



Future developments in 3rd and 4th XI cricket

There has been much discussion over time of changes to the structure and format of cricket at these levels, but other than the introduction of the regional divisions in 2016 not a lot of actual change has taken place. In terms of format (ie, length of game and timed v overs games) discussions with captains in 2016 did not suggest any clear consensus for change and the Executive Committee will not bring forward any proposals for 2018, but would be open to looking at options for 2019 if there was evidence of a renewed appetite for change.

So far as structural change is concerned it is too late to do anything for 2018 as we are already embarking on fixture production using the existing model. Any changes which are favoured in principle can be discussed and refined over a period to be agreed in time to take effect in 2019. Since the 4th XI League has become fully established there has been a conscious effort to manage comings and goings in and out of that and the 3rd XI league so as to sustain 10-team divisions and an 18-match season to mirror 1st and 2nd XI cricket.

The main issues for consideration are:

Size of divisions: Some clubs have suggested that we should move to smaller divisions (probably of 8 teams giving 14 matches). This could be across the board for 3rd and 4th teams, or just for 4th teams, or with a mix of 8 and 10 team divisions according to club preferences. We could, however, only proceed with the second or third of those if the fixture programme can be made to work with divisions of differing sizes. The attraction (for some clubs) would be a shorter league season, avoiding early- and/or late-season problems with availability. Smaller divisions also potentially make it easier to flex the total number of teams and make it easier to take in new teams (there are several on the waiting list for the 4th XI league) compared with now. A drawback of smaller divisions is that if a club regularly fails to get a team out, the number of matches for others might fall from 14 to 12 or fewer.

A single structure for all 3rd and 4th XIs: This system operates in a number of leagues and could provide teams with a better chance of playing opposition of a similar standard with the stronger 4th XIs engaging 3rd XI opposition. In principle it could be introduced in tandem with changes to divisional sizes but that would risk biting off more than we could chew and this might be an either/or at least until the first change had bedded in.

Regionalisation: In county-wide divisions teams can obviously travel a long way to play certain fixtures. This may help create a more even standard within a division but when many players say they struggle to find the time to play at all, is it sensible to require them to give up two hours or more just travelling to and from a game? That said, clubs have not seemed to want more regionalisation and there has been at least one request to reduce it by having only two 3rd XI regional divisions and a county-wide division 3. Whatever view prevails any of the above change options would need to take account of how regionalisation should apply.

The intention at this stage is to promote further debate about the future of 3rd and 4th XI cricket and to establish whether it is worth working on a detailed proposal. What we must accept is that the world is not waiting for the Surrey Championship. We know some clubs are looking at alternative options for their lower XIs and that T20 cricket on Saturday afternoons is among the ideas circulating. Like it or not this is a proposition whose time may soon arrive.