

# A Legspinner's Diary

A magnificent week of cricket & camaraderie at the National O55s Championships, Christchurch NZ, Nov 23-27 2023. The tournament included 16 teams in two Divisions, with NSW and Qld each sending 3 teams, Victoria, WA, SA and New Zealand two teams each, and one team from each of ACT and Tasmania. Each Division was divided into two Pools of four teams for the initial round-robin format, with the top teams in each pool to play off for the chocolates. I was a member of the triumphant NSW Kangaroos, who came through Pool B undefeated and claimed the Division 2 title by trouncing the highly fancied NSW Waratahs in the final. Yes, yes, I know we were all a squad and “your triumph is my triumph” etc, but we all knew we were in 3rds and they (the 2s) were expecting to put us in our place, so it was pretty sweet!

Day 1 we faced Qld Droughtmasters 3 at the storied inner city ground of Burnside West Christchurch University Cricket Club aka “The Pride of Burnside”. Did you know Tom Latham plays his club cricket there? Neither did I, but the Kiwi clubs do an excellent job of displaying their proud history in the clubhouse. Anyway, NSW skipper Mark Tranter won the toss and elected to bowl on a deck that was a lot greener than we were accustomed to, and Matt Hardman got the ball rolling by hooping one back as the opener shouldered arms, and the unusual appeal (“you can't be doing that, Sir”) was answered in the affirmative. Stephen “Lethal” Leathley at the other end was erratic but unpunished, and the first change bowlers Mark Tranter and Paul James kept the scoring rate down, so that when Jamesy eventually broke through they were 2-70 in the 25<sup>th</sup>. I got ball in hand and they were coming out all right. Their remaining opener backed away to cut me for a couple, so I muttered to myself “try cutting this one, mate” as the slider clattered into middle and off next ball. I have to admit I can get a wee bit combative on the field, but this was a treasured moment for me and I will take it! Mark “Buff” Favell took over from Jamesy and soon picked up a wicket, and when another slider got me an LBW they were 5-107 with 11.2 overs remaining.

The Qld number 7 was a lefty named Laurie McCloskey, who was giving me PTSD with his slog-sweeping as I had flashbacks of Greg “the Prez” Brooks bashing me over mid-wicket every

f\*\*ken year in the pre-season “friendlies”. Picked mainly for his batting, Tim Weilandt was given the ball after Buff leaked a few runs. McCloskey greeted Tim with a clouted slog-sweep, which was met by a SUPERB diving one handed grab at mid-wicket by my new favourite sheep-farmer Grant Ryan. Tim swept through the tail with his darted offies, and they were all out in the last over for 153 (Tim Weilandt 5-16!).

Our modest run-chase started rockily as the top 3 fell with just 19 on the board, before a 37 run partnership between Luke Stoodley and Mark “Doc” Freeman steadied the ship. The ship ran aground when Andy Eastcott followed Luke back to the pavilion first ball, 5-56 in the 24<sup>th</sup>. However we were lifted off the rocks by a rising tide which appeared in the form of a captain’s knock from Mark Tranter (55\* retired). Despite losing the good Doctor at 6-99, Lethal and the skipper took us to the brink of victory, and Paul James smoked a boundary first ball to ice the cake for us with 23 balls to spare. One down, and back at the hotel we celebrated NSW teams going 3-3 on day 1.

On Day 2 we arrived at the picturesque mountainside ground of Heathcote to play South Australia A. Unfortunately, the covers were on Saturday’s club game wicket, while our Friday game pitch was a pool of muddy water. The game was moved to a syntho deck in Hagley Park, which was a bit like being moved from the Bradman Oval to Moore Park 8, but still we got to play a 30 over game in the cold, howling wind. We won the toss and batted, and steady accumulation by Grant Ryan (25), Mark Favell (53) and Tim Weilandt (26) got us off to a solid start. From there it was clearly go time, and the acceleration came from Stephen Leathley (29 off 13), Mark Freeman (21 off 16), and Luke Stoodley (21\* off 13) as we posted a competitive 5-184 in our 30 overs.

Their wicketkeeper opened the batting, a chirpy, gloveless chap named Alan Doubleday who claimed to be “in the prison system”, leaving us to ponder whether this was his employment or accommodation status! His stand-and-swat technique was perfect for synthetic wickets, and he was threatening to take the game away from us when Greg Hall, standing up to the stumps to Stephen Leathley, whipped off the bails with a well-timed kick, out stumped for 32. They were never really in the hunt after that and finished 25 runs short at 7-160. Matt Hardman bowled well without luck, a couple of chances going down. A special shout-out to Mark Tranter, Stephen Leathley (2-25) and Paul James (2-21) who bowled into the howling gale without losing control, no mean feat. Personally I

bowled rubbish, and probably need to do more fitness preparation to avoid the second day blues in future. The NSW squad finished day 2 with 6 wins from 6, and we slept soundly dreaming of dual championships.

Day 3 saw us take a trip into the countryside to a venue that reminded me of Mandalong, but with a much better wicket, to take on the highly fancied locals, the Christchurch Casino Invitational XI aka New Zealand 2s. This was the day we played our get out of jail free card, and pulled off a heist to rival the Great Train Robbery.

The skipper won his 3<sup>rd</sup> consecutive toss and elected to bowl on another one of those unfamiliar, deep green New Zealand pitches. Christchurch started cautiously against accurate bowling from Matt Hardman and Stephen Leathley, but looked to have weathered the early storm as they passed 50 approaching the 15 over drinks break. The skipper kept Lethal on for a couple of extra overs, and was rewarded by two wickets leading into the break (NZ 2s 2-59). More tight bowling after the break from Mark Tranter and Paul James saw Christchurch amble to 4-103 at the 30 over mark. After the break the Christchurch skipper and their gun all-rounder started hitting them sweetly, and we were staring down the barrel of a 200-220 chase as they piled on 55 runs in overs 31-37. (NB none of the Christchurch players were on PlayHQ so, their entire team is listed as Phillip Innes aka fill-ins.)

At this point there was a massive plot twist, as the destroyer Tim Weilandt came on from the far end, and Matt Hardman returned for a second spell from the pavilion end. First Tim bowled the gun all-rounder, then Matt Hardman knocked over the skipper with an absolute peach. Fortunately, the umpire did not notice the substitution of a piece of stone-fruit for the cricket ball, and the dismissal stood, 6-164 with 5 overs to go. The new batters tried to keep the scorers busy, but Phil Inn soon holed out to myself at long-on off Hardman, and the next over saw two more wickets to the destroyer and a runout, all out 177 in the 43<sup>rd</sup>. A terrific fightback by the mighty 'roos as Christchurch had lost 6-19!

In the sheds the skipper gave a rousing speech about playing the full 80 minutes, and while I was a little confused about what sport we were playing I'm sure we were all highly motivated to do well in the run-chase. Motivation did not seem to be enough as their gun all-rounder produced a magnificent spell of fast bowling (9-1-24-5), hitting the seam hard and getting it to move and jump

around all over the place. At 5-41 we were on the rocks, and things got even worse as our skipper was stumped and John Toohey was run out by the gun all-rounder's rocket throw from long-on to the keeper's end. FFS who does that in the 55s?

Now 7-69 in the 27<sup>th</sup>, we needed 109 at a run a ball, and the maths professor and the actuary agreed that our WinViz odds were now quite poor indeed. In fact\*, Ladbrokes briefly offered a "write your own ticket" special, but with the dodgy rural internet reception none of us were able to get on.

(\*fiction)

Paul James joined Greg Hall in the middle and started to knock it around, and their partnership lifted us to 8-107 when Jamesy holed out after a quick-fire 24. Still 71 required, at nearly 7 an over, and just 2 wickets to spare. Cometh the hour, cometh the man, they say, but the best we could do was send out the man-child Stephen "Lethal" Leathley. Well, Lethal wasn't here to f\*\*k spiders, and started slogging them around while Greg Hall (41\*) was busy hitting the gaps and turning over the strike. The runs required gradually ticked away, until it started to look like the miracle was possible.

At 8-152 Lethal launched one to deep mid-wicket, straight down the throat of Phul Unn, who looked comfortable under the catch right up until the moment he didn't, 2 runs to us. Undeterred, Lethal simply slammed the next one 10 yards over his head, and we were under the magic 20 runs required barrier that Tim Weilandt confidently assured us made us favourites. Anyway, to cut a long story short, with 2 runs to get Lethal (48\*) launched one to long-off, who spilled it, boundary, jubilation, absolute scenes.

While personally I did not bat or bowl, and spent half their innings jogging from long-on to long-off (I must have farted on the bus or something), this remains one of my favourite days of cricket ever, right down to the moment I spotted Phully Unne crying on the tailgate of his ute after the game. Back at the hotel we celebrated with the Waratahs, who won again to set up a NSW v NSW Div 2 final, and commiserated\* with the Blues who lost a heartbreaker against Qld to miss out on the Div 1 final. (\*shunned)

Day 4, finals day at the magnificent Darfield Rugby Club facility at the foot of snow-capped mountains, fabulous facilities, good looking pitch, lovely weather, and a mate against mate scenario

as the underdog Kangaroos side-eyed the Waratahs who arrogantly marched into the “Home” changing rooms. Skip won the toss (4 from 4!) and batted, and the top order (Buff Favell 26, Grant Ryan 56\*, John Toohey 34) did their job, and the rest of us pushed on to a good total. I got my first bat of the tournament at the death, and cemented my reputation for comedy batting with a reverse ramp and a charging sweep in the last over, and finished with red ink, so I was well satisfied. The sweep shot was met with rapturous applause, which I thought was a tad disproportionate, until I realised the cheers were for us posting the 200, leaving the Waratahs 201 to get.

No doubt they remained confident on a good deck and quick outfield, and they started well enough, with Neil Brooks looking in punishing form and Stephen Rose nurdling and scampering as he does. However the tactical ploy of opening with the off-spin (and occasional leggie!) of Paul James proved a masterstroke when he disposed of Rosey and Ric Howard in the 10<sup>th</sup> over. The gambit was cemented in legend when Brooksy chipped one back to the bowler, C&B James for 44, and at 3-56 after 16 some cracks were beginning to appear in the Waratahs ship.

After an economical spell from Mark Tranter, David “Daniel” Craig came on, while Stephen Leathley replaced Jamesy at the other end. The first 6 overs after drinks produced just 10 runs, and the mounting scoreboard pressure took its toll as Darrel Smith chipped a well-pitched leg-break to Mark Tranter at cover. Lethal trapped Waratahs skipper Steve Wilson in front in the next over, 5-76 with Mark Vallette joining the dangerous Nick “Garlo” Garling at the crease.

I thoroughly enjoyed my battle with Garlo, and here I will indulge in a detailed account of same. “Garlo’s not here for a cup of tea” explained the skip, as we sent men out to his traditional hitting zones, and sure enough a slower flighted top-spinner lured him into a lofted drive to long-on: unfortunately the white ball disappeared into the white clouds, leaving the unsighted fielder with too much to do and the catch went down. I pinned him plum in front shortly after as he tried to hoick the slider, but my vociferous appeal went unanswered despite my prior efforts to suck up to the ump (bloody Queenslander!). He then bunted one back to me and took off with a loud “yes” that absolutely barbecued Will Hudson, top edged a slog sweep that fell between bowler and keeper, and finally top-edged another slog sweep into the keepers gloves. It would be fair but immodest to say that I tied him in knots to such an extent he was constipated for a week afterwards, so I won’t point that out here.

At the other end the rocks and diamonds bowling of Lethal Stephenson put the icing on the cake as wickets and boundaries came at a similar rate, and the Waratahs were well beaten at 113 all out inside 32 overs.

All in all, a great tournament for the Kangaroos, Div 2 champions of the WORRRRLLLLD!; for NSW in general with 9 wins from 12 games; and for me personally as I picked up 5 wickets at 11.8 and bowled with good control (mostly!), conceding just one boundary in 20 overs. In summary, I had a great time with a great bunch of blokes, veterans cricket absolutely ROCKS, HUGE thank you to all the dedicated hardworking blokes who make these tournaments happen, the end.

Scorecards here:

<https://www.playhq.com/cricket-australia/org/veterans-cricket-australia/summer-202324/o55-national-veterans-cricket-championship-division-2/53d5126f>