

Mark Sands

STARS ON SUNDAY

The History of Cricket's
John Player League



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John Player League



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Chapter 1

Cavalier cricket (pre-1969)

SUNDAY AFTERNOONS in 1960s Britain had a quite different feel to Saturdays. The highlight of the day usually occurred at lunchtime with the roast dinner, but once the last of the gravy had been devoured and the dishes were washed and cleared away, the afternoon hours stretched ahead with little prospect of excitement. The newsagent was closed, no other shops had opened their doors at all and once the car had been cleaned thoughts inevitably turned to the looming work, or school, week ahead. The reason for such lack of activity, particularly on the sporting front, dated all the way back to the Sunday Observance Act of 1780. The Act forbade sporting events to be held where charges were made for admission. Indeed, until the partial relaxation of the Act by the Sunday Entertainments Act of 1932, cinemas, museums and zoos also had to remain closed on Sundays.

Debate on the levels of activity to be permitted on the Sabbath grew through the 1960s and led to the government

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presenting the 'Report of the Departmental Committee on the Law on Sunday Observance' in 1964. The report recommended that sports meetings should be permitted on Sundays, but with the stipulations of not before 12.30pm nor where the participants were remunerated for taking part. The former condition, explained the committee, was not necessarily to encourage church attendance, but rather to 'preserve the special character of Sunday as a day that preserves some measure of freedom from compulsory work' whilst the latter opened the way for charitable sporting matches.

Whilst there remained some opposition from the Christian lobby, who held the view that the whole of the Lord's Day should be kept holy and dedicated to worship, there was a growing recognition of the increasing demand for family and leisure activities. Opportunity to attend sporting events on Sunday afternoons, occasions for the whole family to spend some time together, would not prevent worshippers attending church should they wish, as many family services were arranged relatively early on Sunday mornings, so the rest of the day remained free for family activities. Lord Egremont, commenting on the 1965 Crathorne Report on Sunday Observance in the House of Lords, summed up the prevailing view, stating 'a large section of the general public regards the law on Sunday entertainments as obsolete'.

Attending a cricket match would be a perfect way to spend a Sunday afternoon for many, but domestic cricket was not

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in the best of health during the 1960s. In *Summer's Crown*, his magnum opus on the County Championship, author Stephen Chalke describes the decade as 'the worst in the history of the championship', whilst Ted Dexter, reflecting on the declining popularity, felt 'like a man who had reached the top of his profession only to discover that there were no clients'. With attendances falling, it became clear that some form of change was required if the domestic game wanted to survive and thrive.

Enter a dapper character, often seen resplendent in a red cravat, who would first identify the potential for Sunday afternoon cricket. The name Bagenal Harvey is not one that has endured in the history of the game, yet the pioneering sports agent was an important figure in the development of domestic limited-overs cricket. Harvey's first client was Denis Compton, and the arrangement had come about after he was persuaded to help Compton deal with the huge volume of mail the popular cricketer regularly received, but didn't have the time, or possibly the inclination, to wade through. Harvey noted several commercial offers were being overlooked and used his nose for a deal to negotiate on Compton's behalf, leading shortly afterwards to the 'Brylcreem boy' advertising campaign which ran throughout the 1950s.

Harvey quickly established a wide-ranging list of clients, not only sporting stars from the fields of football and athletics, but also from the media. He also astutely spotted

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the opportunity for entertaining at popular sporting events, including the first hospitality tents at the All-England Lawn Tennis Championships. Although rudimentary at first, catering for just 80 guests, the venture rapidly expanded, and the provision of food and drink, including the iconic strawberries and cream, would become a feature of Wimbledon for years to come.

The concept of the International Cavaliers cricket team developed from discussions between Harvey and his cricketing clientele, which included Dexter, Compton, Godfrey Evans, Les Ames and Colin Ingleby-Mackenzie. Frustration at the dwindling crowds and falling interest in the game led the group to consider alternative ways of presenting it. With Harvey offering insight from a spectator's perspective, allied to the former players' views, the idea of Sunday afternoon cricket to attract a new, family audience began to take shape.

The Cavaliers initially formed in 1962, with the aim of raising the profile of the county players who were enjoying their benefit season. The awarding of a benefit usually recognised several years of loyal service to the county and constituted an important part of a cricketer's overall career earnings, and so the addition of a fixture on a previously dormant Sunday would provide a useful boost to their finances. The limited time frame of Sunday afternoon cricket, however, meant the playing conditions could not mirror existing county cricket. Ted Dexter developed the playing format under which the

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Cavaliers matches would operate, with each game comprising 40 overs per side to guarantee a winner and loser unless, of course, the scores were tied.

To further ensure the match would conclude within four hours, the run-ups of the fast bowlers were limited to 15 yards. Dexter was the obvious choice to develop the format, being an excellent theorist on the game albeit one who seemed easily bored, with Mike Brearley referring to him in the mid-1960s as being ‘more interested in ideas than in people’. In addition to formulating the playing conditions for the Sunday Cavaliers fixtures, Dexter would, in later years, devise the alternative rating system for cricketers, sponsored by Deloitte, wisecracking that the motivation for coming up with a different method to the conventional averages was because he was ‘pissed off with Boycott always being top’.

The first International Cavaliers fixtures took place in 1963 and initially, with charging for ground entry on Sunday prohibited, spectators instead had to purchase a scorecard at an inflated price roughly equating to a standard entry fee. The cricket was certainly not trivial, featuring world-class players amongst the Cavaliers, usually facing full-strength county opponents. Harvey and his cohorts soon realised that funding from a sponsor was essential to make the overall project financially viable – after all, he was asking the cricketers to give up their usual rest day. Rothmans of Pall Mall had

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previously partnered with Harvey for a tennis promotion and agreed to back the Cavaliers' cricketing venture.

Aiming to build on the programme of benefit fixtures, Harvey persuaded the BBC that Sunday cricket was a natural fit for television coverage and by 1965 BBC producer Bryan Cowgill had persuaded the governors that Cavaliers cricket could be broadcast beyond 6pm which had traditionally been the 'God slot' reserved for religious programmes such as *Songs of Praise*. The first televised Sunday cricket match was broadcast by BBC2 on 2 May 1965, when the International Cavaliers played against a Worcestershire XI at the Town Ground, Kidderminster, one of 15 Cavaliers fixtures to be given television coverage that season. The fixture benefitted Martin Horton, who would later go on to become New Zealand's first national coach.

Brian Moore, better known as a football commentator, presented the opening match, with Sir Learie Constantine as commentator. Despite being an avid cricket fan, it was decided that Moore should concentrate on his football reporting and Frank Bough took over. Bough, yet another client of Bagenal Harvey, established the presenting slot, not limiting the role to welcoming viewers at the start and wrapping up at the conclusion, but interviewing players at the fall of a wicket and during the tea interval, where guests would include celebrity figures from outside the game. When Bough moved on to front *Grandstand* and *Nationwide*, former Glamorgan

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player Peter Walker took over, continuing and developing the popular interview segments, combining his knowledge of the game with a relaxed manner in front of camera. The BBC producer, Nick Hunter, described the 'revolutionary' feel of the Sunday broadcasts when he spoke to writer and broadcaster Martin Kelner in *Sit Down and Cheer*, Kelner's history of sport on television. 'We felt it was our tournament, and we could break ground by doing different things at tea. The whole broadcast had a relaxed air about it.' John Arlott had been added to the commentary team, and when Jim Laker stepped in to cover Constantine's absence for a 1968 fixture at Fenner's, the classic partnership of Arlott and Laker was established, with the latter continuing to cover the John Player League until his death in 1986.

During that 1968 season, Laker was persuaded to make a playing appearance for the Cavaliers, despite being 46 years of age. He recalled that BBC producer Alan Mouncer had the innovative idea for Laker to commentate from the field of play whilst taking part in the match. He was fitted with a microphone, and a feature that is now commonplace in T20 cricket was born. As is often the case with new ideas, things did not go smoothly at first. Laker hadn't played for several seasons, and it showed as his bowling was carted to the boundary, leading to the bowler/commentator describing to viewers how it was all due to good batting rather than his poor bowling. The presence of Fred Trueman caused more

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concern for the producers, as whenever he passed close to Laker in the field, the microphone had to be hastily covered to ensure his 'industrial' language was not transmitted into front rooms across the nation.

The nature of Cavaliers cricket was apparent in their very name, to play bold, exciting cricket with the enjoyment of the supporters of paramount concern. This was evidenced as early as their second fixture, with Sussex's Jim Parks smashing a fifty against Nottinghamshire in just 16 minutes. Parks scored all of the 72 runs in the fifth-wicket partnership with Alan Oakman, who watched with amusement from the non-striker's end. Ensuring an entertaining spectacle for the public meant the format could be slightly fluid if the situation merited it, such as when the Cavaliers side chased down Warwickshire's total of just 100 in half of their allotted overs. Wary of short-changing the paying spectators, they continued to bat for the full 40 overs, ensuring a full afternoon's cricket was played, and an additional 96 runs and seven wickets entertained the crowd.

Such enterprising cricket clearly struck a chord with the public. There seemed a clear distinction between the attacking nature of Sunday matches compared with the County Championship, which often saw attritional battles where the primary aim was often not to lose the fixture rather than press for victory, especially if that meant taking some form of risk. Dexter noted the growing appeal of the

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limited-overs format. 'The more we played the new game, the more it proved to have a character of its own,' he said. Attendances for the Cavaliers matches grew significantly with each passing season. The total of 34,000 who attended in 1965 had more than doubled for the following season and then increased to 114,000 in 1967. This figure represented more than the total attendances for either of the top two counties, Yorkshire (83,000) and Kent (76,000) which meant the Cavaliers could legitimately regard themselves as the best-supported domestic cricket side in 1967. They drew a crowd of 10,000 for the fixture against Worcestershire, and at Lord's their popularity took the committee by surprise. MCC officials were sceptical that a non-first-class fixture would prove so popular, failing to open sufficient entrance gates to cope with the 15,000 supporters who arrived and lined the surrounding streets.

The increased attendance figures also confirmed that television coverage of the fixtures was not having any adverse effect on supporters turning up at the gate; indeed, the increased exposure seemed to be creating greater widespread interest and boosting crowd figures. Across four seasons, there were 77 televised Cavaliers fixtures. The majority of these involved the county sides, although no fixtures took place against either Lancashire or Northamptonshire. Lancashire cricketers were represented in Cavaliers fixtures, however, as part of either the Roses XI, Lancashire Selectors

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XI or Lancashire League select sides. In addition to county opposition, the Cavaliers challenged Oxford and Cambridge University, a West Indies XI and a Rest of the World XI. The playing record of the Cavaliers at the end of the 1968 season showed 37 wins, 29 defeats and 11 no-results, demonstrating their competitive nature, despite taking the field with a constantly rotating line-up. Appropriately, given he was so instrumental in the development of the concept, Ted Dexter was the top run-scorer, with 876, ahead of Garfield Sobers. The leading wicket-taker was Trevor Bailey, with 38 from 26 games. Sobers was again occupying second place, capturing 34 wickets from the same number of fixtures as Bailey.

With sponsorship and television monies covering the Cavaliers' playing expenses, any additional funds raised on matchdays, from donations and raffles, went to the hosting county, either directly to the player's benefit or for other charitable donations. Tom Cartwright's benefit match at Edgbaston in June 1968 saw a bumper crowd and the huge sum of £3,295 raised (equivalent to £75,000 in present terms).

The Cavaliers had firmly established Sunday afternoon cricket as part of the sporting calendar. Exciting cricket was being played in front of large enthusiastic crowds, with extensive television coverage across the season, all underpinned by a supportive sponsor. It was inevitable that such a successful operation would be imitated, as the cricketing authorities noted the potential for large crowds

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at more than a single location on Sunday afternoons. The Clark Committee, chaired by former Kent captain David Clark, were engaged by MCC to consider the structure and playing conditions of the County Championship in 1965. Whilst their proposals, including a reduction in the number of three-day fixtures, primarily to allow for a form of 'one-day championship' were initially rejected, the wheels had been set in motion and it was not long before a Sunday county league would be introduced, with the knock-on effect of a reduced programme in the Championship, with four matches being trimmed for the 1969 season.

Interest in sponsoring the new competition was widespread, with over 20 companies throwing their hats into the ring, including Rothmans and John Player & Sons. John Player was owned by Imperial Tobacco and produced brands aimed at the mass market at affordable price points. Noting the success that rivals Rothmans had generated from their partnership with cricket, sponsorship of the inaugural limited-overs league looked an attractive prospect.

Tobacco advertising on British television had been banned from 1 August 1965. The impetus for introducing such an outright ban had gathered pace following a report published by the Royal College of Physicians in 1962. The report's recommendations included increased taxation on cigarettes, restrictions on smoking in public places and on advertising. Two years later, epidemiologists Richard Doll

and Tony Bradford Hill published the results of a nationwide questionnaire distributed to all registered British doctors over a ten-year period. Approximately half of the respondents had given up smoking and a dramatic fall in lung cancer was noted compared with the sample who had continued smoking through the period.

Tony Benn, in his position as Postmaster General in Harold Wilson's government, held responsibility for telecoms and broadcasting, and he advised Parliament ahead of the ban taking effect that 'the link between lung cancer and smoking has been established to the satisfaction of the medical profession'. It was also widely acknowledged that tobacco marketing was a significant driver in the growth of the smoking epidemic. Using the powers of the 1964 Television Act, and following consultation with the Independent Television Authority, the government acted to ban all cigarette advertising on television. Such a ban posed a significant problem for the tobacco companies, severely limiting brand exposure via the primary consumer medium. In the period just prior to the ban coming into force, there were approximately 2,000 cigarette advertisements on television per month.

In their academic paper *Bringing you the Best*, published in the *European Journal for the History of Medicine and Health*, Daniel O'Neill and Anna Greenwood suggest 'the John Player League presented an imaginative way to circumvent public

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health moves designed to limit tobacco advertising while keeping its media presence high and maximising exposure for its company name'. It was undoubtedly true that sponsorship of the competition would deliver television exposure, which was otherwise cut off, with the weekly scheduling of a Sunday League fixture providing 100 hours of airtime across the season, at relatively low cost.

It was on 9 October 1968 that MCC signed an agreement with the chairman of John Player & Sons, Tony Garrett. In addition to the league trophy, which was a distinctive statue of a bowler about to deliver the ball and set on a cylindrical plinth, the deal included £55,000 to be split equally between the counties, covering the sponsorship fee and player match fees. An additional £10,550 was on offer in prize money: £1,000 for the champions, £500 for the runners-up and £250 for third place; £50 for the winning side in each match; an equal share of a pot of £1,000 every time a batsman hit a six and a similar share of £1,000 each time a bowler returned four wickets in an innings. If valued in current terms, the overall sponsorship package was equivalent to £1.4 million. Given the involvement in the bidding process of some industry rivals, Player's were keen to ensure the contract prevented the cricketers from advertising or otherwise promoting any other brands of tobacco during the Sunday fixtures.

The title of the new competition was cause for discussion. The initial idea had been to call it 'Player's No. 6 County

Championship', explicitly referencing the leading *No.6* cigarette brand. However, following input from MCC, who were careful to avoid any confusion with the traditional County Championship, the league went under the banner of 'Player's County League 1969'. Naming rights to the competition provided the sponsors with a strong link to a healthy, outdoor sport and helped to create some distance from the underlying product's adverse health aspects. As the season launched in 1969, the government-established Health Education Council produced their first campaign posters, reading 'why learn about lung cancer the hard way', which contrasted with the sponsors' own campaign, 'bringing you the best', which instead focused on the 'enjoyable cricket' for an ideal family day out. Further product promotion would come via young, attractive, confident female product demonstrators. Recognisable in Player's branded outfits, they were employed to distribute free product samples amongst the crowd, and indeed the players, and would be on hand at the presentation of the prize money cheques at the conclusion of the game.

A further benefit of the sponsorship of domestic cricket for the John Player executives was the opportunity it provided to get closer to the Minister for Sport, Denis Howell, who became an ally and defender of the tobacco industry's involvement in sports sponsorship. Indeed, such sponsorship arrangements were introduced in Britain ahead of the United

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States, where it would be the early 1970s before events such as the Virginia Slims tennis circuit and Marlboro Cup horse race were established. A key benefit of that close relationship with the UK government was the continuing application of voluntary agreements, such as health warnings on cigarette packets, rather than having more stringent government legislation imposed upon them.

With the sponsors now in place, the competition announced it had also secured a television deal. On 12 November, the BBC confirmed their contract to exclusively cover one full match each Sunday throughout the season, at a cost to them of £20,000. The corporation additionally offered a prize of £250 for the fastest televised fifty as an added encouragement to promote attacking batting. The BBC contract permitted the sponsors two banners promoting their brand within camera shot at the host ground of each televised fixture.

The awarding of the broadcasting rights to the BBC had been a far from straightforward process, which included a hearing in the commercial courts. London Weekend Television, the ITV network franchise holder for London and the Home Counties, brought a breach of contract case, following protracted discussions which included Jimmy Hill working on behalf of LWT/ITV and Peter Dimmock in his role as head of the BBC Outside Broadcast department. LWT's lead counsel was Geoffrey Howe, who would later

assume the post of Foreign Secretary in the Thatcher administration, but he could not persuade the judge to amend the TCCB (Test and County Cricket Board) decision to award exclusive rights to the BBC. One factor in the TCCB's preference for the BBC was surely the way ITV had dealt with coverage of the Gillette Cup final that summer. It had been somewhat of a coup when the infant LWT had won the rights to televise the final, breaking the strong relationship that existed between the BBC and the cricket establishment. However, when the match between Warwickshire and Sussex was still in progress at 6.40pm with three overs remaining, the producer of the *David Frost Live* programme refused to delay its transmission, meaning viewers were denied the opportunity of witnessing the winning runs being struck, and with that faux pas LWT had sealed their fate regarding future opportunities.

Billy Griffith, the MCC secretary who acted for the TCCB in the negotiations with the BBC, was complimentary towards the achievements of the Cavaliers, but understandably wanted to prevent the new league from potentially being undermined by the continuation of televised Cavaliers fixtures. So, whilst he proclaimed 'the Cavaliers have done a wonderful job for cricket and have shown the way to make Sunday cricket a success', the TCCB simultaneously confirmed that their registered players could not partake in televised fixtures outside of the new league competition, in

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order to give the league the best chance to establish itself and provide the financial benefits hoped for. Several respected observers of the game, including John Arlott, were in favour of the Cavaliers forming part of the new league, effectively as the '18th county'. Given the popularity of the side, some went as far as suggesting that each weekly televised match could feature the Cavaliers versus their county opponent. However, the authorities felt that a clean break from the Cavaliers was in the best overall interest of the county game and dismissed the notion of including them within the Sunday League schedules.

Ted Dexter described the feeling for the Cavaliers ahead of the 1969 season as 'like a large fish which has been netted and transferred to a smaller pool'. They had effectively been frozen out from the county scene and were reduced to putting together a somewhat disjointed set of fixtures against the likes of Scotland, Wales, Bobby Simpson's XI and Barbados, who would be playing in England for the first time. These fixtures were not televised, with ITV taking a cautious approach given the uncertainty of the impact of the new Sunday League on the popularity of the Cavaliers. The first game, against the Scottish national side, only attracted around 1,000 fans. The Cavaliers' mood, according to Dexter, was as if 'we had made a series of disastrous dice throws at snakes and ladders'. Although the season would be somewhat of a struggle for the Cavaliers programme, it did prove beneficial for six young

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West Indian cricketers who joined the Cavaliers squad for the season to gain valuable experience of English conditions. The group included batsman Lawrence Rowe, who would go on to represent the West Indies in 30 Test matches and score seven centuries, and fast bowler Hallam Moseley, who would later appear with distinction in the John Player League for Somerset, debuting in 1971.

With only sporadic television coverage across the season, it did not come as any great surprise when the sponsors, Rothmans, ended their arrangement with the Cavaliers at the end of 1969. They felt betrayed by the sport following the emergence of the Sunday League, operating under the banner of an industry competitor, and concentrated their sponsorship budget in the 1970s on the British Olympic team and the inaugural Hong Kong rugby sevens.

With sponsorship withdrawn, and the current crop of star cricketers playing in the league each Sunday, the Cavaliers, who had pioneered Sunday afternoon cricket, faded away.