

Glory Gardens 7 Down the Wicket

Bob Cattell

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Cricket Commentary

About the Author

Also by Bob Cattell
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About the Book

On returning from their West Indies tour, the players in GLORY GARDENS C. C. are devastated to learn that their new ground has been sold. Determined to find a new home, the team, led by Jo, vote to play the season's league games on Glory Gardens recreation ground where the club first began. But the pitch is dreadful, the changing rooms are a disgrace and their best batsmen are threatening to leave. Some drastic action is called for ...

Down the WICKET

BOB CATTELL
.....

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RED FOX

Chapter One

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE the beginning of the cricket season for dreams. You can do anything, be anything - score the fastest hundred, take a hat trick in your first over, win the League. A golden summer lies before you.

I was standing in the middle of the square at the Eastgate Priory cricket pitch, looking at the wicket and dreaming. It was Glory Gardens' first pre-season net practice and I'd arrived early. No one else was around and I began to think about our first League game against Croyland Crusaders, which was less than two weeks away.

Even I had to admit that we would struggle to improve on last year's amazing results. Glory Gardens had won everything in sight: the under 13s League; the national Champions League against the best teams in the country, and to round things off nicely we'd just returned from a triumphant tour of Barbados. A year ago no one had heard of Glory Gardens C.C.; now we are one of the most famous junior cricket teams in the land. Everyone is looking forward to the new season and, after the West Indies tour, we are all match fit, apart from Frankie, who thinks a training diet is seeing how many burgers he can eat between meals.

I walked back from the end of the square and measured out my 15-pace run up. Then I raced in and bowled an imaginary off-cutter. In my mind's eye I saw the ball bounce on a perfect length, cut back sharply between the batsman's bat and pad and rip out the middle stump. As it

cartwheeled through the air and the bails flew, I swung round, arm raised in triumph, and on one knee screamed an appeal at the nonexistent umpire. That was when I saw Frankie and Cal walking towards me from the pavilion, pointing.

“If the first sign of madness is talking to yourself, what does playing cricket on your own without a bat and ball make you?” said Frankie to Cal in a loud voice. Frankie is Glory Gardens’ plump wicket-keeper, and Cal usually opens the batting and bowls handy off-breaks – he lives next door to me and he’s my best friend. I’m Hooker Knight, by the way, captain of Glory Gardens. My nickname ‘Hooker’ comes from my initials: *Harry Oliver O’Neil Knight*.

“So this is what the captain gets up to when he’s on his own,” said Cal with a grin. “How many wickets have you bagged so far, Hooker?” Being captain doesn’t protect you from the teasing – especially in the company of Frankie and Cal.

“Have you seen Kiddo yet?” asked Frankie.

“No. He’s not here.”

“Isn’t he the one who’s always moaning about us not being on time for nets?” said Frankie. It was true enough. Kiddo Johnstone, our coach, is usually a stickler for punctuality.

Kiddo opens the batting for Eastgate Priory First XI. He was a county cricket pro when he was younger but now he’s our French teacher – Frankie calls it a sad case of a career in free fall. No one understands the game better than Kiddo; his training methods have played a big part in turning Glory Gardens from a team of hopefuls and no-hopers into champions.

“We’d better get changed and start without him,” I said, spotting some of the others arriving at the pavilion.

It was a warm and sunny April day and Frankie’s sister, Jo, the team secretary and organiser of everything that happens at the club, got us together for a photo before

training started. As usual Clive was the last to arrive. Jo put her camera on automatic and joined the group. That's her on the right. Frankie is the one wearing wicket-keeper's pads in the front row. Ohbert - sitting between them with his Walkman on full blast - is our secret weapon. He looks like the worst cricketer in the world but he has the habit of making strange things happen on the cricket field, usually by accident or sheer fluke. No one who saw it will ever forget his amazing run-out in the League of Champions final or the boundary catch against Griffiths Hall in Barbados.



*Back row: Marty Lear, Erica Davies,
Cal Sebastien, Tylan Vellacott, Matthew Rose,
Kris Johansen, Clive da Costa
Front row: Azzie Nazar, Mack McCurdy,
Jacky Gunn, Hooker Knight, Frankie Allen,
Ohbert Bennett, Jo Allen*

If Ohbert is at one end of Glory Gardens' rainbow of talent, then way out at the other are Clive and Azzie, probably the best two bats in the county, and Marty, who is a deadly fast bowler. This is how the squad's specialist skills break down:

Batters	Clive, Azzie, Matthew, Mack
Seam bowlers	Marty, Jacky, Kris
Spin bowler	Tylan
All-rounders	Hooker, Erica, Cal
Wicket-keeper	Frankie
No. 11 bat	Ohbert

I usually bat at five or six and come on as first change bowler after Marty and Jacky - I bowl left arm, medium-fast. Erica is a brilliant containing bowler and an excellent middle order bat.

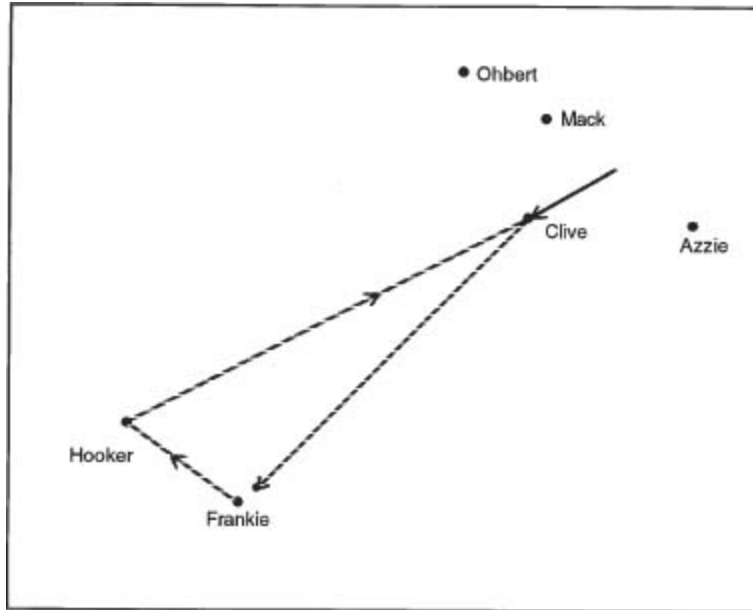
There was still no sign of Kiddo, so I started to organise things. I split the players into two groups. Cal and Matthew put on their pads and went into the nets with Erica, Marty, Jacky, Tylan and Kris bowling at them. The rest of us concentrated on fielding practice in the deep, using the plan Kiddo had taught us.

Mack is Glory Gardens' outstanding fielder; his ability to pick up the ball on the run - sliding, collecting and throwing all in one movement - can be breathtaking. His throw is deadly accurate too and his speed and aggression in the covers is usually worth a wicket or ten runs every game.

Ohbert had been watching Mack's sliding stops and it wasn't long before he was ready to try one of his own. The ball he chose to attack was bouncing towards him quite fast when, to everyone's horror, he launched himself at it with a violent two-footed sliding tackle. Both feet shot up in the air and he was almost standing on his head when the ball struck him square on the bum and he rolled back on top of it with a loud grunt.

"Nice one, Ohbert," shouted Frankie. "But you're supposed to get behind the ball - not get the ball on the behind."

Azzie helped a gasping Ohbert to his feet, and we were still laughing when Kiddo appeared. Something about his expression brought everyone to their senses.



This is a good way to practise long distance catching and fielding skills and it tests the accuracy of your throwing in to the keeper too. Frankie stands by a single stump with me alongside him. I knock the ball one-handed, using an old bat, either in the air or along the ground to the arc of fielders. The nearest fielder races in and catches or picks it up on the run and immediately throws in over the stump to Frankie, who chucks the ball to me, and so on.

He called us all together and we sat on the grass in a circle round him. Old Gatting, Kiddo's fat, wheezy mongrel, waddled over too and picked out Ohbert to sit next to. Perhaps he shares his taste in music - if so, he's the only one.

"I've got some bad news about the Priory, kiddoes," Kiddo said grimly. Glory Gardens is the junior team of the Eastgate Priory club, which puts out three senior League teams too.

"Is that why you're late for nets?" asked Frankie.

Kiddo ignored him. "I've been on the phone to our landlords," he continued, "and they've just told me that we've lost the Priory ground."

"Sounds a bit careless," said Frankie, who can't remain serious for two seconds, especially when everyone would prefer him to shut up. Jo gave him a fierce dig in the ribs.

“They’ve sold it,” continued Kiddo. “The entire ground is going to be developed as a superstore and restaurant complex.”

“But there are loads of supermarkets ...” began Jo.

Kiddo sighed. “I know, kiddo. And you don’t have to tell me either that there *aren’t* loads of cricket pitches. It’s a big blow and no mistake. With luck and some good fixture planning Eastgate Priory First XI might be able to play its games over at the Groves. But there’s no room there for the other teams. Heaven knows where the seconds, thirds and you lot are going to play this season.”

“This season!” said Cal. “You mean they’re throwing us out now?”

“From today. We don’t even get a week’s notice,” said Kiddo, grimly.

“That’s impossible,” said Jo. “Our season starts a week on Wednesday.”

“I understand how you feel,” said Kiddo. “But I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do. They’ve been planning this for some time and keeping it all very quiet. I imagine they’re hoping the new building will go up quickly and, after a bit, everyone will just come to accept it as part of the scenery.”

“Oh no they won’t,” said Frankie, suddenly jumping to his feet and looking as fierce as someone Frankie’s shape can. “We’ll fight them for it. They can’t just ...”

“They can, Frankie,” Kiddo said solemnly. “They’ve got everything on their side: the money, the council, the law. No one is going to let a little cricket club stand in the way of a multimillion-pound development.”

“We’ll start a protest; barricade the gates,” said Mack.

“Yeah, and we can pack the pavilion with booby traps and chain ourselves up in the oak tree,” said Frankie.

Kiddo smiled. “Somehow I don’t see you as an eco-warrior, Frankie. But I know how you feel. A lot of people have worked hard for this club, including you lot, and it’s sad to see it come to an end. We’re launching an appeal to

the Sports Minister but I don't suppose much will come of that. In the meantime, we have no right to play here and if Glory Gardens is going to compete in the League this year, you'd better put your energies into finding a new ground."

"Where?" I asked. "There are no cricket pitches round here. The nearest is the Wanderers and that's completely booked up."

"We wouldn't want to play there anyway, we'd catch something nasty," said Frankie. Wyckham Wanderers are one of the top teams in the county and Glory Gardens' deadliest local rivals.

"There is perhaps somewhere," said Jo, looking thoughtful.

"Where?"

"Glory Gardens."

"You don't mean the playing field?" said Cal in disbelief. Glory Gardens C.C. took its name from the recreation ground at the back of Bason Street where Cal and I live. Most of us played there before we formed a proper club and moved to the Priory. But it's not a real cricket ground. It's just a council rec and a lumpy and bumpy one at that - full of rabbit holes and molehills. It's used mainly by joggers and people walking their dogs.

"We can't play there, stupid," scoffed Clive.

"Why not?"

"For a start the pitch is a disgrace, the outfield's like a paddock and it hasn't got a pavilion. Apart from that it's a great idea."

"We could cut the grass and roll the pitch," Jo said stubbornly. "And there is that old gardener's hut that no one uses any more; maybe we could change in that."

"You're crazy," said Clive.

"Has anyone else got a better idea?"

No one spoke.

"Then who's with me?" said Jo. "Who wants to try and get Glory Gardens rec ready for the new season?"

Matthew's hand shot up immediately, followed by Cal, Tylan and Azzie. I looked at Cal and shrugged and then raised mine too, and slowly, one by one, more hands went up until the majority were behind Jo's plan. But Clive and Marty refused to budge. As Marty put it, "We're a good club now and we could be even better, but not if we play on a rubbish pitch."

Frankie wouldn't support his sister either. "I say we stay at the Priory and fight to the death," he cried. "All for one and one for all. Who's with me?"

Ohbert, who had raised his hand with the rest of us without hearing a word of the discussion, suddenly jumped to his feet and took off his headset. "Oh ... but I will ... I'll fight with you, Frankie."

Frankie looked at the others. "So it's just you and me then, Ohbert. We'll show them. We'll keep our cricket ground because we're not going to be pushed around by some miserable supermarket chain."

But we all knew, Frankie better than anyone, that there was little point in arguing with Jo when her mind was made up. She was already discussing her plans with Kiddo, and after nets everyone, including the doubters, went over to Glory Gardens' rec to take a proper look at the place.

Chapter Two

THE NEXT WEEK was madly busy. Thanks to Jo, things happened fast at the rec, and finally it began to look as if the first League game on Wednesday evening against Croyland Crusaders would go ahead after all.

At first sight, though, the ground had appeared a disaster. We had all walked round gloomily, prodding the pitch and peering through the cobwebby window of the little gardener's shed, which was full of junk almost to its roof. The outfield was as bad as Clive had said. The long grass was matted and tangled and there were loads of molehills dotted around. But the biggest problem was the playing area itself. There are two old cricket pitches in the middle of the playing field, which were last used for matches about two or three years ago. Since then the strips have become overgrown with weeds and the surface bumpy and cracked. There was even a molehill on a length at one end, which Frankie said would help Cal to turn his off-breaks for the first time ever.

But Jo wasn't put off by the general gloom. Within a couple of days she'd got permission from the council to use the ground for matches and training. Kiddo arranged for Bunter, the Priory groundsman, to come over with his mower and heavy roller, and after a couple of cuts the outfield didn't look too bad, though there was a nasty boggy patch down the slope at the Hereward Road end near the ditch. Even the pitches looked flatter and firmer after a few days hard work.

On Saturday we gave training a miss, apart from a few overs in the nets which Bunter had erected under the trees. Instead we tackled the job of clearing all the rubbish from the old gardener's shed into a skip which Tylan's dad had had delivered. Mr Vellacott and Kiddo supervised the job but we did most of the work. Predictably Clive didn't turn up, and neither did Frankie or Ohbert. Marty grumbled and groaned throughout the morning but no one took any notice of him - Marty and gloom go together like bangers and mash; Frankie says he's one of those people who always expects his toast to land with the butter-side face down.

The shed looked bigger once we'd thrown all the rubbish out and given it a good clean. You've never seen so much junk; there wasn't a single thing worth keeping. Kiddo brought over some of the benches from the Priory changing rooms and put up clothes hooks. Soon the old shed was beginning to look like a real pavilion changing room, although it was on the small side for two teams to use at once; we'd probably have to come already changed for home games from now on.

By the time Frankie and Ohbert showed up we'd nearly finished the job. Frankie was carrying a roll of posters and Ohbert had a glue bucket and a brush. Kiddo's old dog and club mascot, Gating, waddled along beside them; he often follows Ohbert about. "We'll put another one up here, Ohbert," said Frankie, and he grabbed the brush, plastered the shed door with glue and stuck a poster right in the middle of it. It read:

**ANOTHER WHITMART? NO. NEVER.
GLORY GARDENS LIVES FOR EVER.**

"What does it mean, Frankie?" asked Cal with a puzzled look.