

CHOOSE CRICKET

CLUBS AND COMMUNITY



Finn digs in

A London club with historic roots got a timely boost from an England star who doesn't mind spade work. By **Steve Morgan**

If you don't ask, you don't get. When Rajan Patel of Streatham and Marlborough CC suggested the club apply for showcase billing for NatWest's CricketForce, he was met with a straight bat at committee level. Undeterred, he applied anyway.

To his surprise, they were put first on ECB's county, then national shortlist. Then, to his amazement, they were selected as the focus of the nationwide initiative, which has sought to bring clubs and communities closer together since 2001.

Over the first weekend of April, the Surrey Championship outfit – which in 2003 merged Streatham CC (founded in 1805), where WG Grace once played, and Marlborough (a little more junior at 1870) – was a hive of activity, with special guests joining club diehards getting down and dirty ready for the forthcoming season.

Middlesex and England stalwarts Mike Gatting and Steven Finn – a champion of club cricket – and Surrey duo Zafar Ansari and Amar Virdi all lent a hand with various tasks, helping spruce up

Ready for action: Steven Finn with club stalwart Rajan Patel



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one of the county's hidden gems, tucked away on the corner of Dulwich Common.

The first XI pitch was voted best in the league in 2010, but as every time-served club player and official knows, a decent playing strip is just the top of a lengthy list of pressing concerns.

At S&M, the challenges are no different. While the welcome is always warm, keeping the facilities shipshape is another matter. As is that delicate balancing act between trying to attract – and keep – volunteers.

The cheery Rajan, now in his sixth season with the club as an all-rounder, explains: “We've pushed out on goodwill from our members, as we're trying to raise a lot of money for the pavilion – we're constantly demanding. But you've got to try and give something back as well.”

Reciprocation can, however, come precisely from that common cause; a shared sense of duty that slakes a thirst in the clubhouse after knowing a job has been well done – and the thought that the endeavour will have lasting significance.

Thanks to NatWest CricketForce, the banks of weeds and vegetation overlooking the club's second pitch have been cut back. A new boundary has been installed on the main pitch, marked by railway sleepers to prevent stray balls running into the adjacent gully and slowing the game up. And new ball-stop netting will please those who use the adjoining tennis courts.

Rajan was impressed by the efforts of the club's guests, who really put in a shift. “Mike Gatting got really into it, straight into trench-cutting, and lumping railway sleepers about,” he says. “Steven Finn did a bit of digging, too. And then Zafar and Amir came in the afternoon, helped and did a load of coaching with the colts.”

Gatt's the way to do it: Streatham and Marlborough get some VIP support from (clockwise from top) Zafar Ansari, Mike Gatting and Steven Finn



“It’s been huge in terms of advertising and social media,” Rajan adds. “I’ve worked on these days in the past, and you’ll get the hardcore members turning up – maybe 20-25 people – and then you’ll get the odd person that might help during the week if you give them specific tasks. I think we had around 200 on the Friday alone. I’d recommend any club to go for it.”

This year’s CricketForce was one to treasure in a part of south-east London where cricket has been played at club level alone for 212 years. Streatham and Marlborough’s website is packed with images of an unforgettable day; memories to warm the cockles on those long winter nights waiting for spring. “It’s really pushed us on the way to – hopefully – getting this new

pavilion, which has been an ongoing thing for seven or eight years, with no real momentum,” Rajan adds. “Ultimately, if we don’t get it, we could fold in five years – you could keep going, but it’s a continual repair job, as it’s falling down.”

For Rajan; surely a shoo-in for clubman of the year, that sense of preserving – and extending – history is a huge driver. “There’s such a feelgood factor in getting the membership together, working together for a greater aim,” he says. “You just can’t let that past slide by and disappear into the ether.”

By joining forces 14 years ago,

Streatham’s illustrious name was preserved. The club now fields seven Saturday teams – no mean feat in the modern age, where the grassroots game competes with multiple distractions.

CricketForce has had the phone buzzing – 44 senior enquiries came in the following week – potentially four new sides in itself. Then there’s the addition of 30 prospective colts off the back of the event. One would like to think that WG himself would declare the club, if not quite in rude health just yet, than certainly in fine spirits. ●



Now in its 17th year, **NatWest CricketForce** has grown into one of the largest sports volunteering initiatives in the UK, with more than 2,200 local clubs taking part this year. Find out more at natwest.com/cricket