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COUNTIES

Wednesday, 18 April, 2001, 12:07 GMT 13:07 UK

A run in the park



Essex and former England bowler Mark Ilott sends the first of his diaries for BBC Sport Online ahead of the start of the Championship.

Cape Town, Bloemfontein, Grenada or Perth?

No not Essex - we spent our pre-season running around Admirals Park or Old Chelmsfordians Sports Ground. And what fun we had!

Seriously, though, it was extremely beneficial. My football skills improved no end and my ability to run through speed ladders has reached levels barely seen before.

“The best thing about pre-season - the handouts”

Mark Ilott

Alan Pearson, a former Australian rugby international, and his team from SAQ (Speed, Agility, Quickness) put the Essex boys to the sword and ran us ragged. No 'donkey' work as Alan called it - just short, sharp drills with a limited recovery.

The one big downer this pre-season was the fact that all our corporate golf days had to be cancelled due to the weather.

This meant instead of walking round some beautiful countryside ruining an otherwise enjoyable stroll we had to continue to run around like headless chickens on ground that even Red Marauder would find tough going.

Talking of things



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equine, the lack of racing also ruined one of our many sweepstakes, which is normally won by Nasser anyhow. What's the saying about money going to money?

We had our yearly meeting about discipline and this time we had the pleasure of Alan Fordham from the ECB, formerly a player with Northants, talking through the new rules, oops sorry, laws.

My, oh my, there are a few changes. Five penalty runs for this, five penalty runs for that - I can't even run on the wicket anymore.

The best thing about pre-season though - the handouts.

Essex has secured an amazing deal with Shoeless Joe's to sponsor our travelling gear. Nice new coffins, lovely big holdalls and free membership of their most excellent bars in the city!

In years gone by the players complained in their droves about the clothing being either too small or the size of action man's clothes once it was slung in the washer. Not this year.

The T-shirts would house a small family and the rain jackets - a small country. But I am not complaining, far from it.

The marketing staff and the people who have worked at getting us to look a professional outfit have done us proud. We'll be trying our utmost to reciprocate.

April arrived and unbelievably Essex had nets outside. Monday, 2 April was a fantastic day. The sun shone, the wind dropped and the nets were firm, yes firm.

It is a fact that the County Ground at Essex gets less rain than any other ground.



I can't run on the wicket any more

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Hussain: In the money

In which case the rest of the country must be underwater, as we have had plenty.

But credit again to groundsman Stuart Kerrison and his lads who work longer hours than Carol Vorderman to allow us to train and net on grass as early as is humanly possible.

This is a feature that exasperates many of the bowlers come mid-July when the thought of a day off is heavenly. However, like our coach Keith Fletcher keeps telling us: "You can't get points in the dressing room." Now that is a fact that isn't. It's untrue as you are awarded points for a draw now!

So there we were - enjoying the spring sunshine in short sleeves and bowling with the sun on our backs.

By Wednesday the sleeves had lengthened and become sweaters and thick woolly hats had covered the sun caught foreheads.

Waldorf and Stadler (Fletcher and Arnold) wrapped up like Eskimos and the bowlers tried to get their bowling arms perpendicular in about five layers. Cold it certainly was.



Keith Fletcher: Waldorf

Kent joined us for a one-day game and showed us the benefit of training in the warmth, beating us convincingly but then we handled ourselves more than competently against Northants in a two-day game where we took the points.

Our last warm-up (?) is against a strong Surrey squad who will be looking to achieve more greatness this year by winning the Championship for the third time in as many years.

Alex Tudor looks cold running into this north wind - I'd better go as this heater is burning my back!

Mark Ilott will be writing every month throughout the summer for BBC Sport Online on life on the county circuit.

Links to other Counties stories

 

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