

THE COUNTY GAME

COUNTY MEMORIES – HAMPSHIRE

Happy Hants the one-day maestros

Jeremy Blackmore speaks to David Gower about Hampshire's fun days under Mark Nicholas, spearheaded by the great Malcolm Marshall

The mid-1980s ushered in a new-look Hampshire under a debonair, innovative captain backed up by two leading members of the all-conquering West Indies side. Over the next 10 years, supporters on the south coast celebrated four one-day trophies amid several near misses in the County Championship.

It was Mark Nicholas to whom Hampshire turned to take over from Nick Pocock as captain in 1985. The club had finished third two years running in the Championship with Malcolm Marshall proving brutally effective.

He took a phenomenal 134 wickets in the 1982 Championship campaign alone. But with Marshall away on Test duties in 1984, Hampshire struggled and slumped towards the bottom of the table.

Pocock's imminent retirement prompted the club to make significant changes, turning to Nicholas rather than the more experienced Trevor Jesty, who many had expected to take the reins.

David Gower, who joined in 1990, remembers: "Mark gave heart and soul to the club. Captaining Hampshire was something he was very proud of and which he gave a lot of time and energy to. He knew the business. His strategies were good."

"It's widely acknowledged captaincy gets easier with a good side around you, but he was a definitive leader. He planned the strategies, he would pull the strings, but he always had good advice around him. That freedom to speak, that inclusivity in the room, was good."

Allrounder Kevan James believes Nicholas was the right captain at the right time, not just for the Hampshire side of that era, but for the days of three-day Championship cricket when inventive thinking was often required to force a result.

"He wasn't really up for playing out a dreary draw," says James. "There would be these incredible declarations, which he tried to negotiate with the opposition."

"When they did go for it, which they always did, he used to come in the changing room and say, right, now we're going to do this, or that's going to happen and you'd think, 'what?!'

"But it's amazing what comes once you put sides under pressure. He just trusted us and backed us to come out of games with more wins than losses. A lot of games that could have gone nowhere didn't."

Nicholas was a supportive captain. While James was often whisked out of the attack to let Marshall bowl at the tail, Nicholas emphasised his allrounder's value to the team by pointing out how many of his wickets were top-order batters.

Nicholas led Hampshire to second place in his first year in charge, with Chris Smith scoring 1,720 runs while his brother Robin, Gordon Greenidge and Paul Terry also topped 1,000. Marshall led the charge with 95 wickets at just 17.68, spearheading the attack with Tim Tremlett who took 75 wickets, while Raj Maru picked up 64 with his slow left-arm deliveries.

Gower says: "If you've someone like Malcolm in your team, you've one of those cutting edges that is hard to beat. Even at the end of his career, Malcolm was still a handful. He might have lost a fraction of the former pace, but even in my time there he was sharp."

It was the chance to be on the same side as Marshall that helped swing Gower's decision to choose Hampshire over Kent when he left Leicestershire seeking a new challenge at the end of 1989.

"Having seen Malcolm at the wrong end of a pitch for the previous 15 years, I just rather fancied playing alongside him. Not realising, of course, I'd then get stuck at first slip with the ball still coming down at me at 90mph but with only a pair of hands to deal with it!

"One of the great things about Malcolm was he gave as much physically and mentally to Hampshire as he did to Barbados, to West Indies. It's one of the reasons he was as popular as anyone at Hampshire because people realised just how much it meant to him to play for Hampshire and to have, as it were, his English family around him."

Marshall played 14 seasons on the south coast, taking 824 first-class wickets at 18.64 and 239 one-day wickets at 24.88.

Batter Tony Middleton explains what made him so effective: "He had a skiddy pace that would make your





ABOVE
Malcolm Marshall
bowling for
Hampshire at
Uxbridge in 1982,
with Mike Brearley
backing up

LEFT
Mark Nicholas in
1985, the first year
of his captaincy

OPPOSITE
David Gower
joined Hampshire
in 1990

life very difficult. Not only that, his great skill, his control of swing and working out batsmen was up there with the best of all time.

"A wonderful cricketer and we were very lucky to have him on our side. You don't get that now, where overseas players spend a whole career at one club and bowl thousands of overs. He was always the one Mark turned to when we were trying to win a game and he was always ready to bowl."

Perhaps what stands out most for James was a very personal moment, his wedding day.

"Malcolm was also a seriously good bloke. I got married in '87, but because I was still new in the Hampshire set-up, I got married back in London. Malcolm really wanted to come to the wedding. At that time, he was the world's top cricketer, and I just remember him being in the wedding photos: 'Oh, God, Malcolm's here!'

"I remember feeling obviously pleased as punch I got married to my wife, but I remember feeling almost equally as pleased he was there, and he wanted to be there."

Greenidge's impact was significant throughout the 1980s too. In 16 seasons until the end of 1987, he scored nearly 20,000 first-class runs at 45.40 with 48 centuries. Not to mention almost 10,000 more in one-day cricket.

James says: "I know one or two people say Gordon was a bit moody, but I never found that at all. I got on well with the guy, absolutely no problem. To the point where

you could take the mickey out of him a little bit and he was fine with that. Maybe it's because people didn't, maybe they looked up to him too much, and took him too seriously. But that wasn't me. Maybe because of that I got on well with him.

"We played against Greg Thomas down at Glamorgan. He'd just been tagged 'the fastest white man on the planet'. Within about the first six overs he had a deep mid-off! You think, what! Is this guy really that quick? There's Gordon just smashing him over his head.

"But when I batted later on, I thought, s***, this bloke's bowling at the speed of light. I couldn't see it, let alone try and smash him over his head. That just shows what a different class those guys were. Once you'd got them on your side, it made the game a lot easier."

Nicholas' team won Hampshire's first silverware of the decade when they clinched the 1986 Sunday League with a match to spare, by beating Surrey in a low-scoring game at The Oval.

After Hampshire collapsed to 95 for 7, James scored an unbeaten 54 to push Hampshire up to 149 for 8. Surrey lost by three runs.

"Being on the balcony and getting the trophy, I really felt part of it," says James. "Because I was the guy that probably did as much, if not more than most, to help us win that day. Of course, generally, I was just part of the team. Everybody says I was a journeyman cricketer, and I was, but the odd moments like that you just savour."

After 25 years, Hampshire finally made their debut in a Lord's final in 1988. They were without Marshall on West Indies duty, but South African seamer Stephen Jefferies proved a more than useful replacement.

Watching from the pavilion as 12th man, James recalls Derbyshire finding runs easy to come by in the early overs before Nicholas defied convention. It sparked a collapse as Jefferies claimed remarkable figures of 5 for 13 in 10 overs.

James says: "Mark made this unbelievable decision to put in a more attacking field with him at short leg. I remember thinking, 'what the hell's he doing?' It just threw everybody. But fortunately, Steve Jefferies was a good enough bowler, it didn't matter. It just totally changed the game. Who would have thought of doing that?"

"That's what made Mark the captain he was. I'm not trying to make out he made brilliant decisions all the way through. But when you see decisions like that, you think, 'would we have won the final if he hadn't decided to do that?' Probably not."

Hampshire knocked off their target of 118 with 23 overs to spare.

In 1990, when Gower joined, Hampshire boasted as strong a top order as any. Terry and Chris Smith often opened, with Gower at No.3 and Robin Smith at No.4. Even when those players were away on England duty, Middleton, who scored 1,200 runs in 1990, proved a more than useful replacement. With Marshall taking 72 wickets, Hampshire finished third in the Championship.

"It was fun and very satisfying," says Gower. "But the honest truth is whatever part I could play was just literally that – a part. When you've got that sort of batting and bowling line-up, it's the depth that gives you the longevity in those competitions."

Gower played alongside both Smith brothers for England and says there was a clear contrast between the two.

"It's that extraordinary thing that the same gene pool sends out two different people. Their methods were different. Their characters were different. Their talents were slightly different.

"Chris probably had to work harder to get his runs than Robin. But both had this work ethic instilled in them by big John, the father, and this huge parental support. Both were very driven to make their runs. Chris opening the batting – without being cruel at all – with ostensibly slightly less talent than Robin, had a really strong attitude to that job. Very professional, very organised.

"Robin, a more sociable creature, more instinctive, brave, super-talented. OK, they both played Test cricket, but there's no real doubt as to which one was the stronger player at that level."

Middleton too remembers a difference in their approaches: "Chris was very much, 'I'll try and bat all day and set myself targets and do it bit-by-bit', whereas Robin was much more off-the-cuff and very positive. A lot more aggression.

"Chris was an exceptional player, and he did very good things for Hampshire, but Robin was really world-class. He contributed massively to our Lord's final wins."

Terry had endured a torrid time against West Indies at Test level, having his arm broken by a lifting ball from Winston Davis, but was prolific for Hampshire.

Gower, his England captain in 1984, recalls: "Paul was a lovely player to watch. Lots of natural talent. We all felt for him with that Test match experience. He wasn't the only one to suffer in the mid-'80s against West Indies and if it's physical pain as well as any mental pain, it's tough.

"He's one of those players that could easily have played more international cricket, if he hadn't had to start against the West Indies. He and Andy Lloyd that year had the pain and the pleasure inextricably intermingled, but mostly pain and not so much pleasure.

"What he did, of course, was play some supremely good cricket for Hampshire. You could basically rely on him for a really good start, especially at Northlands Road. If you were batting at No.3, you didn't expect to be in for a while! He was also one of the best catchers I've seen, brilliant at slip, hardly dropped anything."



Among the bowling attack was the ever-popular Cardigan Connor, regarded as one of the best West Indian bowlers not to play international cricket, who took over 1,000 wickets for Hampshire in all competitions.

Gower says: "Cardy was one of the loveliest men you'll ever meet. He wasn't in every XI, but every time he was there, you got 100 per cent. Just having him around was lovely. I still have a bit of a giggle when I think of Cardy."

Gower reflects how Hampshire's strong team spirit helped him through a rough patch in 1991.

"Coming back from Australia in '91, I had possibly the worst month of my professional career. I had no idea which end of the bat to hold. On literal form at the start of that season when I had so much to play for and all the usual incentives, it just went as wrong as it could do. I had to completely deconstruct and reconstruct my own game, which then started to come back as the season wore on. Mark had to be hugely understanding, the players were very sympathetic.

"That's the one great thing about cricket: in a more lonely game, like tennis or golf, that could have been completely destructive. So, I was very grateful for everything they did to support me through that."

After agonising semi-final defeats in 1989 (by three runs to Middlesex) and 1990 (by one run to Northamptonshire), Hampshire returned to Lord's in 1991 to face a formidable Surrey. By a quirk of the fixture list, they faced the same opponents in the Championship on what James calls "a horrible wicket" at The Oval just a few days before. They lost the game heavily and crucially their captain too when he was struck on the finger by Waqar Younis, an injury which ruled him out for the rest of the season.

Gower was asked to lead the side out at Lord's in what turned out to be a thrilling final.

"I wasn't exactly putting my hand up, I can say that. But they eventually came to me and said, 'would you mind?' 'OK, fair enough, done it before somewhere'," he laughs.

"So, I thought, 'we've got a good team, we can probably work out what to do'. And to be fair, to use a banal expression, it was the team wot dun it. All those things, experienced players knowing what to do at Lord's,

‘I felt not exactly an impostor, but very privileged to be the man who had to hold the trophy aloft for two seconds before Mark shot from the side and got his hands on it as well. So, glad to help out’



ABOVE
Marshall and co
celebrate the 1992
Benson & Hedges
Cup at Lord's

LEFT, FROM TOP
Robin Smith; Chris
Smith; Gordon
Greenidge

knowing their way around a competition, knowing their way around a final and semi-finals.”

Batting first, Surrey set 241 to win and with Robin Smith and Middleton both scoring 78, Hampshire looked well set before late wickets put the outcome in doubt. It was left to Jon Ayling and Maru to see the side home with two balls to spare.

James says: “I remember this wicket not being very good at The Oval. It was horrible. You’re facing Waqar Younis and honestly, it was scary on a wicket that’s up and down. It gets to you.

“But it actually worked in our favour. Because we played on such a flat wicket at Lord’s and Waqar, while he was still brilliant, didn’t look half the bowler he did at The Oval during the week. The bloke was bloody scary, really. Now he’s still scary, but when you’re on a flat wicket, all of a sudden, everybody’s looking at him thinking, ‘well, that’s nothing like we’ve been facing for the last week’.

“So, once Robin got in and you saw him stroking Waqar around, everybody’s going ‘well, this is alright, isn’t it?’”

Chris Smith had played in the earlier rounds of the competition but had retired and relocated to Australia, so Middleton came in to make his NatWest debut.

“It was a very hot day, a big sell-out crowd making a lot of noise and a very tight game that went right through to late in the evening when it was getting dark. It was a wonderful experience. It’s the most memorable day of my whole career. It was a brilliant game and we won narrowly.”

Gower says: “As it turned out, Robin Smith again to the fore, the lovely man was Jon Ayling in the gloom where

it could have gone either way and that very strong team ethic came through.

“So, I sort of felt, not exactly an impostor, but very privileged to be the man who had to hold the trophy aloft for two seconds before Mark shot from the side and got his hands on it as well. So, glad to help out. Obviously, even more glad we won it!”

By contrast the closing overs on Hampshire’s trip to Lord’s in 1992 were more anticlimactic. The game against Kent finished at lunchtime on the reserve day due to rain, after Robin Smith’s 90 again underpinned Hampshire’s 253 for 5.

James helped polish things off by bowling Mark Benson, and with Marshall and Shaun Udal sharing three wickets apiece celebrations began.

While team spirit carried them through the one-day arena, Hampshire struggled in the longer format. Middleton’s best year with the bat was 1992 – his 1,628 runs earned him an England A tour spot that winter. However, Hampshire finished 15th, failing to build on some early wins.

James adds Hampshire may have been one bowler light in the Championship and believes the club hoped he would have been more of a bowler than an allrounder.

“I’ve talked about it over the years with a few of the guys. I’m quite happy to admit it. I think probably Hampshire were hoping I was just that 10 or 15 per cent of a better bowler. It would have suited the side, even if it had meant I’d lost a bit of the batting.

“Also, we had a side that was perfectly suited to one-day cricket, really good containing bowlers and the superstars as well. In one-day games, you just need one person to perform and that’s enough, if everybody else does their job around it, which we all did.

“I just thought, at least we’re doing well, because there were a lot of counties that weren’t in with a sniff in anything. There were still a lot of games that were fun, because of the declarations that Mark used to come back with.

“He was an ideal figurehead for us as a team. The hard bit came when he [in 1995] and a few others moved on. That was when it got really tough. It makes you appreciate when you’re doing well, just how much fun the game can be.”

In the years after, Middleton led the way in developing the Hampshire Academy and building for future success.

Gower reflects: “I really enjoyed being part of that club for those four years. The essence of it is that we still live in Hampshire. We’ve found a home that’s lasted us for 31 years now.

“The allegiance to the county has remained strong. You watch the thing move on from Northlands Road to Botley and it’s a very different sort of club now in its physicality, but very similar in its spirit. It was a very, very good decision to come to Hampshire.

Gower says the Hampshire ethos has developed its own identity since the days of Colin Ingleby-Mackenzie.

“The Happy Hants thing is important, because I’m a huge believer in the right sort of atmosphere, the right attitude in the camp: you enjoy your cricket, you play it better.

“The various captains from Ingleby to Pocock to Nicholas to Warne... Crikey, having Shane Warne as captain, that was the most inspirational of all. That must have been an extraordinary experience from what I know of Shane. So, yeah, there’s a lot of good in this county.” 