



# Leicestershire's tigers

DARREN MADDY, JAMES WHITAKER AND PAUL NIXON RECALL THE 1996 AND '98 TITLES IN THE COMPANY OF JEREMY BLACKMORE

If Leicester City's shock Premier League title in 2015/16 shook the footballing world, they were perhaps following an earlier precedent set by the county's cricket team.

For few teams could have staged the recovery Leicestershire did in the 1990s after losing seven England Test players in just three years, including their captain, the charismatic David Gower.

Yet such was the transformation, that the Foxes went from rank outsiders, narrowly avoiding the wooden spoon in 1991, to winning the Championship just five years later in 1996 and again in 1998.

As Darren Maddy, one of the youngsters who was part of the rebuilding, says: "Let's be honest, we were a small club, we had no superstars. Some of us weren't even recognised around the circuit."

It was James Whitaker who would lead this side to Championship glory, a shrewd, innovative captain who encouraged his team to enjoy their cricket while espousing new techniques in preparation and team building.

But, says Whitaker, it was his predecessor Nigel Briers, who took over from Gower, who laid the foundations for success.

A sergeant major-style leader, Briers instilled a strong sense of discipline. He was Nasser Hussain to Whitaker's Michael Vaughan, says wicketkeeper Paul Nixon.

The club, under pioneering secretary Mike Turner and later chief executive David Collier, set about the unenviable task of rebuilding. Australian Bobby Simpson served as coach at the start of the decade,

**ABOVE**  
The Championship celebrations in 1996

**BELOW**  
James Whitaker lifts the trophy



bringing a fresh energy and attention to detail, before Jack Birkenshaw took over in 1992.

As a non-Test-hosting club with a limited budget, they built a new squad around local youngsters like Maddy and players who were unable to command a first-team place at other counties.

Briers and Birkenshaw set about forging this disparate group into a unified, hardworking unit.

"We had a great spirit because we'd come through together as youngsters," says Nixon. "So, we'd had fun as young players on and off the field together. We brought that energy.

"Nigel created the discipline; James was a very astute captain. The whole culture of the club had a massive change and as young guys together we helped drive that culture forward.

"Jack was a wise old owl. He was a brilliant manager. He made everybody feel relaxed and play for the badge. He's a great people person. He keeps you very simple. He enjoyed us having fun together as a group and brought the young lads through at the right time."

Such was the rapid progress in 1992 that by mid-season, they were challenging for the title and beat champions Essex. Pace bowler David Millns took eight wickets in the process to become the leading English wicket-taker.

Cruelly, their hopes were dashed when Millns broke his foot (missing out on a likely Test cap) and, amid mounting injury woes, the Foxes were unable to sustain their challenge. Jonathan Agnew even came out of retirement to help his former county reach their first 60-over Lord's final, which they ultimately lost to Northamptonshire.

ROSS KINNAIRD/MIKE FINN-KELCEY/ALLSPORT/GETTY IMAGES

The towering figure of West Indian allrounder Phil Simmons was the common denominator in the success that followed. In his three seasons at the club, Leicestershire would finish second, first and first.

The athletic, big-hitting Trinidadian was an attacking top-order batsman and seam bowler with a point to prove to the West Indies selectors. He gave his teammates an immediate taste of his powerful strokeplay on his Championship debut in 1994 when he clubbed 261 to set up a 10-wicket victory.

Maddy recalls: "I was watching this colossus of a man smash the Northants attack all over. He was a brilliant opening batsman, so aggressive. I'd never seen anyone hit the ball so hard.

"Not only that, he was a typical West Indian fast bowler, he was slippery, he was quick and had this knack of taking wickets whenever he came onto bowl. And he took the most amazing, spectacular slip catches.

"His presence really lifted everybody. He was just so influential. He was just a man-giant in a way that everybody looked up to and opposition feared. He was a game changer."

Whitaker rues a pivotal, lost chance against eventual champions Warwickshire at Edgbaston that season. Brian Lara scored a century in both innings and ensured that the Bears held out for a draw, seven wickets down. It was a sign though, he says, that the foundations were in place.

Hansie Cronje's influence as overseas pro in 1995 had a crucial impact on the batsmen. Millns noticed the difference the South African skipper made.

"Before Hansie arrived, they were a little bit stoic, a

little bit: grind it out, don't lose your wicket. People didn't really use their feet to the spinners.

"Hansie almost took the shackles off these young players and encouraged them to express themselves. That showed through when we got to 1996. People came with a different attitude, where they came to impose themselves in the middle, have presence."

However, the portents were not promising heading into 1996. A knee injury to Briers ruled him out for the entire season. He would not play again.

The team had benefited from his regimented leadership which instilled good habits and a strong work ethic, says Maddy. It allowed Whitaker to take a calmer, more relaxed approach to the captaincy.

"When James became captain, he allowed the players to express themselves a little bit more. He was very good at including and listening to everybody. He made everybody feel like they owned a piece of it, they were responsible for the team.

"We were a team ready to burst with those young players, that mixture of youth and experience. It just all came together. We all had the same cause. And Phil brought this sense of belief that we can actually win this."

Birkenshaw and Whitaker took a new approach to preparation. Realising the team always felt more at home at a new venue the second day that they were there, they made sure they arrived early to acclimatise.

Whitaker explains: "It was trying to be as prepared as we could be within the fact that we were playing all the time. Trying to create a new feeling. Each game was a separate entity and there had to be a starting point. We made that starting point the afternoon before the game

**BELOW**  
Clockwise from left: the Leicestershire huddle (imitated by the umpires); Vince Wells takes the wicket of Middlesex's Keith Dutch; Darren Maddy batting in 2000



**'We created a Leicester huddle before any other sports team, making sure that everybody's in together. It was very much an honest, open culture'**





**ABOVE**  
Phil Simmons  
(left) and David  
Millns during the  
Championship-  
winning match  
against Middlesex,  
September 1996

**BELOW**  
Paul Nixon in 1998



home or away.

"We had some skilful players. We tried to encourage that skill to flourish by having an enjoyable atmosphere, by being prepared, and encouraging them to be themselves."

Preparation extended too to 'centring' as Whitaker called it where the team took time to visualise how they wanted the day to go. It made a huge impression on Maddy as a junior player.

"It really felt like everybody was buying into it. As a young player, if you see all of these senior figures buying into it, you think, I want to be part of this, it must work and you believe in it yourself. Of course, when you feel like things like this are helping and you believe in it, it's amazing the energy and the momentum that it creates."

Another innovation helped forge togetherness, says Nixon: "We created a Leicester huddle before any other sports team, making sure that everybody's in together. It was very much an honest, open culture."

By 1996, Leicestershire's trio of leading seam bowlers, Millns, Alan Mullally and Gordon Parsons, were experienced campaigners and knew their games. Whitaker asked them what they needed from him.

Millns had started his career at Nottinghamshire where he saw Richard Hadlee eschew net bowling in favour of a gentle warm-up at 10.10am.

"Hadlee's total philosophy was that if I need to work that hard at nets on game morning, I've not done my preparation right," remembers Millns. "All the petrol I've got, I want to use it on the field. So, James asked the question, and we said, look, we don't want to be out there at 9.30 bowling at the lads in the nets, simple as that."

"If we are out of nick, we'll work very hard in the nets to get ourselves back in nick because we know what we're doing. So, he trusted us to do it. He'd put little incentives in there as well. I want to win the toss and bowl them out and then tomorrow morning, you can have your feet up."

"He was good. He used to drive Jack Birkenshaw up the wall. Jack was very much old school. Nets, nets, nets, nets! But people don't know how hard it is to be a seam bowler in this country. You're in a lot of pain a lot of the time."

With such careful preparation, looking after the quick bowlers, and a professional approach to fitness, they fielded only 13 players in the Championship all season. Only Mullally missed extended periods on England duty. It further strengthened the closeness of the squad.

Whitaker also reshuffled his batting order to maximum effect, allowing him to set commanding totals and apply scorecard pressure.

Vince Wells, who had signed from Kent, moved up to open with Maddy, followed by Ben Smith, Whitaker, Simmons and Aftab Habib, who had joined from Middlesex.

With both openers and Simmons bowling seam, and Nixon a more than capable batsman, the new line-up offered plenty of balance. Millns too had worked hard on his batting and scored his maiden first-class hundred against Essex at Grace Road in a match where he also claimed 10 wickets.

Wells was another attacking batsman in Simmons' mould who could also bowl seam and swing the ball and was a brilliant fielder.

Nixon recalls: "Vince played very positively, got us off to some flying starts, always took wickets with his first over with the ball. He just had this knack. We used to call him 'Both'. He was our little Botham."

Says Whitaker: "Vince Wells was a superb allrounder. He kind of sums up what the team was about. Whereas previously he was just averaging 25-30 with the bat, suddenly he was averaging late 40s and putting in fantastic bowling spells."

The opening day at Derby was an inauspicious start.

Kim Barnett hit 200 not out but the Foxes turned it around and won inside three playing days. Millns and Mullally shared all 10 second-innings wickets as Derbyshire were skittled for 89.

Says Maddy: "That confirmed the belief that everything that we'd done previously was going to work. I can't ever really remember thinking we're not going to win that year."

Six of Leicestershire's 10 victories were by an innings. Whitaker encouraged players to cash in if they got a decent start. The top eight all reached three figures at some point, scoring 19 hundreds, eight of them in excess of 150.

Their highest total came after their only defeat at The

Oval. Regrouping at Bradford Park Avenue in late June, they righted the ship and beat Yorkshire by an innings, the first of four wins in a row. Batting first, they posted a monumental 681 for 7 before declaring. Wells and Whitaker both made double-centuries.

The captain recalls being heckled at tea-time: "I was walking around the boundary, and one of the Yorkshire fans said, 'Whitaker, you're killing the game! Declare!' That was an old legacy of three-day cricket. Really, four-day cricket was a long time. So, we went big because people took responsibility for their performance."

It gave the bowlers time to recharge and allowed Millns and Mullally to bowl at full tilt, backed up by the ever-reliable Parsons who was also on hand to offer advice and a sounding board for his fellow seamers.

Says Maddy: "Gordon Parsons was Mr County Cricket. His overs were priceless. Most teams would give anything for someone who would just run in all day, bowl long spells, 20-30 overs in the day, and just hit a length every ball."

Spinner Adrian Pierson, who had joined from Cambridgeshire, was the unsung hero that year, says Millns. With a tall action, he offered good drift, turn and bounce. He would shore up an end and control the run-rate, while being able to bowl teams out in the second innings.

Leicestershire won three games on the bounce in late season before their final game against Middlesex at Grace Road. Surrey were the only side still able to catch them.

Checking the Surrey score, Millns tuned his radio to BBC Five Live at tea-time on day three, where, fittingly, Agnew broke the news that the Championship pennant was heading to Leicester. Celebrations began with the crowd congregating outside, joining in the singing and dancing.

Nixon sums up their success: "It was a really special achievement from a non-Test ground with small budgets. It's a true marathon. We were just delighted that we'd finally got there. It was a lot of pain and discipline, ups and downs."

A small crowd soon grew in number as the evening wore on. Maddy recalls an electric atmosphere.

"It was relief. We all helped each other through those real difficult times where the energy levels were running out and it's one more big push. We were exhausted mentally and physically."

## 'As a young player, if you see all of these senior figures buying into it, you think, I want to be part of this, it must work and you believe in it yourself'

As Leicestershire were crowned champions, Maddy was awarded his county cap on the field.

"I'm a Leicester boy. I spent all my boyhood years in the indoor nets. I'd scored my first Championship ton. I'd been part of a team that had won the County Championship. It hadn't been done for over 20 years.


"There's a generation of very good Leicestershire players who hadn't had that opportunity. So, I felt extremely privileged and lucky to be part of this, in what was my first full season."

With a huge amount of confidence and belief, they headed into 1997 only to have a third of the season washed out by persistent rain. One debutant that year was a 21-year old local batsman who bowled a bit of seam: Darren Stevens.

Simmons returned in 1998, as did Chris Lewis. They were without their injured captain, however. Whitaker played just one game all year but was determined to travel with his team. Lewis led the team on the field initially and combined with Wells to chase down an improbable 204 in 20 overs against Northants. That victory proved a catalyst and they won the final six games under Simmons' captaincy.

The bowling attack was formidable, says Millns: "One of the West Indians playing county cricket said, 'We don't face this in Test cricket where you've got four quicks coming at you'."

The season culminated at The Oval in a televised game against a star-studded Surrey side who needed to win to take the Championship. Leicestershire racked up 585 for 6 declared. By the close of day two Surrey were 13 for 4 and never recovered. The Foxes won, yet again, by an innings.

Whitaker sums up the collective effort: "People were prepared to help others. There was a lot of camaraderie, a lot of energy. We were riding the crest of a wave, enjoying ourselves, being positive, prepared, disciplined and looking forward to get to the ground every day." 

**BELOW**  
Chris Lewis celebrates a wicket against Surrey, in the match that clinched the 1998 title (left); Simmons sprays the bubbly

