

NORTHERN CONFERENCE MEETING

Meeting held at Northern Tennis Club, Manchester, 7.30pm 13/09/03

Present: Ian Marchment – Chair
Roger Young – Manchester Baseball Club
Tom Gillespie – BSUK
Nelson Setzer – Menwith Hill
Robbie Orme – Liverpool Trojans
Mrs Orme

Apologies for absence: John Mills – Halton Jaguars
Karl Barry – Strathclyde Falcons
Graham Burgess – Bournville Razorbacks
Bill Sheldrick – Glasgow Stars
Hull Baseball Club
Barnsley Strikers

I opened the meeting by thanking everyone for attending, and advising the meeting of those who had confirmed their non-attendance. I advised that it was my intention to organise the meeting around the suggested agenda, as well as the discussion document prepared by Nick Clark, GM of Edinburgh Baseball Club.

I confirmed to the meeting that following the resignation of Kevin Macadam as BBF President, former Vice-President Genny Simmons had been appointed as Interim President. I explained that I had been contacted by Genny Simmons, and asked to join the BBF Board as Northern Conference Representative/Commissioner, and that I had accepted this invitation. I advised that a BBF Board Meeting had been arranged for the weekend of 20/21 September, probably at Upper Heyford, and that I would report the outcome of the meeting to the Board at that time.

I confirmed that I would continue to play for MBC, and that I intended to maintain my status as a qualified and registered umpire, throughout my time as the NC Rep. I did however advise that in order to avoid any potential conflict of interest, I would automatically refer any issues regarding MBC to the BBF Board for a decision to be made. In all likelihood, any such issues would be referred to Jenny Fromer, who was likely to continue as Director of League Operations in 2004.

I explained that I felt that this appointment was a significant step forward for the NC, as the teams in the North now had a representative on the BBF Board who was based in the North, who had played/managed/umpired in the North, and who was capable of giving a voice to all the Northern teams.

The meeting discussed how this might work. I advised that I intended to hold NC meetings much more regularly than once a year, so that I could obtain as many viewpoints as possible, and ensure that any discussions held at Board level that included the North did so with involvement from as many Northern teams as possible. Monthly meetings were suggested, and I confirmed that this was not out of the question, but that I would leave the decision up to the teams jointly.

The meeting agreed that the NC cannot continue in it's current format for 2004. It was agreed that the gap between the top teams and the bottom teams is now

far too wide in terms of both ability as well as organisation. We felt that the NC as a whole is incapable of moving forward if the Conference is limited to a single division. The meeting discussed the possible number of teams for next season. I explained that I was not aware of any of the 12 2003 teams dropping out, and that there was the possibility of four further teams entering (Menwith Hill from the Rawlings National League, Bournville from Division One South, Strathclyde, and a second team being formed at Hull). Robbie Orme advised that the possibility of a second team being formed at Liverpool had been discussed internally at the club, but that there was no desire on the part of the likely second-team players for such a team to be formed.

With the possibility of 16 teams taking part in the 2004 Northern Conference, the meeting agreed that a single division would not assist in the development of baseball in the North. All present advised the meeting that they were not aware of any teams that were strenuously opposed to the NC being split for 2004. I therefore explained that we either split the teams geographically, or split the teams according to ability/results/facilities, etc. After some discussion, it was agreed that the teams should not be split geographically, as this would not assist in moving the NC forward.

Nelson Setzer confirmed that in his opinion, the gap between the top teams in the North and the teams in the RNL was not as wide as originally thought. The RNL teams had access to better facilities, and had better organisational structures than many teams in the North, but there were no insurmountable obstacles to Northern teams competing on a level playing field with the RNL.

The meeting discussed how a "top division" should be made up, and whether or not minimum requirements should be implemented. Nelson confirmed to the meeting that in 2001, he understood that the RNL had comprised of only five teams. This was simply because the RNL had qualifying criteria that had to be met before a team could be invited to join. All present agreed that setting out a list of minimum requirements would "raise the bar" for teams in the North, and would give teams who did not qualify both the motivation and the time to ensure that the criteria could be met for 2005. It was also agreed that teams would rather play in a smaller division that enforced stricter qualification criteria, rather than loosening the rules simply to ensure that a division had enough teams.

It was felt by some at the meeting that there were teams in the current NC who seemed to be stagnant in terms of ground and team development. They had recruited a number of excellent players, but seemed unwilling to put the effort into developing permanent playing facilities or starting a junior team. It was felt that denying these organisations access to the top division in the North would provide the proper motivation for moving those organisations forward.

The meeting discussed minimum requirements in relation to playing facilities. It was agreed that all playing fields should be grass, a suitable size, and should include a mound, a permanent backstop, a boundary fence (not necessarily permanent), and changing facilities. The example given was that of Sheffield Baseball Club, who have recently invested time and money into the installation of a mound at their ground, and significantly improved their playing facilities as a result. The meeting felt that there were no obvious reasons why teams seeking to play at the highest possible level could not follow this example.

The meeting then discussed team finances. I referred to Nick Clark's discussion document, which quoted the example of Preston's entry into the RNL, which resulted in their withdrawal part way through a season. In order to avoid a recurrence, it had been suggested that teams in the top division could make

certain financial information available to the NC Commissioner, to ensure that finances existed to fulfil all fixtures. The meeting did not feel that this was warranted in the circumstances, and that the payment of fees at the outset of the season was both proof of certain finances being available, and also strong motivation to those teams to complete all fixtures. The issue of monetary fines for forfeiting fixtures was discussed. Nelson explained that this was unnecessary in his opinion, providing that the first tie-breaker at the end of the season was the number of fixtures that a team had forfeited. He quoted the example of the London Warriors from 2003. London forfeited a fixture at Menwith Hill for tactical reasons, and ended the season tied for a playoff place. The team that they were tied with had not forfeited any games, and so the Warriors were eliminated from the playoffs. The meeting agreed that this was sufficient incentive to meet all fixtures without adding financial penalties.

I explained my belief that in order to maintain the development of baseball in the North, teams must be encouraged to run a junior programme. Roger Young explained that at least 6 of the MBC Pony team were regular players for the Manchester Express, and that joining the senior and junior elements of the club together had provided significant rewards for the senior teams. We considered making the establishing of a junior organisation a requirement for admission into the top division, but perhaps providing a time by which this must be done.

After some discussion, it was felt by the meeting that websites were an important issue, but that websites were not a single issue. It was suggested that all teams in the North should have a website, in order to promote their own organisations. However, it was agreed that a central NC website would be preferable, so that all teams had a central point for obtaining information and news. It was also felt that a central NC website would be better for using to promote the sport and the NC as a whole. Roger explained that the MBC website had become the main meeting point for the NC, and that this had helped in the organisation of events such as the NC Tournament. It was now not necessary for anyone to visit the websites of all the teams to find out the latest results, or information regarding future events, etc. Tom Gillespie advised that the central NC site could be run via a link from the official BSUK website, with links to individual teams or organisations being provided from the NC site.

I then raised the issue of umpires and umpiring. I advised that as an umpire myself, I acknowledged the need to recruit and train as many umpires as possible. If the NC wished to appear more organised and professional, I advised that in my opinion, this could not simply be limited to on-field matters. I confirmed that any umpires registered this year had to attend yearly umpire clinics, and re-register every year. The meeting asked whether or not BJ DeLorenzo, as Northern Umpire Commissioner, could visit each ground at some point during the season to ensure that qualified umpires were being used, and that standards were being maintained. I explained that as far as I was aware, this was not possible because of BJ's existing umpiring commitments. However, I confirmed that if there was a significant number of umpires available to cover games that BJ would initially be expected to cover, he may be available to travel. I did however explain that this was something that would have to be discussed with BJ and ABUA-GB directly. Tom raised the issue of scoring. Many at the meeting advised that this was done on a relatively *ad-hoc* basis, and that recruitment and training of scorers did not seem to be a priority for many Northern teams. Tom confirmed that in the same way as umpiring, scoring clinics could be arranged, if there was enough interest.

The meeting agreed that for teams seeking inclusion in the top division, it would be necessary to have at least two registered and qualified umpires available for

every home game. Teams in the bottom division would have to have at least one registered and qualified umpire available for every home game. It was also agreed that top division teams would have to have a qualified and registered scorer at every home game, if not every game. This would not initially be a requirement for teams in the bottom division, but it was certainly something that teams should be aiming towards.

In order to ensure that the team that wins the NC's top division was the most worthy of the title, it was agreed by the meeting that it would be necessary to schedule double-header games for every fixture week of the season. Roger advised that in either 1999 or 2000, the top division in the North played 15 fixture weeks out of 17 or 18, providing for 30 games in total. I advised that I felt that this would be beyond the means of some bottom division teams, but that it would not be unreasonable to expect top division teams to meet this kind of schedule. It was therefore agreed in principle that the top division should play double-headers every week, whereas the bottom division could remain in the same position as 2003, playing double-headers on average every other week.

The meeting felt that one of the most important goals for the NC was to move forwards, towards achieving a level of organisation and playing ability that would allow the North and the South to compete on a level playing field. The use of wooden bats was therefore an important issue to discuss. It was agreed that the RNL clubs have been using wooden bats for 3-4 years, and that therefore the Northern teams have some catching up to do. I suggested that the 2004 season might be viewed as a transitional year, and that we could therefore arrange for top division teams to use aluminium bats for the first game of the DH fixtures, and then use wooden bats for the second game. Both Robbie and Nelson stated that they did not want to see any "half-measures" in 2004, and that if the use of wooden bats was going to be allowed in the North, it may as well be allowed "across the board". The main drawback was likely to be one of cost. Nelson advised that Menwith Hill had purchased approximately 30 wooden bats at the beginning of the 2003 RNL season, and that they had broken or damaged around 20 of these. It was therefore agreed that it was important for a financial summary to be prepared alongside the list of minimum requirements, so that teams intending to apply for top division status would be aware of their financial commitment from the outset. League sponsorship was briefly discussed in this context, until Nelson advised that Rawlings provided only three bats to each RNL team at the beginning of the season.

I asked the meeting whether or not they considered it appropriate to have promotion and relegation between the two divisions in the North. All present agreed that promotion should definitely be allowed for, but that there should be no automatic relegation. This would recognise the efforts made by every club to qualify for top division status in the first place, as well as recognising that someone has to finish last, and that playing ability should not be used as the only indicator as to whether or not a team should remain in the top division.

We then discussed the issue of the playoffs. Mrs Orme explained that she found it hard to understand how Menwith Hill could go undefeated in 2002 in the Northern Conference, but yet they were only eligible for entry into the Premier level playoffs rather than the National Final Four itself. Nelson advised the meeting that he was strongly of the opinion that the Northern top division should not be seen as level with Premier Division South, but on a par with the RNL. Therefore, the issue of playoff qualification was very important as far as the North was concerned.

I explained my initial thoughts on the matter, in that there would be separate playoffs, and separate championships, for Division One South and Division One North, Premier South and Premier North, and RNL. Those present at the meeting did not agree with this. It was felt that the winner of the RNL and the winner of the North's top division should automatically qualify for the National Final Four, currently held in Brighton. The RNL's 2nd placed team would then play the North's 3rd best team, with the North's 2nd best team playing the South's 3rd placed team. The winners would then advance to the Final Four. If, as was believed in the South, the Northern teams were weaker than RNL teams, the South would dominate the playoffs. However, this would be a perfect opportunity for the Northern teams to grade themselves against RNL opposition, something that they have so far been unable to do.

I then raised the possibility of having a bottom division Final Four, to be held in Manchester for 2004. I explained that we had proved that such an event could be held at our ground, by organising and hosting the NC Tournament. It would help to re-dress the balance of playoffs being held solely in the South, it would help clubs to gauge their success against unknown opposition, and it would provide the bottom division clubs with something to aim their season towards. Tom advised that this was certainly a possibility, and something that BSUK would be happy to look into.

Overall, Tom explained that BSUK would be willing to get involved in anything in the North that moved baseball forward, and that was properly planned and organised. If there was a common goal for baseball in the North to improve and move forwards, Tom confirmed that BSUK would be in favour of such a goal, and would support it in any way that they could. In response to a question from Mrs Orme, Tom advised that the appointment of a NC Commissioner did not in any way reduce the involvement of BSUK in the North. It was not the intention of BSUK to appoint a NC rep to the Board simply to silence any critics, but to assist the NC teams in their dealings with the league, and attempt to promote baseball in the North.

Robbie asked if it was possible for a list to be drawn up, which would provisionally set out the intended minimum requirements for qualification for the top division, together with a financial projection of some description. I explained that this could take the form of a "tick box" list, so that teams would know exactly what they needed to do for 2004, and how much it would be likely to cost. I advised that I would attempt to draw up such a list, and circulate it to all the Northern teams prior to the "official" NC meeting, currently scheduled for 15th November.

I also agreed to put together a detailed report on the discussions that had already taken place, and again to circulate this amongst the Northern clubs. This would help to ensure that it would not be necessary to repeat such lengthy discussions on 15th November, and monopolise the meeting time dealing with issues that had already been raised. The Northern Tennis Club was suggested as the venue for the meeting on 15th November, as all present agreed that the facilities were suitable for such a meeting. Tom advised that he would consider this, in conjunction with the Board, and arrange for all clubs to be advised accordingly in due course.

There being no further business, the meeting concluded at 10pm.

Ian Marchment
Chair