eleven men, clean underwear. They are keen in the field and don't talk dirty. And be warned, they drink tea out of cups perched on saucers. Don't look at the saucer and say 'what the fuck is this for?'

Nicky Bird