

Lancashire County Bowling Association / Bowls Lancashire Middleton Cup History

Pre 1959 the Middleton Cup was run on a straight knock-out basis. Lancashire's first game in the competition was a real baptism of fire away to Northumberland on 26th May. Not surprisingly, Northumberland went on to win the Cup that year, Lancashire were defeated 167-93. Similar defeats, away to Northumberland, followed in 1952 (175-79) and 1953 (159-76). The results for 1954 (Durham - home), 1955 (Cumberland - away) and 1956 (Northumberland -home) are not available. In 1957 we played Yorkshire away and went down 158-85. Again the result of the game against Durham (away) in 1958 is not known.

In 1959 the Cup changed to the round-robin format we know today and up to and including 1982 Lancashire were in a group of 5 including the other 4 'Northern' counties. The change must have done us good because the League Table shows Lancashire's first recorded victory. The total shots situation for the 4 games was 400-517 and we still finished bottom of our Group.

Despite further victories in 1961, 1974 and 1976, plus a draw in 1965 we never moved off the bottom, nor kept the overall shots deficit below 100. 1967 was the nadir - 363 shots for, 605 against, minus 242 for the season. The 1965 draw is still remembered to this day with a tribute to David McNair hanging in the Heaton Hall clubhouse.

In 1976 after a first game defeat to Cumberland Lancashire introduced 2 new 'young' faces to the team for the trip to Darlington RA to play Durham - Duncan Wilson and Tony Horobin. Perhaps Lancashire's heaviest ever defeat - 100 shots. Perhaps this was when Tony lost his optimism ! He should not have done - in the next game Lancashire played Northumberland on the 'B' green at Stanley Park and WON. Neither Tony nor Duncan have missed a game since their debut - both being 92 not out - although they have both missed ONE Muras game ! The last game of the 1982

season (away at Kingston BC to Yorkshire) saw the introduction of Martin Gale and Paul Whiteley.

A summary for the period 1959-82 shows Lancashire lost 91 of the 96 games played with shots for of 9,342 and 13,197 against. It could only get better !

In 1983 the EBA changed the format and we went into a group of 4 with Durham, Lincolnshire and Northumberland. To maintain contact with all the Northern Counties it was decided that we would join the Muras Cup competition. Our first match was against Cumbria at Cleator Moor and with the introduction of such promising bowlers as Brian Hindle, Allan Higgins and Alan Mayne victory was secured by one shot (115-114). This despite a 33-11 defeat for Alan's rink ! The heroes were Bob Jack and his rink (Max Bloom, Harry O'Byrne and Frank Taylor) who despite losing 15-16 held on at the last end to secure team victory. The scoreboard showing Lancs 1 UP was waved furiously in the back window of the bus as we left. Welcome back, Bob.

Further victories that season against Lincolnshire in the Middleton and Yorkshire in the Muras showed the 'worm had turned'. Although we still finished bottom of our group. Our worst season was 1990 when we lost all 3 games by a total of 78 shots - a reaction to the previous year's Final defeat by Kent ?

This was all forgotten in 1998 when the Cup was finally lifted with an 8 shot defeat of Warwickshire, a fitting moment for Gordon Niven's 100th Middleton Cup match for the County.

A summary for the period 1983-2000 shows Lancashire played 65, won 37, lost 28 shots for 7,558 and 7,279 against. May the improvement continue.

My own worst moment - a 13-47 defeat against Yorkshire on my return to Middlesbrough BC, 14th June 1980. Hopefully not to be repeated when we go there for the Muras Cup on 26th May - the 50th anniversary of our first Middleton Cup match.

Since writing the above the County has had a number of 'near misses' with 2 Quarter-Finals and a Semi-Final defeat at the hands of Kent in 2016.

Bowls was all but cancelled by the Covid Pandemic in 2020 with NO Nationals played. For 2021 Bowls England reverted to the 'Fifties' format of a knock-out competition. Regrettably, following several of the squad being advised to self isolate we had to concede our first round to Durham. It appears that this knock-out arrangement is likely to continue for the foreseeable.

Compiled by Alec Atkinson