

# THE COUNTY GAME

## COUNTY MEMORIES – WARWICKSHIRE

# Revolution in the second city



In the last of his retrospective series around the 18 counties, *Jeremy Blackmore* asks Neil Smith, Tim Munton, Andy Moles and Paul Smith about Warwickshire's unparalleled cross-format domination in the mid-1990s

**ABOVE**  
Dermot Reeve is chaired by ecstatic Warwickshire supporters after beating Kent in the 1994 NatWest Trophy semi-final and keeping a possible quadruple on course

**M**asterminded by innovators Bob Woolmer and Dermot Reeve, Warwickshire dominated county cricket in the mid-1990s, writing themselves into the history books with an unprecedented treble in 1994 and following it with a double in 1995.

A competitive Bears squad were boosted by two of the greatest overseas stars. Brian Lara amassed over 2,000 runs in their 1994 Championship success including a world-record 501 not out – not to mention six centuries in seven innings. Allan Donald spearheaded the attack in 1995 with 88 Championship wickets at just 15.48.

Warwickshire had often languished near the bottom of the table since winning the Championship in 1972, with only a lone Sunday League title in 1980. But the seeds of a remarkable transformation were sown in the mid-'80s when manager David Brown and captain Norman Gifford brought through a group of raw youngsters. The real transformation got underway with Bob Cottam as coach and Andy Lloyd as captain, who instigated a

change in mindset.

Bowler Tim Munton recalls: "The club had gone through many years of poor performance and recognised the need to get on board a whole plethora of new young talent and give them their heads. It was Andy and Bob [Cottam] working together that took a bunch of young talented cricketers and put a bit of hardness into us and taught us how to win."

An early sign of a new positive approach was the last-over victory against Middlesex in the 1989 NatWest final at Lord's. Spinning allrounder Neil Smith, whose place in the squad had been under threat, came out in the gloom and carved a Simon Hughes slower ball for six.

The win, which Munton says probably came ahead of time, gave them belief. While veterans like Geoff Humpage and Alvin Kallicharran played that day, it was, says Smith, a launchpad for the next generation.

"That win in 1989 was equally as important as anything because it showed we could win competitions. It took a few more years until we got to Lord's again in



1993, but it showed you can be successful, you can win a competition if you play the right type of cricket."

Major change came when Woolmer arrived as coach in 1991, the year Warwickshire finished runners-up in the Championship. Donald claimed 83 Championship wickets at just 19.68, rewarding the faith shown by Warwickshire, who had favoured him over Tom Moody and given him a new long-term contract.

The partnership between Woolmer and Reeve – appointed captain after Lloyd retired at the end of 1992 – proved pivotal. The pair instilled a self-belief and insisted players take responsibility for their own games.

Allrounder Paul Smith says: "For leadership, I've never seen anyone as good as Woolmer. Once Woollie came on board, it was a completely different league. We were a bunch of young guys really. But Woollie said 'If I can make you 5 per cent better people, you'll automatically become better cricketers'. We loved Bob from very early on. No one was more passionate about cricket than him. No one talked cricket more than him.

"I probably spent more time with Bob than most because I don't sleep much. So, I'd have breakfast with him and talk cricket for two hours before we went to the ground and what happened at the grounds got better and better."

Munton sums up: "Lloyd and Cottam were the starting point. Then it was the Bob Woolmer finishing school. You add to that Dermot's amazing cricket brain, particularly in one-day cricket, and an amazing talent and the side all gelled."

The brains trust of Woolmer and Reeve took Warwickshire to another level, studying how one-day cricket was played and adopting tactics innovative for their time, now commonplace in T20. Reeve examined Warwickshire's run-rate against certain types of bowlers. He was a strong advocate of the sweep and reverse sweep and identified how to manipulate the field. Increasing the scoring rate against spinners played a crucial part in Warwickshire's one-day success.

Woolmer too was meticulous in his planning and

**ABOVE**  
Brian Lara during his 501 not out in 1994; signing a new sponsorship deal; celebrating with team mates after winning the 1994 County Championship at Edgbaston

**BELOW**  
Paul Smith tears in

ahead of his time as a coach in challenging players and encouraging them to innovate but to practise, to think and talk things through.

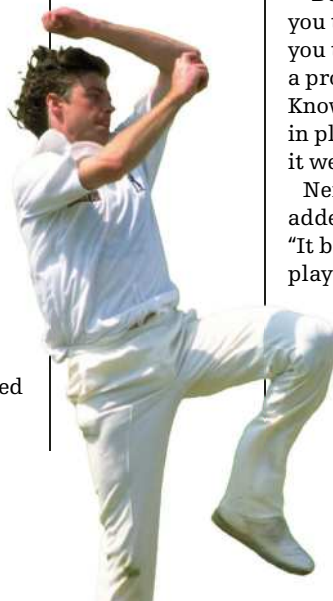
Batter Andy Moles says: "Dermot was inimitable. His big thing was to worry about your own game and not anybody else's. He didn't put undue pressure on you. He allowed you to innovate. It was all about, 'if you want to do something, then practise it diligently'.

"We were the first team really in county cricket that took the reverse sweep on wholeheartedly, and we all learned it. The only one that didn't was Brian because he used to say if Sir Garfield didn't play the reverse sweep, then he didn't have to play the reverse sweep!

"Bob would drip-feed you with the way he wanted you to play or how you could improve. Then he wanted you to understand you had to practise in the nets for a prolonged period before you took it into the middle. Knowing that if you practise enough and had confidence in playing the shot, then when the game came, you'd play it well."

Neil Smith says innovations in one-day cricket brought added benefits for their Championship campaigns: "It became an instantly transferable skill. If you're playing it in one-day cricket, why can't you do that in four-day cricket and stop bowlers dominating? So, the pace of all cricket improved. Scoring rates improved from that point, almost until now.

"We were at the start of that, and the skills that were probably thought of more as one-day skills automatically become transferable into the ▶





red-ball game for no reason other than it's about taking control and dominating situations and bowlers, not letting bowlers dictate to you and trying to get on top of the opposition early."

Levels of professionalism went up too, with Woolmer lobbying for video technology to analyse players' games.

The 1993 NatWest final offered a clear sign of what was to come. Far from being intimidated by Sussex's record 321, Warwickshire chased down the total thanks to Asif Din's 104 and two vital knocks from Paul Smith and Reeve. Finally Roger Twose chipped his first ball for two over point in the dark to win off the final delivery.

Munton says: "It was the experience of winning something nobody expected us to. That became our trait, we were never beaten and we always literally carried on until the end."

Neil Smith agrees it was hugely important for what was to come. Their approach: if Sussex could score that many runs, then 'why can't we?'

"That then led into 1994, where certainly with Lara in the side, it was a case of, it doesn't matter how many the opposition gets because we'll get more. That's fairly easy to say when Brian's in the form of anybody's life. He was the best player on the planet at that stage. That fed into the mentality we could win from anywhere.

"We backed ourselves as a bowling unit with Gladstone Small and Tim Munton leading the way. We played with a number of allrounders. It gave us options. People had different strengths in different parts of the game.

"We weren't short of ideas. We could try things, we could be experimental, we always had someone to go to because of our strength in depth with ball and bat. We still believed we could win, even when wickets fell, because we had guys capable of doing the job."

Warwickshire's dominance across all competitions in 1994 was borne out of a challenge laid down by Woolmer on his arrival at Edgbaston. At a pre-season meeting, he asked every player to write down which competitions they thought they could win. No one wrote down all four, says Neil Smith.

"It made everybody think 'well, why can't we? 'What do

**ABOVE**  
Allan Donald celebrates bowling Northants' Richard Montgomerie for 1 in the 1995 NatWest Trophy final at Lord's

**BELOW**  
Neil Smith bowls in the 1994 Benson & Hedges Cup final



we have to do to win all four, be competitive in all four?' It's not a positive philosophy if you go into a season thinking, 'should we focus on one competition and put all our eggs in one basket' – whereas actually, 'why can't you win every game you play?'

"That was probably the most important thing Bob did, just making people think along those lines. That fed into, 'well, we beat Sussex from what was deemed an impossible position, so why put barriers up in front of ourselves?' And Dermot was very positive. As captain he always took a positive approach, always tried to keep the game moving forward. Even if we were behind, you can still be proactive, it doesn't mean sit back and just wait for the inevitable."

With Reeve injured for much of the 1994 four-day campaign, vice-captain Munton stepped up and insisted Warwickshire could win their first Championship in 22 years.

"Everybody knew we had a great one-day side in '94," he says. "And there was some whisper about whether we should focus on one-day cricket and rest people in the Championship. My role was to say, 'I'm not prepared to give up on the Championship yet, we should still be willing to put out strong sides in all forms until we physically can't win the Championship'. We only had 17 players in the whole of that Championship season."

With Donald away with the touring South Africans, Munton stepped up to lead the attack and become more of a strike bowler. He bowled quicker, fuller and attacked the stumps. It paid off. His strike rate increased, and he finished with 81 wickets.

The players first got wind of Lara's signing on a pre-season tour of Zimbabwe when word filtered through that original overseas signing Manoj Prabhakar was injured. But excitement grew when news broke that Lara, who had just scored 375 against England in Antigua, would soon be arriving at Edgbaston.

Moles says: "It was very exciting. In Championship cricket, he scored over 2,000 runs at quicker than a run a ball. That was so vital because it gave us so much time to bowl people out. To see Brian in that form just inspired the rest of the batting group. Any confidence issues anybody had were blown away, batting with Brian at the other end."

Moles heeded advice given to him by Worcestershire's Tim Curtis – who had shared partnerships with Graeme Hick in a similar purple patch – to focus purely on your own game.

"With Brian, the ball was being dispatched to the boundary twice an over. Yet when we came to bat, the hardest thing was not to try and copy, but to stay in your own game and just let him play his. As a team we all understood that."

It is well documented the relationship between Reeve and Lara that year was not always smooth, but Lara's team-mates speak highly of their overseas star and understand the pressures he faced.

Neil Smith says he never saw anyone play as well as Lara: "Brian is a good guy. The difficulty he had at that point was everybody wanted a piece of him. He had to try and cope with the celebrity side of it, which was new to new to him, new to cricket really, certainly new to the game in England, other than Botham.

"Lara was the biggest name that broke every record and caught everybody's imagination. He had a lot to deal with. He probably found it more

peaceful out in the middle than anywhere else. So he stayed out there and kept scoring runs.”

The tone was set with a packed pre-season press conference which attracted an estimated 300 journalists and, as batting records fell, attention did not let up.

Paul Smith says: “Brian got a lot of flak from the media; people said it was all about the money. Brian was 24 when he came to us, still a young man. Professional sport, there’s no real hiding place.

“The impact he made with us immediately, it made everyone want to prove to him they could also play and he fitted in remarkably well. It made you want to protect him. He copped flak. At times they said he was this, he was that. But I will defend him to the hilt. Because he wanted to win games, he wanted to win trophies. He played a massive part in that. If you look at the speed he scored his runs and the confidence he gave people all around him, it was quite remarkable.”

Munton says Lara was often misunderstood in terms of what a great team player he was and cites him turning down several singles on 99 against eventual runners-up Leicestershire to ensure a draw as one example of how he put the team first.

Being competitive in all four competitions brought a physical and mental toll on the Bears with constant demand for their time from sponsors and dignitaries.

Paul Smith adds: “Every game, every day was an event. All the days off you may have had in the past, we didn’t have them. We were either travelling, preparing, training, talking, it was non-stop. On reflection, those two summers were probably the equivalent of four, physically and mentally – certainly physically. We were shattered.

“For 18 months I was hardly at home, and I had a benefit year in the middle of that. We weren’t protected in comparison to guys now, but the dominance of all formats, I’m not sure it’s been equalled. We wouldn’t have changed it. It was unknown territory for us. It was a matter of how can we stay on the park. Often

**‘Everyone wanted a piece of Brian. That kind of celebrity side of it was new to the game in England, other than Botham’**

**BELOW**  
Reeve and Tim Munton show off all three trophies after clinching the Sunday League in September 1994

overlooked was our physio, Stuart Nottingham, who worked from breakfast till midnight. It was a completely different level.”

The Championship season included 11 wins, allowing them to finish 42 points clear of Leicestershire. Lara averaged a phenomenal 89.82 with Twose and Dominic Ostler both passing 1,000 runs.

Worcestershire were a constant threat in one-day cricket and the local rivals clashed in both Lord’s finals. Warwickshire emerged victorious in the first with 10 overs to spare. Paul Smith proved key with three wickets (including dangerman Hick) and 42 not out.

The Pears got their revenge in the NatWest final with Hick and Moody putting on 198 as Warwickshire went down by eight wickets, the only competition they failed to win all year. They ended the season by clinching the Sunday League title (four points clear of Worcestershire) to seal a famous treble. Missing out on much of the 1994 Championship proved an incentive for Reeve and the returning Donald going into 1995.

Munton says: “It genuinely spurred Allan on. As a Bear, he felt the pride and excitement in 1994, but then wanted it for himself for the next year. So, he was doubly motivated in ‘95 and won many of those games for us. The two biggest impacts were AD and Dermot having a real drive to win the one tournament he didn’t particularly play a big part in in 1994, the Championship. Absolutely all credit to him and AD, they were fantastic that year.”

Moles adds: “We were confident from the year before, but also there was a certain fear other clubs had of us. Allan as always bowled quickly and aggressively.”

There were changes in personnel at all levels. South Africa recruited Woolmer as coach, so Phil Neale came in as coaching director. Nick Knight joined from Essex and had an immediate impact, averaging 57 in the Championship. Young homegrown players like Wasim Khan started to play more regularly too.

With 14 Championship wins, the Bears finished 32 points clear of Middlesex and added the NatWest title by beating Northamptonshire at Lord’s. A second consecutive Sunday League title narrowly eluded them when they finished runners-up behind Kent due to an inferior run-rate, although they won it again in 1997.

Neil Smith talks about the pride of being part of a close-knit side and explains how the level of expectation changed from when he started: “Then you wanted to be a professional cricketer, there wasn’t really the level of expectation ‘we’ll try and win a trophy’. Now you try to win all trophies. That’s probably what we left behind – that desire to be a very successful club.”

Moles’ abiding memories are not scoring big hundreds but his team-mates doing well.

“That was the secret, we were genuinely pleased for everybody else’s success. There was no jealousy. I know from my coaching, that’s a very difficult thing to instil in a team. Dermot and Bob managed to do that, but that’s testament to the quality of the players and the character we had.” **A**

