



**Top guns: Henley won their sixth Home Counties League title in 2017**

# HENLEY RIDE ON THE CREST OF A WAVE...

James Ayles discovers the secret behind the Oxfordshire club's rapid rise to the top

**W**hen club chairman Brian Kenworthy joined Henley Cricket Club in 1984, the Oxfordshire outfit had just one team and played no league cricket.

Yet just 30 years on from first entering a Saturday league, the club were once again crowned Home Counties Premier Cricket League Division 1 champions in 2017.

Now running three Saturday sides, a Sunday side, a ladies' side, three girls' sides and a dozen junior sides with over 200 players and a thriving social section, the club have established themselves as one of England's most prominent amateur teams.

Having witnessed the rise through the Three Counties League and Cherwell Leagues, Kenworthy expressed his pride at the club's progress.

He said: "The transformation in such a short time is absolutely amazing, and I am really proud of the club for where we are now."

"The players on the field and everybody on the committee has done so much hard work

"I give all the credit to the people who do the hard work to get the cricket on the field.

"I'm proud to have played a small part in the last 30 years."

Having won their sixth title in 2017, Henley are this season hoping to draw level with rivals High Wycombe, who have seven league victories to their name.

He added: "It would be fantastic if

we could equal it but the guys just want to go out and win.

"There's been 18 seasons in the league, and 13 times it has been won by either High Wycombe or Henley. It is quite a record.

"If they can express themselves and play well, they can catch them.

"We don't take anything for granted.

"It was great we won it last year but it will be a great tussle to try and keep hold of it this year."

On the field, Henley continue to progress, and next season will enter a team into the ECB U19 Club t20 competition for the first time.

Kenworthy believes this is a great opportunity for the club to recruit more state-school players into their ranks.

"We have an initiative this year with Henley College and we have been able to recruit four or five lads from there who are new to our club and who will play in that competition this year.

"If they enjoy it they may hopefully come and play more regular cricket with the club.

"We hope we can do it year on year and build links with the college in particular."

Kenworthy is also eager to dispel the notion of Henley as a financially well-off club, highlighting the club volunteers and their fundraising efforts.

Over the years, this has seen the



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club earn council loans and ECB grants to fund work on the pavilion, as well as coaching schemes in the community.

Kenworthy said: "There is a perception that Henley is a wealthy club but it isn't really so we can't just buy our way to success.

"We have to develop talent here. We are not blessed with a wealthy benefactor, we just have to be very active in the fundraising arena.

"We've got a very active committee and some very good people who work tirelessly running two or three fundraising activities every year to raise the money to help pay back the loans from the local council."

Kenworthy also pointed to the success of young players coming through at the club.

Club players Jack Davies and Euan Woods were both selected for the England under-19 World Cup squad last year, and Kenworthy believes there are more talented youngsters at the club ready to follow in their footsteps.

He said: "We've still got more young players coming through who have great potential. We want to help them develop and become the best they can be.

"It is all about fostering young talent and we have got a number of Berkshire players who started by playing youth cricket for Henley so it is quite nice when you see that development process.

In a bid to clear the pathway for young players, the club recently stopped using an overseas players.

Kenworthy said: "Through our early development period when an overseas knocked on the door we took them to strengthen the team

"We took the decision a few years ago to say actually we are taking in and developing home-grown talent now."

# Support keep us



Alex Narey goes back to school to catch up with former England fast bowler, Dean Headley

**I**'ve often wondered about cricketers and retirement. For many, the road remains a steady line where benefit years are ticked off and emotional farewells planned. You see those players every year, afforded the luxury of one final goodbye – a doff of one's cap here and a raise of the bat there.

But even when you see it coming, leaving something you love is seldom painless. So just how did Dean Headley deal with playing his final First-Class game at the age of 29, arguably during the peak years for a fast bowler and little more than 12 months after propelling himself into the international spotlight as one of England's most consistent and dedicated performers.

"Forced retirement," Headley tells me. "I went into a design and print company, which evolved into a newspaper group which I was a development director of. But it got to the stage where I didn't want to go to work.

"When I got to about 38, I realised I wasn't right when I finished playing. I wasn't depressed, but the human element tells you someone has taken away what you love, and I couldn't be near the game. I didn't go anywhere near a cricket field for four years."

Headley played his final First-Class match, in an England shirt no less, during the South Africa tour of 1999/2000. An incisive seamer with an energetic run-up, he would attack the crease before uncoiling to find, at times, lavish movement away from the right-hander. He had built a fine reputation in county cricket with Kent as a canny operator who was capable of match-turning spells, and would make his Test debut during the summer of 1997. Always dependable, there were more highs than lows, but his finest moment in the whites of England came when he tore through Australia with 6-60 at Melbourne in December 1998 as the tourists scrapped for redemption, winning a memorable dead rubber with the Ashes already gone before Christmas.

But the following summer, he complained of a lack of rhythm in his bowling, brought on after suffering a fall at home. Struggling in the County Championship, England continued to pick him and there was relative success in the summer series defeat to New Zealand. But still, something just didn't feel right.

"I had gone in the head," says Headley. "I kept saying to people all season that something had gone with my bowling action. I just didn't have the control I always had.



As Headley attests, there were some pretty dark times as he searched to rekindle his bowling spark with Kent. His coach, John Wright, claimed he was being a prima donna after his success Down Under. And yet despite the knocks, England still came calling. He earned selection for South Africa before finally breaking down in the opening tour match against the Oppenheimer XI.

"The ball didn't come out more than 50mph," says Headley. "Stress fractures, misdiagnosed for ten months. I had called it all year that there was something wrong. That was when people started apologising."

## Burning issue

Today, aged 48 and some 19 years later, Headley is imparting his cricketing wisdom as a coach at Stamford School in Lincolnshire. It's at Stamford where we meet; tucked away in one of the school's common rooms as pupils mill around us. He doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who would be comfortable talking to the kids at school about the

# us at club level and it'll a-Head of the game



**Club life: But club cricket is not producing the players it should since the ECB Premier Leagues were introduced in 2000**

PICTURE: Getty Images

times he played for England. Understated, there is a refreshing dose of modesty about him.

Indeed, when I bring up Melbourne in 1998, he is quick to push the conversation elsewhere. We talk about the future of Test cricket – which Headley fails to see much hope for against the whirlwind of T20 that delivers an entertainment package current lifestyles can relate to; we discuss the problems facing cricket in schools, and why the minor counties circuit should not be a comfort zone for retired cricketers, but rather an under-26 development process to give young county players a taste of competitive matches they wouldn't get in second XI cricket. But mostly, we tackle the burning issue that Headley believes is holding the game back in this country – grassroots and club cricket.

Headley earned his early stripes in the hard-nosed world of the Birmingham League, a notoriously tough environment that brought together the best club players in



**Injury prone: Dean Headley**

the country, complemented with senior professionals and overseas talent. As Headley states: "There was genuine quality everywhere!

"When I was playing in the Birmingham League, everybody knew that if you wanted to be a pro, you had to be noticed there," Headley adds.

"We had players travelling great distances to play in that league and yes, they were playing for money but to do that you had to be very, very good. You had top players from one to eleven, and every club competed. There weren't a lot of overseas players but if you were one, then you had to be a serious overseas player. Because there are overseas players and there are 'overseas' players.

"When I was 14 my club had Greg Matthews as their overseas player. A year later he was playing for Australia. These weren't Mickey Mouse cricketers. You weren't just some kid who happened to be in the country who was half-decent."

It's all a far cry, according to Headley, when compared to the club landscape

now, which was restructured in 2000 with the introduction of the ECB Premier Leagues. Headley argues the current system has split club cricket where many 1st XIs are not working alongside their second.

The drive and ambition of clubs as they push for honours – and the bun fight of promotion and relegation – serves only to create clubs within clubs, and it is coming at the cost of developing players and giving them a stepping stone to move into the professional game. In short, club cricket is not producing what it should be...



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"If a kid told me he wants to play cricket for England, then I couldn't tell them how to because I couldn't draw them a map," says Headley.

"I couldn't say you go there, then you go there, then you go there, because it is a minefield. The ECB felt the standard of cricket would improve with the ECB Premier Leagues because clubs would have more ambition. But it is players who need ambition, not clubs. The club system did not need to change.

"If I use the old structure of the Birmingham League as an example, which had three divisions: first, second and third. The first and second divisions were the same clubs; the 1st XI in the first division and the 2nd XI in the second division. It was a vertical system.

Then you had the Birmingham League's third division, which was pretty much the same clubs' 3rd XI with a few other clubs in there, smaller clubs whose first teams would play in that division.

"There was no promotion and relegation, but every week you were up for selection and there was a ladder you could climb as you moved up. Everything was connected. What we have now is a horizontal club system where your second team isn't really connected to your first.

"Now, you play in your 1st XI, you could end up getting injured or losing your place, and instead of playing what should be the next best level with your 2nd XI, you end up playing several divisions lower down the structure because that is where they have floated to."

Headley highlights the Australian Grade system as a case in point for developing and nurturing talent, which creates a clear pathway for aspiring cricketers who are serious about their game; a player moves up through the grades, from as far as seven to one, they do well there, get noticed by the State selectors and suddenly after doing well, you could be playing for Australia.

"It's a very simple system," enthuses Headley. "But with club cricket in this country, there isn't a smooth step into the county system.

"My biggest fear is with promotion and relegation: a team goes up and a team goes down. But the players don't get relegated. They can just move on. So if we are going to play in a system of promotion and relegation, then perhaps we should have two-year registrations at clubs.

"As things stand players can just walk away. I've seen a club go from the Premier League in Kent, out of the Kent League, five divisions in five years because all the players moved away. Fixed leagues are the only way.

"And too many 1st XIs are chasing promotion at the cost of their clubs. We have to get our head out of the sand. Winning is important, of course it is, but when the majority of your money for grassroots comes from England, then we have to produce the players for the system and not load up with overseas players."