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CRICKET AT STONYHURST

A DIARY BY PETER DAVIDSON

THE VATICAN VS. THE GENTLEMEN OF STONYHURST

Ribble Valley: oak trees, pies, cricket, Catholicism. The pitch at Stonyhurst is beyond the baroque walled garden with its clipped yews, summer houses and Jesuit observatory. Walking out towards the match, not long after noon on the fourth of July, in the prodigious height of summer, the air is already wrinkling in the heat, and the grass underfoot is yellowing, despite having drunk the deep rains of a Lancashire winter. A crowd – cars, picnics, dogs – is spread along the sunny boundary and the half-timbered pavilion's veranda steps offer a refuge in cool shade. Opposite it, to the left of the scoreboard, the land falls sharply away, so that behind the rim of the pitch you see the whole tree-deep valley open wide before you and the bare flanks of Pendle Hill rising beyond. Almost no cloud, no wind.

The yellow blazers of the Vatican St Peter's Cricket Club are much in evidence amongst the crowd of players and spectators on the pavilion steps. The two tour managers, Fr Sameer and Fr Eamonn, are at the heart of the crowd wearing their clerical shirts and collars under their golden jackets. The Vatican players are changed already into their T20 kit of blue with gold trim – representatives of almost every cricketing nation on earth from Sri Lanka to India to Ireland. The Stonyhurst team are in whites, with the school crest on their shirts – the strong gate tower of the College and the motto QUANT JE PUIS – *as much as I can*. They are greeting friends and allies with truculent urbanity. These are, after all, the current representatives of a school which has produced fifteen martyrs for the Roman Church and seven VCs for the British army. Don't say that I never warned you. It is a hand-picked team: cunning veterans, recent alumni, young sports coaches. A few are wearing the College cricket blazer with its yellow and brown stripes. "The squashed banana jacket" mutters one of the masters, "can't get banana sandwiches out of my mind all summer long."

Stonyhurst to field, Vatican to bat. Crowd settles to their rugs on the slope, to the benches in front of the pavilion, and in a little picnic group to the right of the pavilion where the ground slopes to a combe with hawthorns and a flock of sheep. Beyond is the tremendous panorama of summer Lancashire. White-shirted players spread over the field, the first blue and gold players march in to bat. The first over passes in a flash of tight bowling – the Headmaster's voice comes from beside me saying quietly "this is the most beautiful of days." The third over of the match, Richard Drinkwater bowling with absolute concentration, a snatched run nearly stumped, voices from all over the benches in front of the pavilion steps agreeing that it hasn't been like this since the summer of 1976, yes the summer of 1976.

Overs tick past fast, a ball cracked to the boundary hurtling past the picnic to vanish into the hawthorn trees, scattering the sheep. The air is growing warmer, the misty sunlight amongst the trees in the valley is greying with the heat, mist just forming in the distance to the west. James Watson bowling gracefully, but a late cut smashed out behind for three. During the tenth over, a breath of wind stirs, but dies at once. Voice behind me, "you ought to come up and bless the guns, Father, when we go shooting in August." It must be thirty degrees out on the pitch. The umpire signals for a drink for the parched fielders. In the break, one of the Vatican players plays gentle football on the grass in front of the pavilion, with a Stonyhurst player's children: "come on, you be England and I'll be Colombia." Play resumes, a shout from the Vatican players to the batsman "Come on, Kapila, stay with it." In the twelfth over Kapilah Manjula snicks a fine shot behind to boundary and a great cry of "classy, classy" erupts from the Vatican side. One of the Vatican players is chatting to a family on the benches and I catch

the words, “to do this with prayer and to the Greater Glory of God.” Wicket falls, the Vatican batsman going in settles his helmet, touches the ground with his right hand and makes the sign of the Cross as he goes. A woman’s voice on the left calls “Father?” to be answered by at least six male voices saying at once, “Which Father do you want?” Last over, there is one smudge of unmoving cloud over to the left by the slopes of Pendle Hill and the ridge is shimmering in heat, its outline wavering in the rising air. Vatican have 138 runs and the batsman walking off smiling now has 75 to his credit.

Interval. Paper cup of orange squash (I don’t think I’ve drunk a paper cup of orange squash since approximately the summer of 1976.) I catch a fragment of conversation from behind, as I settle back onto the bench on the steps of the pavilion “not in *our* family, well not since Emancipation.”

Play resumes with the blue and gold players - athletic, highly responsive players - tightly deployed on the green and tawny striped field. A Stonyhurst cricketer’s voice from behind, “we thought of trying a little light sledging, but we soon realised that they’re just such nice people that we couldn’t do it.” Go-for-everything batting, skilled fast bowling alternating with a cunning slower bowler who swings his right arm out as he pitches the ball. My friend the Classics Master settles down beside me, “he bowls like swinging a right hook in boxing.” A tiny unmoving cloud like a calligraphic “w” hangs over the village to the west. A man’s voice comes from the doorway of the pavilion behind, “It was terrible, really terrible: they were pulling us down to their level. It was like playing against a Rugby League side. I can’t describe it.” The air on the southern horizon quivering with heat now and the western valley filling with pale heat-mist. “Lots of derring-do from the batsmen” says the Classics Master, “swashbuckling fielding. You could write that down in your notebook, since you’re writing things down in your notebook.” Stonyhurst batsman out, returns to pavilion grinning, shaking his head. The Stonyhurst Captain calls up to my friend Stephen Withnell sitting in his whites on the pavilion benches “Stephen, put some pads on,” “But I don’t want to jinx the next man in.” He goes off into the pavilion to arm himself. Barrage of spin from the Vatican bowlers. The Headmaster passes walking slowly from left to right. A Ball clattered to the boundary right of the pavilion, three fielders sprinting in pursuit. “Now this *is* Epicurean, we are sitting in the shade with our hats on watching them running about in the sun.” A textbook leg drive to the opposite boundary, the ball vanishes over the lip of the slope and down into the valley. In the pause while the fielders scramble for the ball the victorious batsman mimes his lovely shot three times over.

A small white butterfly rides the thermals and vanishes over the pavilion roof. An embarrassed young father retrieves a small child and a bright yellow football from edge of the pitch. A voice behind, "Chorley's pro's Sri Lankan; Preston's is from Pakistan; St Anne's from India, and all the rest are South African or Australian. *International.*" Whalley Nab is white with heat and the mist grows opaque in the broad valley. "It's not true about Stydd chapel, it's only a myth that Margaret Clitheroe's heart is buried there, only a myth." Golden blazered Vatican coach trots onto the field with an energy drink for the bowler. Batsmen meet and fist-bump in middle of wicket. A red admiral butterfly, moving slowly, drifts on the hot air from left to right, flickering into the combe with the hawthorns.

"A hundred up, fellows, well done." Stonyhurst gaining runs but only a few overs to go to catch up with the Vatican's 139. "Pugin built what Pugin bloody well wanted: if you wanted to see the altar - *tough*; if you wanted to celebrate Mass properly - *tough*. We're going to have to get silly if we want to win this." Golden retriever passes slowly in front of scoreboard, with attendant human, moving from right to left. Sam Owen out, returns to pavilion, red faced, happy, applauded. "Now no Boycotts here, no playing to keep up your average." Next man in. He slogs away at tight bowling. Stephen, padded and gloved, is sitting now on the lowest pavilion step with his wife's hand on his shoulder. Vengeful fast bowling, batsman pushed back, bowled out.

Stephen goes in, bat under his left arm, he crosses himself with his gloved right hand as he steps over the boundary. Not long to go. Spectators free with advice: "Come on, fellows, have a swing"; "Push, push, push"; "Get the bat to it." Now the whole valley is opal blue with heat and the outline of the slopes has blurred, air gone colourless, shaking over the ridge of Pendle. The Captain, padded up on the pavilion step, puts on his gloves and settles them on his hands, bat by his side in the shade. Three balls to go in this over, they'll need three sixes to draw close. Fielding untiring, onto it, precise. Second last ball and the batsman cracks a perfect shot to the boundary. He holds the bat still for a moment at the end of its drive, his figure white against the whole blueness of the valley and its misted trees. An action of gratuitous beauty. *Laus Deo Semper.* Very last ball -- a ferocious delivery from the bowler, one snatched run -- and the Captain slowly takes off his gloves, and begins to unbuckle his pads before the players come in across the tawny pitch, and the cheering begins, cheering which goes on and on, all around, and the players handshaking and embracing and coming sweating into the shade out of the blazing, shimmering afternoon.

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