

# THE FUTURE FOR RECREATIONAL CRICKET?

*Tristram Murphy reviews the current status of recreational cricket in England and Wales and identifies a number of radical major reforms to both the Governing Body's national management and local administrative structures that need to be implemented as a matter of urgency to safe-guard its future*

## Introduction

In many ways cricket is a victim of its own longevity; the fragmentation of the administration of the game continues to cause severe problems with necessary change and reform being held hostage to a minority of vested interests. The creation of the England & Wales Cricket Board (ECB) in 1997 was long overdue, but the necessary reforms were hampered by restrictions imposed by the minority who controlled the purse-strings and placed self-interest before the ultimate good of the game. Most would agree that the structure of County Boards reporting to the ECB was right; however the draft County Board Constitutions imposed by the then new National Governing Body have since proved to be not only undemocratic and virtually unworkable, but also to have created feelings of profound frustration and distrust throughout the recreational game; particularly at grass-roots levels.

Wholesale reform of the structure and governance of the game - particularly the recreational game - is long overdue and, with the current accountabilities imposed by such outside agencies as BSKyB, the ICC, the IPL etc., now essential.

The nature and implementation of practices relating to child welfare, discipline, club accreditation, restrictive TV rights and financial governance - together with the implications of the ECB's 'Whole Sport Plan' - reinforce the need for an urgent root and branch overhaul and total 'top-down' re-structuring of the ECB.

A code of conduct for all areas of the game, from the smallest village club to the national team must be an aspiration for all cricket and cricketers throughout England and Wales; indeed, throughout the United Kingdom. Such an aspiration will require a willingness to accept change at all levels and in every aspect of the game; not least in the way it is administered, controlled, financed and promoted. Such change will take time, but a degree of urgency is now required in view of the numerous funding, disciplinary and child welfare issues that are currently so topical.

## The Current Position in England & Wales – the ECB

As the National Governing Body of Cricket in England and Wales, the ECB *should* be the principal policy-maker providing strategic, innovative, leadership and direction for both professional AND non-professional cricket through numerous initiatives including, for example, the National Academy; Coach and player education, development, mentoring and monitoring; the pro-active 'level-playing-field' development and support of recreational clubs and club cricket at all levels; and young player welfare/protection; as well as professional administration and technical expertise.

Unfortunately, because the England & Wales Cricket Board is not a 'National Governing Body' in a similar mould to the more democratically-structured RFU and the FA, with a clearly defined remit and authority that embraces total accountability across the whole spectrum of the sport from primary schools to professionals -

including, for example, the even-handed budgeting, allocation and distribution of funding from central income; the implementation and regular review of the rules and regulations for clubs' membership/affiliations/League participation; the setting and even-handed enforcement of nationally consistent codes of conduct and disciplinary procedures for ALL clubs and players; the education, professional qualification, development, grading, registration and appointment of Umpires and Scorers at ALL levels; match and competition regulations, Laws changes *et al* - it is perceived by the vast majority of the country's recreational cricket clubs and leagues as being a *de facto* private members' club 'managed' by a small, self-perpetuating, coterie (formerly the First Class Forum) comprised of the 18 First Class County Cricket Clubs' Chief Executives who are interested only in, and accountable only to, the First Class (professional) game (i.e. themselves); to the demonstrable detriment of non-professional, recreational club, league, school/junior/youth and women's cricket; and cricket for those with disabilities.

Their decision to continue to deprive terrestrial television of cricket by renewing their exclusive media rights contract with BSkyB for a further 4 years for £300,000,000 - *a sum that does not include any quantified 'ring-fenced' funding allocation for the development of recreational cricket (with the exception of certain favoured 'Focus Clubs') during that period* - has only served to compound the feelings of deep frustration, remoteness, and resentment felt by the vast majority of administrators of grass roots cricket.

Since the creation of the ECB in 1997, the climate and culture within cricket has changed. It has changed to the extent that it has now become an imperative for the Chief Executives of the 18 First Class Counties to relinquish their iron grip over all aspects of the ECB's income and expenditure (including Sport England/National Lottery funding, commercial sponsorships *et al*), administration and activities of the ECB. It is wholly unacceptable and corrosive, not to say potentially corrupting, that 38 private members' clubs should be able/permitted to exercise the degree of absolute control that they currently hold over the game of cricket throughout England and Wales.

Whilst, clearly, it is unrealistic in the short term to expect the First Class County Clubs to relinquish their total domination over the (mis)management and finances of the game, nonetheless the urgent and desperate need for a substantially increased **direct** investment by the ECB in recreational and grass-roots cricket to enable it to survive - *a requirement amounting to a minimum of 20% of the ECB's total annual income from all sources, **in addition** to ECB Trust (formerly the Cricket Foundation) grants made via the County Boards* - needs to be continually and very publicly campaigned for.

### The Current Position in England and Wales – The County Boards

The County Boards are responsible for the day-to-day organisation/administration of recreational 'grass-roots' cricket and the implementation of ECB policies and 'development' programmes at local levels throughout England and Wales; including, now, the activities of the plethora of newly-created local Associations of Cricket Officials (ACOs) that are responsible for 'training' and appointing umpires for the recreational game; a responsibility that the County Boards are manifestly ill-equipped to undertake.

Because of the widely varying levels of income, investment and resources that they receive, or to which they have access, the standards of administrative efficiency vary

considerably from County Board to County Board; i.e. from absolutely dire to very good. The original draft constitutions drawn up by the ECB handed control of the 38 County Boards to the 20 First Class County Cricket Clubs (FCCC) thus enabling the FCCC Chairmen/Chief Executives to assume and exercise tight control over their structure, activities and funding with the result that most are equally as undemocratic and remote as the FCCCs and the National Governing Body; fuelling still further the feelings of frustration and distrust felt by local recreational cricket administrators and organisers.

There is a demonstrable need - and an overwhelming case to be made - for all County Boards to be democratised and re-structured into a nationally consistent format with a full time, paid, Secretariat and to be genuinely independent of the First Class County Cricket Clubs. Grassroots confidence and trust needs to be restored and all those involved in the organisation of recreational cricket within the bailiwick of the County Board should have both the right and opportunity of input into their Board's activities. In addition, all affiliated clubs should have the right to elect the Chairmen and members of the Management Committee and sub-Committees of their respective County Boards.

It is very apparent that not all County Boards are delivering the service that the clubs they are supposed to be supporting have a right to expect and deserve. Nor, with the now added burden of the ECB's Child Welfare Policy and the requirements for CRB Enhanced Disclosure Certificates expanding - not to mention the onerous new Licensing Laws relating to recreational sports clubs - is this situation likely to improve.

Cricket Development Officers - some of whom are paid direct by First Class County Cricket Clubs, others by the ECB - are now being asked to get involved in issues that stray way beyond the boundaries of cricket development into administration efficiency, club and league development, club accreditation, club and league politics, finance procurement etc.

It is, therefore, time to establish a consistent paid Secretariat structure within each of the 38 County Boards. The funding and financial structure of each Board also needs to be addressed because the health and future of recreational cricket is approaching crisis point and some hard decisions have to be made. The ECB's 18-man Management Committee, sycophantically and myopically supported by the Minor Counties, has not enamoured itself to grass-roots cricket administrators with the number of harsh year-on-year budget cut-backs - unmatched and unreciprocated in the budgets for the First Class game - they have imposed on recreational cricket over the past 2-3 years. Cricket, as a whole, has now reached the point where some wholesale fresh thinking is required.

### Looking to the Future

Discipline across the whole spectrum of cricket requires one code. A sanction or penalty imposed on a player, irrespective of that player's status or position within the game, be he/she professional or amateur, should be consistent and apply equally and even-handedly cross ALL levels of the game throughout the country. The "*Spirit of Cricket*" is now enshrined as an integral part of the Laws, but it is questionable as to whether or not this is sufficient, legally, to enforce the same control over all players. Consider the recent case of a professional player banned from the First Class game for a drugs offence. It was ruled on his behalf that because ..."*professional cricketers play under different rules and regulations (sic)*"..., he must

be allowed to continue playing in the recreational game, e.g. in non-professional League cricket; thus demonstrating that the “*Spirit of Cricket*” alone is neither adequate, nor sufficiently robust, to ensure the imposition of a total ban from all cricket on such players.

The National Player Registration System must be the starting point for better control of discipline. However, the ECB’s Child Welfare Policy, with all its implications, requires a national registration system that extends beyond just the players and umpires and scorers to the creation and maintenance of a central database of all those who are actively involved in the organisation and administration of each aspect of the game.

A simultaneous requirement is the laying down of national disciplinary protocols for both the ECB itself AND the County Boards. Society today is becoming increasingly litigious, with the American ‘*no win, no fee*’ approach to making claims, however flimsily based, becoming more and more common. There have been a number of reported instances over recent seasons where ‘aggrieved’ - i.e. ‘defendant’ - players reported for misconduct have refused to accept the penalties or sanctions imposed on them by their local Club, League, or other, Disciplinary Panels and have appealed over the heads of these bodies to either their local County Board or to the ECB direct.

Such a flawed system is wholly unsatisfactory in maintaining consistency in good order and discipline. Leagues (and clubs) should conduct disciplinary matters locally in accordance with nationally consistent rules, regulations and procedures and the tenets of natural justice. Providing these rules and regulations have been properly drafted and implemented, all/any appeals should stop with the League or club, and the players should not have recourse to any other outside body. County Boards and the ECB should only become involved to the extent of ensuring that the proper laid down procedures have been followed; not in re-hearing individual cases.

For its part, Onside Cricket Limited (OSCL) remains committed to wanting to work with and alongside the hardworking members of staff of the ECB’s Recreational Cricket Development Department, most of whom are expected to implement policies and fulfil their responsibilities towards the development of grass roots recreational cricket whilst having both hands tied behind their backs by the 18 First Class County Chief Executives (aka the ‘Management Committee’) who give them neither the necessary assured budget, adequate funding resources, nor the authority they need to enable them to fulfil their role as effectively as they, themselves, would wish.

[\\*If you have any comments on this article that you would like to express and to have published on this website, please email them to: \*\*Tristram Murphy\*\* at \[communitycricket@btinternet.com\]\(mailto:communitycricket@btinternet.com\). \(Note: Anonymous comments will not be published\).](#)