

Crushed in South Africa - 2005

Are aircraft seats becoming narrower as our members grow gracefully old? That was the thought in the minds of some of Ron Hart's party of fifty six veteran cricketers and their wives travelling on the Forty Club's fifth tour to South Africa last February, a happy visit which ended with just two wins, a draw and fourteen defeats in a punishing schedule.

Your editor had rung the Human Resource department of SAA to arrange a special seat with leg room and the manager duly supplied one - 76H. When he saw the passenger sitting inside his aisle seat - a gargantuan figure, weight all of twenty-five stone - his face fell. It was worse than being incarcerated in one of the US's Guantanamo Bay detention units. After being pinned and almost crushed, he was forced to evacuate to one of the rear jump seats, normally used by cabin staff. The staff were resting upstairs so the jump seat was n't needed. A rather brusque senior stewardess ordered him to return to his seat, or half seat. Some of the leading airlines are not really catering for their customers any more and that was yet another example. A seat measuring eighteen inches isn't enough.

Next day, bruised and battered, his plans of seeking compensation faded as a perfect Cape day dawned. The party leader led his troops into action on the very first full day, February 8. Our opponents were Somerset West and they won pulling up, by three wickets. Andy Meads, the Colin Cowdrey of the squad, didn't need a sauna. His innings of 94 in a temperature of 30 degrees acted as one in the middle as the pounds drained away. The 25-stone man should have joined him.

Feb 9 - Phew! A double header with 22 of the 28 players in action. Our old friend Julian Wilson, the former BBC racing correspondent, turned out for the Wombats CC and his slow left arm bowling was despatched to all boundaries as Barry Peay, with 58, and Ron Helyar, 36, put on 89 for the first wicket. The remaining nine batsmen mustered only 94 in XL's 183-6 which was passed with five wickets in hand. Matt Joblin, a 19 year old thumper from Leatherhead, the Wombats overseas player, clumped an unbeaten 69. Clive Lloyd, the ICC referee who upset Michael Vaughan in the Test series, might have been called in but he had returned home. Our leader intimated that he had nicked the ball although the umpire had raised the finger as soon as the fielders appealed for lbw. Ron was allowed to bat on but was soon dismissed. At international level, there is an automatic fine for that! XL's 'B' team took on a Western Province G XI and the venue was at the WP's new £5m cricket sports complex near Newlands. In England something like that would be a revelation - but there aren't any. Unfortunately the main oval was built on a rubbish dump and the outfield had subsided in parts, with bits of glass and debris emerging from the ground. And the square has so far produced "dead" pitches. A real Vets home side reduced XL to 88-6 until vice captain Roly Walton, with 47 not out, and Meads, 46, lifted the total to 176. It wasn't enough with the G men winning by six wickets. A highlight was the arrival of a flotilla of twenty-six long beaked hadeda birds who specialise in ripping out grass. Someone thought they were vultures and Mike Stratford, the XL Handbook photographer, said to Andy "I bet you haven't seen so many birds fancying you before!"

Feb 10 - Are they mad? Yet another double-header, at the WP headquarters which accommodated both matches. The senior game finished with a 78 run defeat against the Chairman's XI, mainly 040s who have played first team cricket. Improved fielding (except the leader's two drops at deep mid wicket) kept their score to 227-5. XI started far too slowly, a common fault, and it was soon over. Your editor was stumped off 12 year old James Carson who was duly awarded the Man of the Match. Behind the pavilion, in what appeared to be a massive wind tunnel masquerading as a cricket ground, the WP U17s slaughtered our other team - U17s 210-7, XL 117-6. Ron Helyar stumped three and Hansa Abraham's 81 came off 32 balls, including six sixes. Mike Wicks withdrew after just one over, 0-24 retired.

Feb 12 - A riotous, unabstemious encounter at Stellenbosch with the Scorpions crawling all over our shattered forces - XL's 161-8 in 45 overs (Peay 42, Helyar 30 retired with sore hip) against the home team's 165-2 off 28. A late night ensued.

Feb 13 - Drakenstein is arguably the most beautiful ground in SA, if not the world. It is surrounded on all sides by mountains and it boasts the first all grass square, first used in the 1890s. Rather unwisely, captain Ron wanted to bat in the midday heat and with the tufty grass slowing our ground shots, the first 15 overs produced just 35 runs. Run machine Meads battled to 80 off 96 balls with his opening partner Albert van Nieop scoring 40 (off 89 balls). The skipper strained a hamstring before emerging later to bowl without any visible support. The experienced home batsmen took the aerial route, bombarding our shell-shocked boundary fielders, none of whom failed to get a hand to any of these towering shots - Drakenstein's 192-2 off 30 overs, a win by eight wickets. The rest of the day was thoroughly enjoyed by all. These guys can entertain!

Feb 15 - We should have won this one at windswept Fish Hoek, where the Huguenots first landed more than 300 years ago. XL's 202-6 in 40 owed much to openers Denham Earl, 57, and Clive Huggins, 49, but the usual collapse occurred. The elderly home players reached 179-9 and opening bowler Grebelaar steered them to a one run victory with the aid of 25 wides, two dropped catches by Tim Woodcock and one from skipper Walton. A plus was the accurate bowling of Hugh Milner, with 3-22.

Feb 16 - So close ... the scores ended level in our XL A v Durbanville A. And in the B contest, we should have drawn in the other declaration game. With Perkins played the ball to cover and thinking he heard a "Yes," set off for a needless run, only to be sent back by new arrival Howard Clay. Perk was run out by a distance with the talkative home team winning by 44 runs. Skipper Walton was furious and there was an exchange of words in the cramped dressing room. Howard was threatening to take the next plane home and when the leader mischievously mentioned that Perky "was trying to score 36 in the last over" in his speech our ball to bring the scores level. Andy Meads amassed another big one, 67, and Gordon "Flash" Watts was still there on 37, but at the wrong end. The leader raised more than £200 for disadvantaged children, conducting a "heads and tails" session and Mike Foster auctioned the prizes, two Boxes of wine.

Feb 19 - Return to Knysna for a happy ceremony at the Knysna Sports Club, owned and run by the Critchley family. Three years ago our fines raised £285 for building a scoreboard. Until then they used sticks of wood. In the excitement, that fact was overlooked, provoking the fines master to think of storming off to the next airport to return to icy Britain. Keith Critchley struggled to get enough veterans to make up his side but they managed to beat us by two wickets - XL 150-6 (Robbie Barker 33). KSS Vets XI 151-8 off 31 overs. The leader was fuming. A mile away at the Knysna CC, Keith's U15s side showed how good they were on an uncertain pitch. Earl, 48, and Peay, 43, made a sound start as the middle sagged against excellent pace bowling and accurate spin bowling. Peter Blaine Dodds, a tall leg spinner, brought blood when your editor tried a sweep and an edged shot came off his boot into his chin. Dr. Fred Imms slapped a massive plaster on it, only for it to fall off. The patient returned to the crease and was surprised to hear the bowler say "Sorry Sir, I hope you are all right." Right hander Houston Kock, a 14 year old, was responsible for the champagne moment when he snatched a powerful drive with his left hand at mid wicket and XL's 177-9 looked a reasonable total in the conditions, especially as the boys were 40-4. De Bruin, a pugnacious right hander, hit 65, and with 36 needed at 3 an over with four wickets in hand Roly Walton brought himself on and bowled De Bruin with a big turner which pitched outside leg. Reminiscent of Shane Warne, two more wickets fell in as many balls. A win! It was more of a giveaway than a well deserved win.

Feb 20 - More controversy. "Slim" Ron, as opposed to "Big" Ron (Helyar) chipped the ball to midwicket as the Afrikaans speaking fielders of Mossel Bay Whalers celebrated the "catch." For the second time on the tour the skipper held his ground, claiming it was a bump ball. His partner thought otherwise but after discussions he was permitted to stay. He thanked the home side for their sportsmanship. The ground was beautifully positioned over the sea but the game didn't match up to the view - Mossel Whalers (who failed to clap in the XL team) 226-4, XL 157-7 (Walton 72).

Feb 22 - The front coach (we had two splendid ones) broke down on the way from Knysna to Port Elizabeth for the 75-minute flight to Durban. A rear tyre burst and against advice from the owner, our steadfast driver Andy insisted on continuing at 50 mph ...and just made the deadline. Well played sir. We were quartered at the Beverley Hills Hotel in Imhlanga Rocks where England's cricketers stayed over Christmas. Barry Aitken discovered that a monkey had invaded his room and stolen an apple and as the side's military consultant was promptly fined for a serious breach of security. The monkeys used to call in daily but most people kept their windows shut. England's Ashley Giles, who stayed on the second floor, said "Luckily I didn't see any of them." The cricketing highlight came at Durban High School, the highly regarded school which has produced 29 SA Test stars, including Barry Richards, more than 10% of the overall total. Five of the current side have played in junior SA sides and one, Cheslin Nhalpo scored an elegant 142 in 124 balls before he sportingly gave his wicket away. Look out for a 16-year-old left-hander, Jon Vandiar, who was 28 not out in a brief appearance. Durban HS 290-4, XL 109-5 in 55 overs. A mind-dulling draw.

Feb 24 - The game against the old boys, The Horseflies, turned out to be a closer encounter - the home side 190-8, XL 169-7 (Meads 48).

Feb 25 - The locals were astonished by our work rate. "They're playing more cricket than the England team," said Colin Chater, one of the organisers. This game was in the hills at Eston against a genuine oldie side whose players had immense clout, knocking up 236 on a slow outfield. XL just passed the hundred. Hammered. A few years ago the farmers clubbed together to build a massive sports club, including a small concert hall to stage their annual 6-night karaoke concerts. Forty-six performers, all amateurs, took part in this one, a wonderful, vibrant 90-minute show which was more entertaining than the average West End musical. It was quite sensational. You couldn't imagine

anyone doing that in rural England these days, though perhaps in Wales. "Everyone helps everyone else," said skipper Peter Hosking, who tragically lost his wife a few years ago. We came away with a warm glow around the hearth, until the second coach stuck in the mud following a heavy rainfall. A tow bar was wrenched off, a towrope snapped and we feared the worst until three more farmers hitched up their 4x4s to the stricken coach and dragged it clear. Another hour had been wasted and we arrived back well past midnight.

Feb 26 - Time to rise at 6 ready for the 14 hour round trip to the Battle of Isandlwana in 1879, Britain's worst defeat until the Anglo-Boer War started in 1899. Lord Chelmsford's 4,500 redcoats were routed by 20,000 Zulus (the word comes "from heaven") in the Kwazulu Natal. It was totally fascinating. The tiny round houses are still there and it is like being back in another world. The film "Zulu" - still shown regularly in the UK and a week after we arrived home - is still banned in SA for misrepresenting the real story and the extras weren't paid and are still waiting for their money! Close by we went to the Battle of Rorke's Drift when Queen Victoria and her advisers awarded no less than eleven Victoria Crosses for bravery when a handful of brave soldiers were shot, speared and disembowelled in two hours of mayhem. The Zulus weren't savages at all. They were dignified, honest men defending their land against invaders supporting greedy traders and their custom of disembowelment was to release the spirits of their foes. These military routs brought back Memories of XL's cricketing massacres and also the televised cricket routs as SA mutilated the poor Zims. On the way back we passed through heavy peasouping fog and heavy rain and we got back an hour after the farewell dinner had started. What a whizz! It was midnight when our fines were completed- 199 fines for 58 "offenders."

Feb 27 - The last match. Another early start to Keamsey School in a beautiful suburb of Durban. The opponents, Colin Chater's Willows CC, featured ex-SA batsman Henry Fotheringham and Geoff Griffin, the first SA bowler to take a hat trick at Lord's. Geoff did it in 1960 in the Second Test before he was no balled for throwing. Amazingly, we won by five wickets with an over to spare. Colin wanted a rule, 35 and retire, but it rebounded on him because Fotheringham retired and came back too late to improve the total of 158. Meads and Peay both retired on 35. Meads and Milner, both about to qualify for the dreaded bus pass, were the stars of the tour. Andy scored 417 runs from seven completed innings, average 67, three short of his own record, and Hugh captured 18 wickets for 240 runs, a tour record. Forty eight members repaired to the Hluhluwegame Reserve for three days of R & R while eight returned to the ice and cold of England. Socially, if not on the battlefields, we had plenty of laughs on a joyous trip and that is what it is all about.



Peter Robinson, and others, hear about the Battle of Isandlwana in 1879



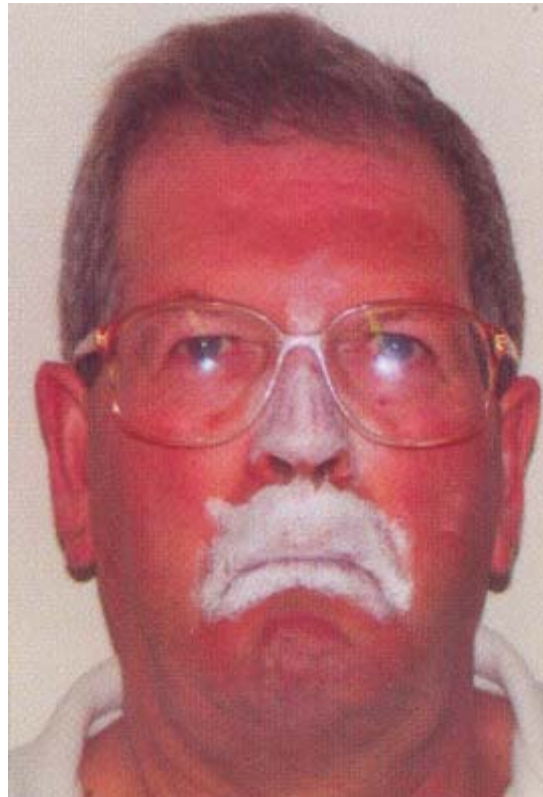
Foreign Legionnaire Norman Jones
ready to march



The 40 Club loosening up before the match against Durban High School



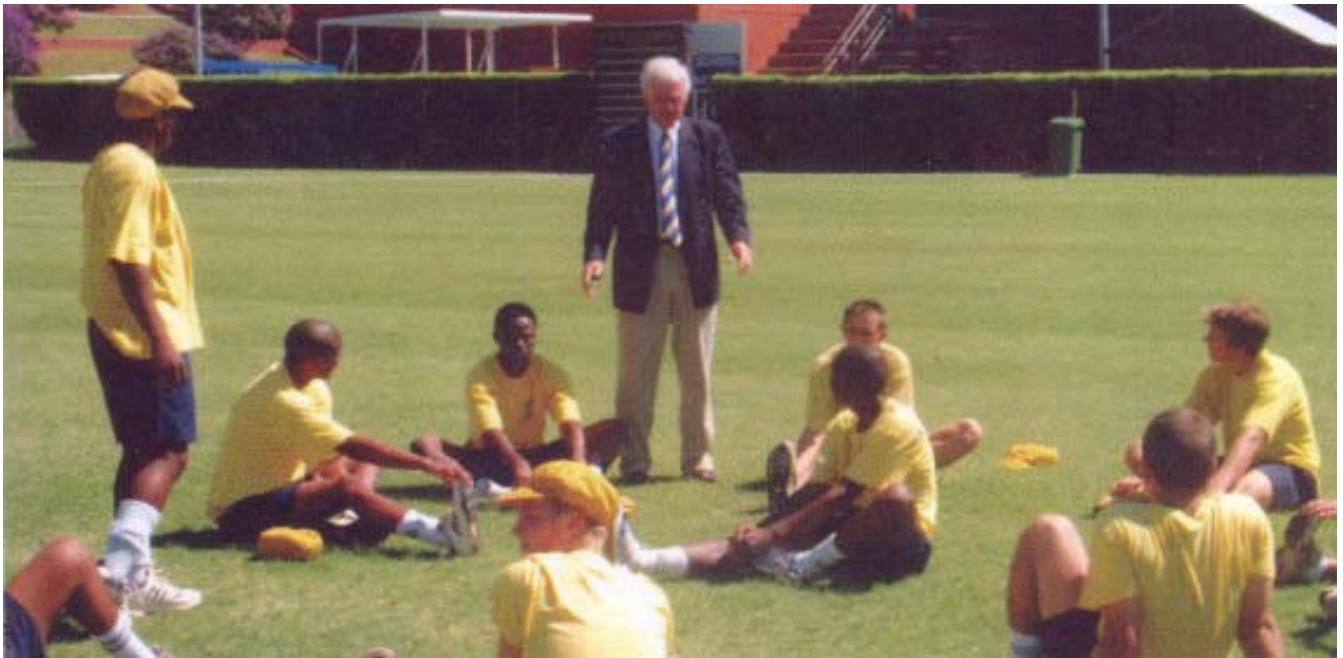
The opening of the Knysna Sport School's cricket Scoreboard, founded bt proceeds from end of tour fines



Mike Wicks runs out of sun cream



Our Dutch scorer Liedeke Ohm working on the balcony of the Western Province's £5m cricket complex near Newlands. Robbie Barker admires the view.



After a very long pep talk the Durban GS boys failed to ram home victory!