

WEST AUSTRALIA WINS BACK-TO-BACK FOR DIAMOND ANNIVERSARY SHIELD

With our long-awaited new National League cast aside for at least another summer, the 2008/09 season saw a slightly revamped and upgraded Claxton Shield competition, much along the same lines as the quite successful 2007/08 version. The 2008/09 Claxton Shield would be conducted under the banner of the 75th DIAMOND ANNIVERSARY of the competition. To celebrate this, teams agreed to wear "modified retro uniforms" from their traditional baseball past.

The most significant change was the abandonment of the Australian Provincial team that had enjoyed Claxton Shield status since the 2002 competition. Even though 'Flintoff & Dunn' have been staunch supporters of the Provincial concept and its place in a balanced six-team competition, we had to accept the reality of the direction chosen by Baseball Australia. In a nutshell, they were doing their best to prepare for the new National League with a similar "Home and Away" style schedule, involving series of games in each state.

In order to provide some extra opportunity for "provincial players" to compete in the 2008/09 Claxton Shield, a pre-competition draft was organised whereby each of the State teams could select one "import" player. History would show that Western Australia scooped the pool when they selected ACT slugger Nick Kimpton with the last pick. He went on to win the prestigious Helms Award, while helping WA to secure back-to-back national championships. The other most notable import was ACT's Michael Collins who played for Queensland.

To emphasise their attempts to spread the game around the country, games were played at a variety of "provincial" venues, as well as the established state capital centres. The regional centres to enjoy fixtures were Canberra and Wollongong in New South Wales; Geelong and Mildura in Victoria; and Mt.Gambier in South Australia. Queensland played a home series in Lismore, NSW.

As well as playing at the established Blacktown Olympic Park in Sydney, one game was also played at Manly. Melbourne also hosted one semi-final game at Waverley's Napier Park, while their other games were played at Melbourne Ballpark. Brisbane games were played at both Redlands and Windsor, while Adelaide played their games at Glenelg. The only constant, of course, was Western Australia where all of their games were hosted at Baseball Park, Thornlie. For some unexplained reason the competition opened with a "round-robin" of games called the Showcase Round that was played by all teams entirely at Blacktown. This was the prelude to the "Home and Away Rounds" that were hosted around the country in the format of a three game weekend series.

After all 16 preliminary games were concluded the top three teams qualified to contest the finals. The top placed team, WA, received automatic qualification to host the best-of-three Grand Final series. Second placed Victoria hosted a best-of-three semi-final series against third placed New South Wales. The outcome saw New South Wales recover from a 0-1 start to upset the Aces 2-1 in the semi-final. The Patriots then grabbed a 1-0 advantage over WA in the Grand Final before West Australia captured the remaining two games in dramatic late-innings style. The WA Heat (or Perth Heat as they like to call themselves) had captured back-to-back national championships, their 8th Claxton Shield triumph.

To quickly gloss over this annoying subject once again, 'Flintoff & Dunn' simply cannot support WA's insistence on calling themselves "Perth Heat" in our national Claxton Shield competition. To repeat the obvious, Perth Heat was another, quite different, entity as a club team that played in the now defunct Australian Baseball League. The Claxton Shield is a long-standing national competition for Australia's STATE teams to contest. Regardless of their parochial reasoning, Perth is not a STATE and the notion of having a capital city (name) competing with other teams who all have State identities is ridiculous and it is an irritating distraction to the event.

This Claxton Shield review is not intended to duplicate the detail about every game from the individual game reports that will also feature in 'Flintoff & Dunn's' 2009 Edition book, but we do want to run through a brief overview of each series for historical purposes, as follows:

SHOWCASE ROUND 1

All games played at Blacktown Olympic Park, Sydney: 2 Dec 2008 to 7 Dec 2008

2 Dec: QLD d WA 8-2 4 Dec: WA d VIC 6-5 5 Dec: QLD d SA 11-9 6 Dec: VIC d SA 8-0
 3 Dec: VIC d QLD 13-3 4 Dec: NSW d SA 4-3 5 Dec: WA d NSW 4-3 6 Dec: NSW d QLD 9-4
 3 Dec: WA d SA 7-0 7 Dec: VIC d NSW 10-1

After each team played each other in a "round robin" format Victoria and WA both emerged with 3-1 records, with Victoria edging WA for top position on run percentage. The Aces had lost their game to WA, while WA was only beaten by Queensland in the opening game. Hosts New South Wales and Queensland both finished with 2-2 records, while an undermanned South Australia remained winless.

HOME & AWAY ROUND 2**Victoria Hosting Queensland: 12-14 Dec 2008**

Only one game of the preliminary rounds was scheduled for Melbourne, at Melbourne Ballpark but, somewhat predictably, this game was abandoned due to rain. Victoria won the series 2-1.

12 Dec 2008: Melbourne Ballpark (washed out)
 13 Dec 2008: Mildura; 15-0
 13 Dec 2008: Mildura; 10-9
 14 Dec 2008: Mildura; 3-4

NSW Hosting WA: 12-14 Dec 2008

New South Wales won the series 2-1.
 12 Dec 2008: Canberra; 5-3
 13 Dec 2008: Canberra; 2-7
 14 Dec 2008: Wollongong; 11-8

HOME & AWAY ROUND 3**SA Hosting Victoria: 19-21 Dec 2008**

Victoria won the series 3-0.
 19 Dec 2008: Mt.Gambier; 3-2 10-Inn
 20 Dec 2008: Mt.Gambier; 12-0
 21 Dec 2008: Mt.Gambier; 9-3

WA Hosting Queensland: 19-21 Dec 2008

West Australia won the series 3-0.
 19 Dec 2008: Baseball Park; 6-3
 20 Dec 2008: Baseball Park; 4-2
 21 Dec 2008: Baseball Park; 6-3

HOME & AWAY ROUND 4**Queensland Hosting NSW: 2-4 Jan 2009**

Queensland won the series 2-1.
 2 Jan 2009: Lismore; 3-0
 3 Jan 2009: Lismore; 3-2
 4 Jan 2009: Windsor; 2-10

SA Hosting WA: 2-4 Jan 2009

West Australia won the series 2-1.
 2 Jan 2009: Glenelg; 11-2
 3 Jan 2009: Glenelg; 9-11
 4 Jan 2009: Glenelg; 0-16

HOME & AWAY ROUND 5**WA Hosting Victoria: 8-10 Jan 2009**

West Australia won the series 3-0. Thereby clinching a home grand final.
 8 Jan 2009: Baseball Park; 8-7
 9 Jan 2009: Baseball Park; 4-3
 10 Jan 2009: Baseball Park; 11-5

NSW Hosting SA: 9-11 Jan 2009

West Australia won the series 2-1.
 9 Jan 2009: Blacktown; 3-0
 10 Jan 2009: Blacktown; 11-0
 11 Jan 2009: Manly; 9-8

HOME & AWAY ROUND 6**Victoria Hosting NSW: 15-17 Jan 2009**

Victoria won the series 2-1. Thereby clinching a home semi-final.
 15 Jan 2009: Geelong; 1-2
 16 Jan 2009: Geelong; 13-7
 17 Jan 2009: Geelong; 12-2

Queensland Hosting SA: 16-18 Jan 2009

Queensland won the series 3-0.
 16 Jan 2009: Redlands; 16-6
 17 Jan 2009: Redlands; 7-6
 18 Jan 2009: Windsor; 2-1

SEMI-FINAL

Victoria Hosting NSW: 23-25 Jan 2009

NSW won the semi-final series 2-1.

23 Jan 2009: Melbourne Ballpark; 7-1

24 Jan 2009: Napier Park, Waverley; 0-9

25 Jan 2009: Melbourne Ballpark; 0-5

GRAND FINAL

WA Hosting NSW: 6-8 Feb 2009

WA won the Grand Final series 2-1.

6 Feb 2009: Baseball Park; 3-5

7 Feb 2009: Baseball Park; 5-4

8 Feb 2009: Baseball Park; 3-2

As already mentioned Western Australia (or Perth Heat) repeated their remarkable Claxton Shield success of 2008. Once again they were anchored by consistent pitching, but their maturing offence was perhaps more potent than the previous year. The gallant New South Wales Patriots matched WA's pitching for the most part even though they just could not find a way past them in the deciding Grand Final games. Beaten semi-finalists Victoria boasted probably the strongest offence but their pitching was inconsistent. This might not have been a factor if Travis Blackley had been available throughout, or if their ACT "import" Steve Kent had not been injured and unable to play.

Apart from anything else the West Australian team, under the administration of Shane Tonkin, had shown the capacity to win an exceptionally high percentage of the close games and this is often the hallmark of a championship team. 'Flintoff & Dunn' congratulate them once again!

OFFENSIVE HIGHLIGHTS

Whenever we consider the quality of offensive performances in Claxton Shield competition, it is worth remembering the exceptionally high overall standard of the pitching and defence. In this context there was, once again, some tremendous hitting on display this summer. Not unusually the cream tends to rise to the top when we start examining the statistical leaders.

To start with the traditional yardstick batting average, it was no surprise to find eventual Batting Champion and Helms Award winner Nick Kimpton way out in front with his tremendously consistent .474 from a near maximum 76 at bats... it was a stunning competition for him. If there was a combined award for brothers, Queensland's Dutton duo would have been easy winners with Wade batting .425 from 40 at bats and previous Helms winner Brad batting .393 from 56 at bats.

For those with more than 50 at bats, third billing went to WA's Rookie of the Year Chris House who plundered .349 (63 at bats) from young stars Jimmy Beresford (Victoria) and Shannon Pender (NSW) who both had identical .339 averages from 59 at bats. Another young future pro from NSW, David Kandilas, had a prolific campaign with his consistent .324 from 74 at bats. Beresford and Pender were especially impressive in the playoff games where Beresford hit .444, while Pender hit .400, including two home runs!

Others to impress with fewer than 50 at bats were proven performers; WA's rising pro Luke Hughes .436 (39), NSW star Trent Oeltjen .375 (32) and Victorian veteran Paul Weichard .370 (46).

Nick Kimpton also dominated the sluggers with his gaudy .803 SLG% that was outstanding. He was topped only by Michael Collins .957 and Luke Hughes .949, both from far fewer at bats. Next best after a terrific competition was WA's Lachlan Dale with .622 from 74 at bats. Dale topped the home run list with 7, from WA team mates Nick Kimpton (6) and Luke Hughes (5). There could be some issue of venues to discuss here, but this is not for us to differentiate at this time.

Nick Kimpton <yawn!> was the RBI king with 24 from productive Victorian pro Daniel Berg who delivered 18 from limited plate appearances. Quality players Brett Roneberg (Qld) and Tim Kennelly (WA) both drove in 15 apiece. Kimpton and Victoria's Paul Rutgers both crossed home plate for a competition joint-high 20 runs. Speedy NSW outfielders Trent Oeltjen and David Kandilas both swiped four bags to lead the way for base thieves.

Victoria's recent major league star Brad Harman might have been a tad below expectation with the bat, but he walked a competition high 17 times, just ahead of underrated Queenslander Matt Studeman (15) and Aces' Paul Rutgers (14). Wade Dutton led the on base average men with .531, while Nick Kimpton (.517) and Trent Oeltjen (.500) were the only others to crack the .500 mark.

PITCHING HIGHLIGHTS

As we said with regard to batting, whenever we consider the quality of pitching performances in Claxton Shield competition, it is worth remembering the exceptionally high overall standard of the hitters they face. Once again there were some familiar names among the pitching stars here.

As mentioned, we wish we could have seen more than the total of 17.2 innings pitched by Victorian major leaguer Travis Blackley who, technically, led the ERA stats with 1.02. Blackley also owned a brilliant 1.188 strike outs per innings pitched and the second lowest opponent batting average with .164... he was undoubtedly a class act! Victorian team mate Adam Bright had an OBA of .150 from limited innings, while young WA ace Liam Hendriks was the only other pitcher below the .200 plateau with his impressive .190 from a much higher 25.2 innings.

Undisputed Golden Arm Award winner, for the second straight competition, was NSW gun Timothy Cox who finished with a 1.06ERA from his 34 innings... this after he owned a 3-0, 0.00ERA record before the playoffs! NSW evergreen lefty Craig Anderson was next cab off the rank with his 1.17ERA from 23 innings, followed by Victoria's Darryn Cassidy 2.84ERA (31.2ip) and Patriot Wayne Lundgren 2.95ERA (42.2ip).

The only other regular starters with ERAs below 4.00 were; Victorian Adam Blackley 3.62 (32.1ip), WA's Dylan Peacock 3.68 (29.1ip), WA's Liam Hendriks 3.86 (25.2) and "grand pappy" Phil Brassington, who played with SA this year, 3.96 (25.0). Just-turned 20yo WA star Liam Hendriks had barely recovered from minor back surgery and his second Claxton Shield campaign was a tremendous follow-on from his outstanding debut competition in 2008.

Finalists Wayne Lundgren (42.2ip) and Tim Cox (34.0ip) from NSW led the innings eaters, from WA's Mark Kelly with 34.0 and seasoned Queenslander Chris Mowday with 32.2. Victorian starters Adam Blackley (32.1ip) and Darryn Cassidy (31.2ip) were the only others to hurl more than 30 innings. Mark Kelly led the strike out count with 44, while NSW pair Lundgren (35) and Cox (31) were the only others to pass thirty.

The most prolific winners were Tim Cox and Adam Blackley with four; while Mowday, Hendriks and Lundgren each notched three victories. The outstanding reliever of the competition was WA's senior pro Brendan Wise who racked up four saves to compliment his 1-0, 2.31ERA record from nine appearances out of the bullpen. Next best was rising Queensland pro Ryan Searle with two saves for a 1-1, 2.57ERA record from four appearances.

While not fortunate enough to earn more saves, WA's Benn Grice enjoyed an effective debut competition with his 1.42ERA from five appearances, along with emerging NSW pro star Bradley Tippett who owned a 1.46ERA from six appearances. Tippett underlined his potency again here with his amazing statistic of 11/1 strike outs versus base on balls ratio.

DEFENSIVE HIGHLIGHTS

From our various reporters around the country I know that there were very many defensive highlights, but it is difficult for me to report much more than what I witnessed myself while following the Victorian team at home and across the southern states.

One player who stands out head and shoulders above all others is Victoria's young catching star Grant Karlsen, who picked up the reins as the Aces permanent No.1 plate minder from previous captain Mathew Kent who stepped aside this year. From 104 chances in the toughest of all fielding positions, Karlsen kept a clean sheet with an incredible 1.000 fielding percentage. He also threw out five would-be base stealers for a brilliant 50% throw out percentage. Karlsen was a clear-cut winner of the Golden Glove Award and a long, bright future lies ahead for him.

In one game at Geelong I witnessed three of the finest outfield catches you would ever see. Victorian utility player Danny Berg took one at left field and team mate Paul Weichard's diving effort coming forward was also an eye catcher. Maybe best of these was from NSW opponent Trent Oeltjen who tracked one at centre field that defied belief... he is a genuine A-plus outfielder.

Victoria's interchangeable middle infield duo of major leaguer Brad Harman and Jimmy Beresford regularly pulled out the party tricks during Claxton Shield 2009. Senior pro Harman has stunningly quick hands around the second base bag, while rising young pro Beresford is a spectacular athlete who occasionally turns the impossible into outs... keep an eye on him! It is no surprise that both went on to represent Australia at the 2009 World Baseball Classic.

Once again, I can only apologise to any others who might have deserved special mention here.

THE AFTERMATH

Again we repeat here our congratulations to the West Australian team who deserved back-to-back triumphs at Claxton Shield 2009... They have now become the lure for others to chase.

Although our proposed new National League seemed like it was getting closer at the end of the 2008 Claxton Shield, we have to say that it feels somewhat further away at the conclusion of the 2009 competition. We don't know of anyone in Australian baseball (that matters) who is holding out any genuine hope of anything new for the upcoming summer of 2009/10.

While the new Australian National League, backed by Major League Baseball in the USA, remains on our horizon, it may have been delayed or deferred by the melt-down of the global financial markets. Whatever the case, those often mentioned "jungle drums" are not beating very loudly about this happening in the foreseeable future. In any case those same questions, like venues and facilities, remain very much unanswered in some states of Australia.

To repeat what we said at this time last summer:

We have constantly and consistently stated our case that we are not too concerned about establishing our new National League in the soonest possible time, unless we are totally confident about the long-term sustainability of the league. One trap that we must not allow ourselves to be seduced into is the notion that the USA's Major League Baseball will continue to support and finance any type of league that cannot support itself long-term. The latter will not happen unless the hard-core of loyal Australian baseball fans can enjoy and embrace the concept and presentation of the league... once again, ANYTHING ELSE WILL NOT WORK!

In the meantime 'Flintoff & Dunn' have enjoyed the recent "Home & Away" format for the Claxton Shield and, in our view, this remains a very decent program for Australia's annual national level baseball. In the absence of a National League, the current Claxton Shield remains a very necessary bridge for our aspiring professional baseballers, and those who need to hone their skills leading into their upcoming professional seasons. We just can't wait for the 2009/10 installment!

Peter Flintoff