

Robin Hobbs: A County Champion – Rob Kelly



“I’ve never won anything in my life!” That’s not strictly true; there was the Second XI Championship in 1980, and the Minor Counties Championship in 1977 – one of his happiest moments in the game, but certainly the big prizes in cricket eluded Robin Hobbs, ‘Hobbsy’ as he’s affectionately known. His love affair with cricket began as a young boy in Dagenham and the passion has never dimmed. This self-confessed cricket nut was still playing club cricket until the

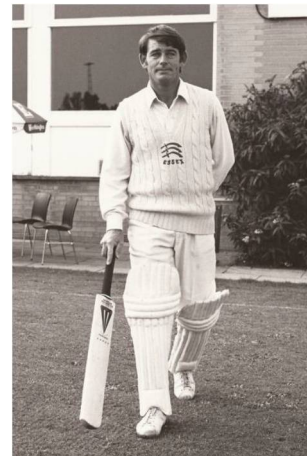
age of 68 and these days he’s one of the few former Essex players who regularly watches from the stands at Chelmsford. He’s not one for T20 and whatever you do don’t mention The Hundred; for him the County Championship is still *the* thing.

When Essex won their first Championship title in 1979 it was without the ebullient leg spinner who’d played 325 matches for the club before hanging up his boots four years earlier at the age of 33. Ironically, as Essex were finishing top of the table, his new side Glamorgan – after being tempted out of retirement to captain them – were rock bottom and enduring a miserable winless season. “We very nearly won one” says Robin, shaking his head in comic disbelief as he reflects on the match. Glamorgan had Mike Procter’s Gloucestershire nine wickets down at Cardiff and with number 11 John Childs fresh at the crease Robin must have felt the first victory in the Championship within his grasp. The minutes ticked by and an increasingly exasperated Robin urged the bowlers on but with half an hour to go he knew it wasn’t going to be his day. “I just got that feeling, I thought the only way we’re going to win is if I go off the field and offer Procky a few quid!” Recalling the match years later Procter would quip with Robin that Gloucestershire had nothing to play for and £50 would have sealed the precious win for Glamorgan.

Robin’s first-class career began almost 20 years earlier in 1961 under the captaincy of Trevor Bailey whose personal intervention prevented Essex’s rivals Kent from nipping in to sign the talented teenage bowler. With a plethora of spinners already on the staff it seemed an impossible task but by 1964 – and with his confidence levels boosted by successful tours of East Africa with MCC and Jamaica with the International Cavaliers – Robin was able to establish himself as the principle spinner in the Essex side, a role he would maintain for the best part of a decade.

By 1975 leg spinners were an anachronism, and if Essex – under Keith Fletcher’s captaincy – were going to use spin it would primarily be the finger-spin options of Ray East and David Acfield. Robin was fading in Fletcher’s eyes, he could have stayed, played Second-XI cricket and a bit part in the first team but it wasn’t for him. In his opinion East and Acfield were the two best spinners at the club and had he stayed it would have been to their detriment. Before riding off into the sunset however he produced the most spectacular swansong, giving the Chelmsford faithful a performance they’d remember by scoring 100 against the touring Australians in August 1975.

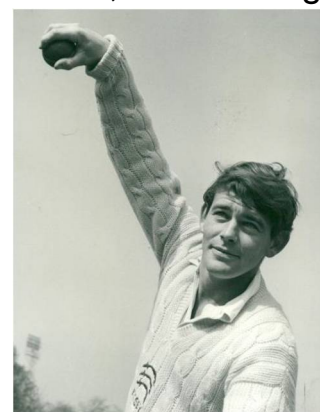
It was a whirlwind innings – 44 minutes; seven sixes and 12 fours – in which he took Ashley Mallett and Jim Higgs to the cleaners and was only brought to an end when Robin skied a catch after stand in skipper Rod Marsh threatened to bring Jeff Thomson on for a bowl. For Robin, someone who'd never relished anything above medium pace, that challenge was one he'd rather pass. "Sod that for a lark!" The hundred against Australia is still talked about but Robin prefers to be remembered for being the last English leg spinner to take 1,000 first class wickets, a milestone he reached at Worcester in 1975. In his match report for *The Times*, Alan Gibson stated, 'No other leg spinner, I am afraid, will do it again.'



Ian Salisbury came close but, with fewer first-class games and opportunities for leg spinners nowadays, Gibson's prediction has proven to be well judged. Among Robin's 1,099 first class wickets are several greats – Worrell, Pollock and Sobers; all intimidating batsmen to bowl at but arguably none more so than Viv Richards. Robin first encountered the 'Master Blaster' during Richards' debut season in county cricket in 1974. Essex were playing Somerset at Taunton and Robin, captaining the side in place of Keith Fletcher, watched as Richards made his way to the wicket. Even early on in his county career, Richards' swagger was unmistakable. "Viv came in, took guard and to the first four balls I bowled he played beautiful shots straight to fielders", recalls Robin. "The fifth ball was an over-spun leg break, Viv played back and it hit him in front of middle and off, I appealed and he was given out." As Richards walked past he nodded and remarked "Well bowled." Robin wouldn't get to bowl at him again until his final season in first-class cricket in 1981. Glamorgan set Somerset a target of 322 to win with four hours play remaining on the final day at Taunton and Viv Richards, as Robin was about to discover, had a long memory.

Richards strutted to the wicket; "Hobbs," he announced, "the day of reckoning has come!"

Robin, nearly 40 years old and past his peak spun the ball uneasily from hand to hand before bounding in to bowl. A succession of brutal boundaries followed but the cricketing gods were kind that afternoon, the rain came and Robin's bowling figures were spared further punishment.



Robin retired at the end of the 1981 season, there was no real money in the game during his career but it had been fun for both him and the spectators who recognised and appreciated a player who excelled in the field, bowled and batted with great spirit and who ultimately was just as enamoured with the game as they were. Nearly 40 years later he still is.

*Rob Kelly is a member of Norfolk Cricket Society, his biography of Robin Hobbs – **Hobbsy: a Life in Cricket** was published in 2018 by Von Krumm Publishing.*

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