**The Mallards against DCSCC, Riding Mill, 11 July 2023**

The storm clouds which had hung all day over the ground at Riding Mill eventually parted and thus the scene was set for a bright evening’s contest between two evenly matched teams. And then the news percolated through to the Mallards dressing room that their opponents were one short: Durham staff’s esteemed captain and key all-rounder Chris Cowie announced he was too ill to play.

‘Bad luck, old boy!’ ‘Shame!’ came the response as the Mallards cried genuine crocodile tears - much as the England team had done when Glenn McGrath twisted an ankle and was ruled out of the second Ashes test in 2005.

So, with only ten men, DCSCC elected to bat. Guy was kept quiet at first by a fierce Mallards attack (!) but not so Vinay who opted to smack three boundaries in quick succession, before mistiming one to cover where he was duly caught. Rich Root came out next and was initially subdued, no doubt unwilling to take risks against a geriatric opening bowler, but he had the affrontery to make up for this slow start by carving a six and a four off the next over. (Root is hereby summoned to explain his behaviour to the Club’s disciplinary committee, chaired by you know who, and the punishment (already decided) is that Rich finds himself batting at number 11 and umpiring in every game from here on in for the rest of the season.) Rich was eventually yorked by Standring, Mallard’s other opener, thus denying your chairman any chance of revenge and so Rory came to the crease to face the next onslaught. With Dave Cox, evidently on loan from the New Zealand first eleven, now bowling, Rory could get nothing away at first. Another slow start. And then the unbelievable occurred – for the first time in living memory, Guy was *bowled!* His normally impenetrable forward defence was breached by Standring. Would the DCSCC team manage to overcome this shock/horror and gain any more runs?

Step forward Patrick Card, the tyrant from Tynemouth, who rapidly took stock of the situation and, waiting his chance for a wayward delivery, hoisted a mighty six into the nearby field, then a four, then another six before getting caught attempting yet another launch above mid-wicket. Rory, by this time, had got the measure of Kiwi cruise missiles and was duly collecting boundaries and rapidly advancing the score board. Aidan gained his obligatory single before being bowled, and whilst Rory was continuing to punish the bowling, Eckart was next to come to the crease.

Hereafter the story changes. The Mallards brought their secret weapon into the attack: the looping lollops of Lee Latif. Eckart was bowled by one ball that refused to bounce; Nigel replaced him and was promptly stumped attempting to hit another that was reluctant to come on to the bat.

Cometh the hour, cometh the time of long-absent and almost forgotten-about Mike Costello. Not having played with half of his team-mates before, he nonetheless struck a valiant figure against the Mallards and staunchly supported the run-gathering of his partner at the other end. He gained a couple of singles before Rory at last retired with a maximum.

Last man Ian Boothroyd now took strike and facing him at the other end was one-time captain of the Mallards, bamboozling bowler and actual staff member of Durham, the estimable Ian Stone. Some bewitching left-arm deliveries brought a handsome caught-and-bowled of Ian, off Ian.

Was this planned? Perhaps a suicidal sacrifice? Because following Ian B to face the last balls of the Stone’s last over came Rory again, determined to make his impact by hoisting the final ball of the innings into orbit over the next-door field: Durham finished with 127 for 8.

Stig and Dave Cox opened the batting for the Mallards, with Vinay and Ian B bowling for Durham. Runs came steadily at first with both openers collecting runs in ones, twos and fours. No wickets fell until the bowling changed – Stig presenting a catch off Guy and then Nigel came on to wreak chaos as first one batsman and then his replacement were completely undone by the Metcalfe magic. How does he do it? No idea, but keep on doing it!

The Mallards captain Buckley took up his bat next to steady the proceedings and between him and Cox the scoreboard advanced, despite some vicious (and sometimes erratic) deliveries from Rory, until the New Zealander retired with a boundary and 33.

The never-to-be-forgotten again Mike Costello caused his name go down in the annals of DCSCC history with his first ball bowled in countless years – which duly removed the off-stump bails of the next Mallard batsman to retire to the pavilion. This meant that Standring replaced him and quickly set about scoring boundaries off Duffy and Costello before Buckley retired on 30 and then, with Mallards on 85 and four overs to go, DCSCC brought back their opening bowlers.

Standring battled manfully – edging one quickie off Vinay which nearly broke Nigel’s fingers – but he was eventually caught by Rory off Vinay. Lee Latif walked out next showing utter distain for the opposition by wearing only one pad but regrettably he faced only one ball since Ian demolished the tail in his last over with two wickets bowled - much to disgruntlement of the Mallards and your correspondent who had done nothing but watch the collapse whilst umpiring. After 20 overs, Mallards finished on 118 for 10. Another victory for DCSCC! Which team is next for the sword?