

## Blazing Sun on a hot tin roof - 2004

It looked like a mirage as General Ron Hart's expeditionary force, his ninth in charge, sped across the flat and uninviting sands west of Abu Dhabi last October. A mile away, rising from the heat and dust. A giant mushroom appeared, or so it seemed.

On closer sighting we realised it was a space age, £12m cricket stadium named after its patron, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan who died two weeks after our arrival back home, at the age of eighty six. According to the "The Guardian" the Sheikh had twenty-one daughters and an undisclosed number of sons. He was revered as the unifier of the Emirates after Britain's 150-year reign ended abruptly in 1967.

The 22,500 capacity ground was staging the second visit of an England side, the Forty Club veterans. The first UK visitors were the MCC earlier in the year when they were soundly beaten. A Canadian architect designed it and to build such a wonderful construction in that part of the world, like an oasis in the desert, is truly remarkable. Less than a month earlier the Rose Bowl staged several matches in the ICC Champions Trophy and Hampshire was rightly praised for its initiative and foresight. But one has to say that English cricket is being left behind by the Middle East's New World with its wealth and its innovative buildings. There are seven small kingdoms in the Emirates, full name United Arab Emirates, with a population up to 3m, and 900,000 of them can use the Internet. Three quarters of them are foreigners who cannot apply for citizenship.

In 1966 when England towered over the world, if only in football, the Emirates had only 180,000 people, mainly Bedouins who reared camels. In less than forty years they are overtaking the prosperous cities of the USA. At 20,000 dollars, the UAE's annual per capita GDP equals America's and even surpasses Saudi Arabia's. And in cricket they are rapidly gaining acceptance without many Arabs in their leading sides.

Our opening match the day after we arrived in temperatures close to the 40s was against a UAE Select, mainly Indians, Pakistanis and Sri Lankans who have played in ICC competitions with considerable success. Later, others who played against us played against Canada and Scotland in November! As our players changed in the huge 30m x 8m dressing room - sadly there was no loo paper - we feared an annihilation. Our fears were soon realised. Mohammed Kaif Ghuray, a left-hander who has played first class cricket and once outscored Andrew Flintoff in the Hong Kong Sixes, amassed 127. There were 22 sixes in the Select's 368-8 and although it was a 40 over contest, the home skipper declared with two overs to go. XL's 101 was scored at a different tempo, no sixes and hardly a four. Defeat by 267 runs, an XL record.

Leading official Inamul Haq Khan, our host, was kind. "Your players have shown tremendous enthusiasm in this heat at your age," he said. "I envy you, you are legends! We applaud The Forty Club for paying their first visit to us. I congratulate you."

Next day we were off at 8.30 am for another 40 over a side match, except that the New Medical Centre XI had younger, better players. They wanted to bat first in the cruel heat and it was almost like a public flogging. One consolation was that we restricted them to 9 sixes in their 386-5 with two retirements, beating yesterday's record. Neil Clinton, the new vice captain, was advised to make it a declaration game and the home skipper agreed. Mainly through the endurance of our Tyke, Peter Robinson, we snatched a draw. He bowled 12 overs for 2-112, and then batted out twenty overs for 10 in XLI's 123-6. "It was down to my Yorkshire grit," he said.

On Sunday, October 10, we moved on to Dubai and much-needed rest and recreation was provided by a run out into the desert in four wheelers, whizzing up and down the dunes. Dinner was served in a giant Bedouin camp and it was a marvellous experience. To honour the Bedouins, the Government built houses for them at no cost. You can't imagine Blair's Government doing that for our WWII survivors - they are menacing their pensions instead! Neil Clinton's father, 81-year-old Peter, was a Burma survivor and was on the trip. He loved it and he wasn't the only one.

The most enjoyable, and most meaningful, match was against the Dubai U18 Select, average age 17 against the 60 average of XL. The venue was in a sand zone, outside Dubai, which houses two new grass grounds, costing £150,000 and built in thirty days. The spacious portable rooms were all air-conditioned which was welcome because the front of the pavilion had a tin roof. The temperature soared as we chatted to the personable boys. Leaning back in the plastic covers on the settees it was like being given heat treatment to sore backs.

The boys' coach, ex-Indian all rounder Abid Ali, who played in 29 Tests, hitting the winning run to clinch a first-ever Test victory in England thirty years previously, insisted on a fair toss so for the third time XL were condemned to 3 and a half hours of sun baking. The considerate hosts laid on refreshments, including cake at coffee break, curry at lunch and tea and biscuits at tea. Our overseas player, Dutchman Japp Volgelaar, stepped up his slow pace and returned excellent figures of 1-28 in 8 overs. He is a fitness fanatic and plays hockey, walks miles each day and does the gardening while bowling up and down the 22-yard area at his house.

The long green grass at Dubai CC has to be watered every night, otherwise it would die within days, and it proved a handicap as XI set off to beat the boys' 254-5. The anti-champagne moments came when one of our members (whose name is withheld for humanitarian reasons) dropped four catches on the long off boundary in as many minutes. XL's openers Andy Meads, 58, and Denham Earl, 44, put on 118 for the first wicket in 31 overs before a collapse. XL's final total of 134-5 was a gallant effort and many plaudits went to the brilliant young fielders who made it so difficult for our batsmen. The boys ought to have been candidates for an overseas award, similar to the Henry Grierson Trophy. Their behaviour and knowledgeable cricket talk were impressive- and the happy occasion was what Forty Club is all about.

Now it was big league stuff, playing the ECB Blues under lights at the Sharjah Stadium, built in 1980. Some of the Blues players were internationals, including one, named Shoaib, as fast as Darren Gough, and with a third of the lights not working it was hard to pick up the white ball. They were skippered by the sole Arab, Wadeem Bukhatir, the son of the man who paid for the stadium and he made a witty little speech after XL's 98 run defeat. After a 20 minute catching session, the first arranged since 1991, XL's fielders dropped only three catches in the Blues innings of 220.

By this time it was dark but the humidity was up to 80%. Andy Meads (Meaz on the electric scoreboard) sweated his way to 42 on a dew-soaked ground before he was bowled no by tiredness more than Leon, the other quickie. Peter Robinson did another Boycott, 14 not out off 72 balls, in XL's creditable 122-7.

Match 5, also under lights, was staged at the Dubai CC and resulted in a 51 run defeat. Their veterans, with an average age 25 years younger than ours, reached 189-5, XL making 138-7. The final two engagements were played at Darjeeling, the oldest cricket ground in Dubai. The pitch was rubber on concrete and the outfield was rolled sand. Surprisingly, the ball travelled faster to the rope than on grass at other grounds.

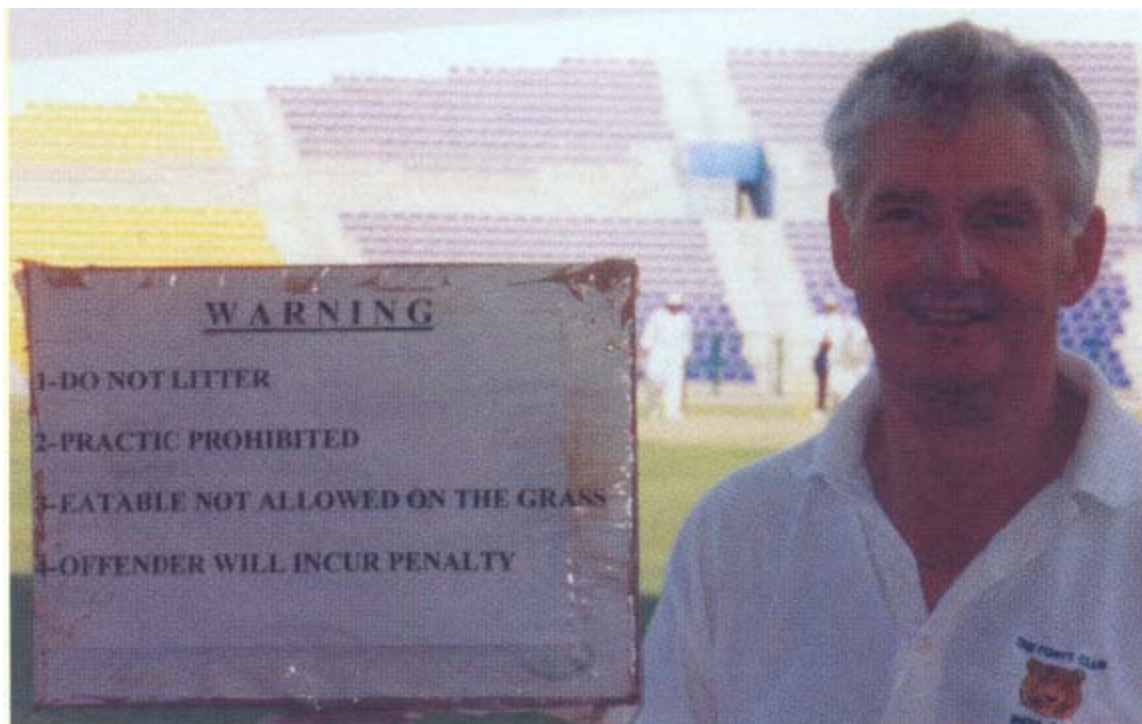
What appeared to be the M4 just fifty metres away and the sight screen, out of place, couldn't be moved. A few beamers and bouncers came our way and only one batsman, Denham Earl, wore a helmet, a reminder that he nearly lost his nose some years previously. For the sixth successive time, our fielders frizzled in the middle at noontime and the ex-pats, mainly English, piled up 330-6. Our Sussex champion Meaz impressed again with an unbeaten 43 following Ron Helyar's exhausting 67 in our 184-5 before he joined the throng watching the TV coverage of the India v Australia Test in Chennai. It was exceptional watching and your editor had a vested interest because his son Gavin was the director of the programme.

Alan Good, the DCC organiser, claimed he was putting out a "weakened" side for the next day's encounter but it was another slaughter - XL 209 (Glyn Gunning 43, Robert Smith 77), DCC 210-1 (Good 101 not out). The sun was setting as the winning run was completed, a brilliant finale to one of the most unusual, and most enjoyable, tours of the Club's history. With rain falling on only 5-6 days a year there are plenty of sunsets in the UAE. Cricket is on the move in this part of the world and we were privileged to see the beginning of it.

Most of our matches were reported in the local English newspapers and the Forty Club has never had a higher profile abroad.



Back view of the £12m Abu Dhabi Stadium



John Widgery on litter watch



The floodlights came on at noon



Ran Hart congratulates the boys



XL make their debuts in coloured clothing at Sharjah



Another debut... under lights



Glyn Gunning plays to fine leg



Umpire Phil Clark, wife Hazel and a friend