

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

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Now we are into the cricket season that never was...the pandemic season of 2020...it is appropriate to offer you the tale of the match that never was.

It was inspired once again by that master of comic cricket-writing, Herbert Farjeon, who introduced the world to the inimitable rivalry of the two English villages Herecombe and Therecombe. Farjeon explored the extent of the Laws of Cricket as understood by village cricketers and umpires. I am merely bringing it into a school setting and into the modern era.... and adding a few personal flourishes. If you think that I have misread or misinterpreted the Laws, let me know – in the interests of historic verisimilitude.

It is a great tale....I can claim that because I do not claim its origin.

That's Not Cricket

We all know that schools, like any other institution, have to follow the common law, statutory law, regulations, local by-laws and statutory guidance. But to comply fully with all the law that guides and regulates our national life we must also observe the rules of societies, associations and clubs to which we belong. That includes games and sports, not least cricket, whose ancient eighteenth century Laws (by tradition always a capital L, by the way) have led the way in regulating sport and baffling the non-English-speaking world.

Both pupils and parents at Much Knowing Primary Academy consider that they can bring the Laws to their aid when necessary. This belief was tested at the summer term's annual Parents (mothers as well as fathers) v Pupils match.

This year's match was already a needle match before it even started. The school team had never won for the past thirty years – but all that was before the school became a Business and Law academy. Things were different now, vowed the school captain, 11 year old Noel Wisden.

Despite his name he was not a scion of the great Wisden cricketing dynasty, but nevertheless gobbled up everything in that family's annual Cricketers Almanack, as well as being an avid devourer of tales of great legal victories in courts and tribunals.. Noel was determined to be the first winner for many a long year – at all costs – and reckoned that he had the litigious nous to stretch the Laws to his advantage, even if his team could not match the parents in the simple arts of batting and bowling.



But on the other hand, the opposing captain of the Mothers and Fathers team was Noel's dad, Norman Wisden - a barrister and aspiring judge, who brought to his cricket the jaw-thrusting resolve and devious subtlety that marked his practice at the bar.

Norman was not going to be the first parent captain to lose the annual match for many a long year, oh no, not even if it meant a lot of kudos for his son to win. Not striving to win by all possible means was unthinkable to Norman - a stubbornness he had passed on to his son.

And so, all it needed was fate to take a hand once the senior umpire, deputy head Mr. Augustus Agnew, had called 'play'.

The gods immediately threw their weight behind the school team. The parents, by convention, always batted first, and the very first ball, bowled by Wisden Junior to the opposing captain - by happenchance his father - was hurled with all the power a pumped-up eleven-year old can muster. It flew at a full length but somewhat wide of the off-side. Father Wisden watched it carefully, but not carefully enough. The bright red ball hit a pebble on the edge of the pitch, shot off sideways towards square-leg, and narrowly avoided father Wisden's nose on the way. Norman eyed the ball in disbelief, put his hands on his hips, shook his head and muttered audibly, *'Well, I declare!'*

Quick as a flash, Wisden Junior turned to umpire Agnew and cried. *'You heard that, sir. He's declared! It's our turn to bat!'*

'Oh dear!' replied Mr. Agnew. *'Oh dear, oh dear. I don't think he meant to declare, you know.'*

Quick as another flash young Wisden replied. *'There's nothing in the Laws about intention, sir. A declaration is a declaration.'*

He swivelled towards his father and pointed a finger. *'Isn't that so, dad?'*

His father was too astonished to answer immediately. His mouth kept opening and shutting *'like an expectant frog'* as young Wisden described it later on to his mother.

At that point umpire Agnew surprised even himself by making a sort of decision.

'The umpires will have to consult,' he announced.

And so, for fully fifteen minutes Mr. Agnew and fellow umpire, Mr. Boycott, the local bookmaker, poured over the Laws of Cricket, rubbed chins, wrung hands and shook heads. Finally their verdict was that whether or not inadvertently, the Parents captain had actually declared. There seemed to be no provision in the Laws for the captain to change his mind or deny he ever did it. The Parent's innings was closed. That was that.

The only consolation was that the Parents XI had scored one run, a 'wide ball'.

Noel and his school team were wild with excitement. This was it. Victory in sight - at last!

But father Norman was also an aficionado of cricket law, and a brilliant interpreter and manipulator of all law. His brain whirred; his eyes narrowed. He saw a winnable fight ahead. So, he mustered his team-mates behind a closed changing-room door and spent the interval between innings advising his team on Wisden and the Laws of Cricket, and recalling the advice of those ancient luminaries, Neville Cardus, Herbert Farjeon and Brian Johnston on the tactics that should be employed when backs were against the wall.

Thus, when the Parents went out to field, instead of asking club cricketer, Bert Statham, to open the bowling, the ball was given to Shane Wilson, the local over-40s cross-country champion.

Umpire Boycott, now at the bowler's end, called '*Play*' and Shane set off towards the wicket. But instead of delivering the ball at the crease he turned sharp right and ran off to the boundary and started to run around the field. He kept going, not once but twice, and as he set off on his third circuit school captain Noel, who, of course, was opening batsman as well as opening bowler for the school, protested to the umpires.

'That's cheating, sir, or time-wasting, or both. It's not right!,' cried the young captain.

The umpires again consulted – as Shane entered his fourth circuit. Despite an extensive trawl of the Laws they could find no restriction on the length of a bowler's run-up unless such a restriction had been agreed beforehand. Norman and the rest of the parents' team lay down contentedly on the grass while Shane trotted on.

Noel and fellow opener, Bill Mann (nicknamed 'Brad') met in the middle of the pitch for a pow-wow.

'I think I've got the answer,' said Noel, now calmer, to the umpires. *'You must invoke Law 42.9 covering unfair play by the fielding side. They are deliberately slowing the game down. Do your duty, sirs.'*

The umpires conferred and readily agreed. They declared that ball was dead, and the bowler should be punished.

'You must now put on another bowler,' they told Wisden Senior.

'OK,' replied Norman. *'We have another long-distance runner. She can take over.'*

'Oh dear,' muttered Mr. Agnew in some despair, *'Do you have to?'*

'We certainly do,' replied father Wisden. *'Every game should be played by the rules. That is all we are doing.'*

'Well,' said Umpire Agnew, prompted by Wisden Junior, *'In that case Law 42 says that if you persist in time-wasting we will have to abandon the game and inform the Executive covering your game, which I suppose is the school Board of Trustees.'*

Norman shrugged his shoulders. *'Suits us. Go ahead. Cecilia Trueman has started her run up over there by the sight-screen.'*

At this point son Noel piped up from the batsman's end. *'You can abandon a match in the middle of an over, sir, but you cannot abandon a match in the middle of a bowler's run-up.'*

'Oh dear,' repeated Mr. Agnew, *'Oh dear, oh dear.'*

He and Mr Boycott met again, consulted their battered Laws of Cricket once more, and agreed that while the umpires can abandon a match in the middle of an over, they could not stop it in the middle of a ball being bowled. The ball had to be bowled. There was no other way out.

And so, in the gathering gloom, champion long-distance runner, and mother of three, Cecilia Trueman prepared to make history. When accepting the role as first-change bowler she had never expected she would actually have to bowl the ball, and did not actually know how to. She had never bowled a cricket ball in her life. So she trudged up to the wicket and threw the ball underarm with all her might, but with her elbow illegally bent.

'No Ball!' cried umpire Agnew quick as a flash, as the ball trickled past batsman Noel (who could not see it), past the wickets and into the wicket-keeper's gloves.

'Match tied, one run each,' declared Agnew, quickly drawing stumps and marching off to the pavilion.

And so, the only game in history to end in a one-all tie without a single ball being officially bowled was completed. Just a wide and a no-ball scored. No skill needed, but a whole afternoon of exquisite pleasure in the Laws and strategy of the beautiful game - enjoyed by all - except the Head, who had long since retired to his study couch with a cold poultice.

With due acknowledgement to Herbert Farjeon, Wisden's Almanack, Wilson of the 'Wizard', Alf Tupper of the 'Rover', the interpreters of English civil law and the drafters of the Laws of Cricket.
