

REFLECTIONS ON THE UCC FIRST TEAM OF 1997 - UCC WIN THE DIVISION 1 TITLE



L/R BR – Mark Gilliver, Howard Reeve, Andy Wilsdon, Matthew Wood, Alex Wharf, Ziarat Nasa Hussain
L/R FR – Mr John Wilkinson, Iqbal Khan, Chris Burns, Russell Heritage [c], Glen Yates, Chris Schofield

As the 2022 season draws to a climax and the battle for promotion intensifies, I thought it timely to reflect back a quarter of a century to the last occasion when UCC won the First Division title. The 1997 side was in my opinion one of the great UCC teams in the clubs history. The club can boast having had some fantastic players over many years, including international and county players, the history of the club tells its own story. I had the pleasure of captaining the title winning side of 1997, and can offer my perspective on the players and what I think made the team so successful.

The Chairman, **John White** had a three year strategic plan to win the First Division, he assembled a team that he thought could do the job. The team composed of a nucleus of very talented experienced UCC players, plus a couple of new additions to add strength and depth. Collectively, he believed this squad could get us over the line.

We had some very talented individuals, some real characters but most importantly we had eleven good men. Despite having two aspiring county players in **Matthew Wood** and **Alex Wharf** and a first class overseas player in **Iqbal Khan**, plus several who had experience of county second eleven cricket, no one saw themselves as a superstar or better than any other member of the team. UCC 1997 were a team in which everyone had a valuable contribution to make and we recognised that everyone's contribution was important. The ultimate aim was about the team winning rather than individual performances. John White had focussed on building a balanced side that could compete whatever the conditions or opposition.

As a spin bowler, I have always believed that the most important player in any side is the wicket keeper, in **Chris [CB] Burns** we had the best in the league and the best I've ever played with. Chris was an all-rounder, he was great stood up or back, his batting was destructive and his enthusiasm and motivation infectious. Chris was a great man to have in any dressing room.

Howard (Jim) Reeve, was the stylish right hander and UCC stalwart who had a great tactical cricket brain, he was my trusted right hand man. Jim loved to win and was always aware of points needed and what the opposition needed to do to get close to us. He never liked getting out, the dressing room would quickly clear if he ever got a bad LBW!

Mark [Gilly] Gilliver and **Chris [Scoff] Schofield** were the 'team clowns' but both extremely talented batsmen. They could dominate any bowler and could score heavily. Both were winners and both were extremely loyal to the team and the club. I'm not surprised that Gilly became one of the all-time league leading run scorers. I remember once giving a serious team talk before a game and asked if anyone had a problem they needed to speak to me about it. Gilly, in typical fashion announced he had a problem with long division and as a school

teacher could I help it with it! We all laughed and won the game (I never helped him with the maths). Gilly was and still is a very special character.

I had played alongside Iqbal Khan for many seasons at Mirfield before he joined UCC. He didn't have his most prolific season in 97 but his performance with both bat and ball won us games. Iqbal proved to be a great catcher close to the bat and someone I would always want in my team. At the age of 50 years plus he's still going strong.

Matthew Wood and Alex Wharf were our county starlets. I take great pleasure in having spotted the very talented Woody when he was only 14 years old, in a schools game in Huddersfield. UCC benefitted from both players not being quite regulars in the Yorkshire side but eager to impress in the league to bolster their county prospects. Matthew was a stylish opening batter and athletic fielder, Alex a big tall lad who could bowl with pace and aggression and could hit a long ball with class and elegance. Both of these young players were totally committed to the cause and an absolute pleasure to play alongside.

Andy [Wilso] Wilsdon opened the bowling and just wanted to bowl, he never wanted to come off. He bowled down the hill at UCC and was a handful with his extra bounce. Andy was a great competitor, never afraid to voice his opinion but always for the benefit of the team.

One of John's best new signings was without doubt **Glen Yates** who joined us from Idle. He was a talented all-rounder who bowled wicket to wicket and seldom gave away runs. He could bat anywhere in the order and often scored important runs. Glen established himself as another great team man.

That probably leaves my lifelong friend **Ziarat (Nas) Hussain**, Mr Cricket. We would talk about strategy and aspects of the game for hours! Nas could swing the ball in any conditions and quite simply got 'the good players out'. Nas, was never prolific but always consistent, reliable and extremely loyal.

It is important to also recognise the importance of the second team players who stepped up to play their part when required and contributed to the team's success.

Having been fortunate enough to play in two Championship winning sides, Bowling Old Lane in 1978 and UCC in 1997, the sides were very different but they had some very distinct characteristics. Both teams had a balance of experienced players and those with enormous potential. Both teams were extremely competitive, the team's success being more important than individual achievement. Relationships were based on togetherness which focussed on the positive, and a shared belief that we could beat any other side in the league.

The camaraderie amongst the 97 side was probably the best I've experienced during my long career. The team played hard but always with a great sense of humour. I'd like to give a special mention to the team's unofficial mascot, **Mr John Wilkinson**, who seldom missed a game and provided the team with encouragement and entertainment from the side-line throughout the game, and in the bar long into the evening. Also to two important members of the team who disappointingly were not included in the team photograph, our scorers **Andy Reynolds** and **Craig Hudson**.

It's fantastic to see that a number of the team of 97 remain involved in the game. Alex, is an international umpire, Woody, remains involved with the professional cricketers association. Nas, is now the custodian of Bradford Park Avenue, and Gilly an established coach. Howard's legacy lives on through his cricketing sons, Damon and Bradley. Iqbal plays for Yorkshire and India over 50s, and JW still quotes CB as the best keeper in the Bradford League.

I'm sure that I speak on behalf of all players from the last title winning side when I emphasise we want our achievement resigned to history and hope for many more UCC successes to follow.

Good luck to all UCC players, officials and supporters.

RUSSELL HERITAGE - UCC FIRST TEAM CAPTAIN 1997