

MCC universities aiming to unearth the Freddy of tomorrow

by Michael Devine

THERE ARE many educational institutions that provide excellent sporting opportunities for their students, but few can match the package offered by the MCC Universities - the collective name for the six University Centres of Cricketing Excellence (UCCE's) in the UK.

Introduced in October 2000 by the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB), the UCCE's are comprised of thirteen academic institutions, who aim to provide students with the best possible opportunity to fulfil their cricketing and academic potential.

Successful graduates include Essex captain Mark Pettini and England spin sensation Monty Panesar, ensuring MCC Lords and Universities manager Fraser Stewart is content with the scheme's progress so far.

"There have been quite a few players who have come through the system and we're very keen for more of our graduates to make the breakthrough into first-class cricket," he said.

"It's also a very good opportunity for young cricketers to get a degree behind them, which is very important as a relatively low percentage make it into the first-class game."

The UCCE's have been solely funded by the MCC since the beginning of the 2005 season, and each centre currently receives a basic entitlement of £70,000 a year, with an additional £100,000 available for the maintenance and upgrading of facilities.

The centres face each other in two-day and one-day matches in the first half of the summer, while each centre also gets the opportunity to

play three fixtures against first-class counties, a privilege previously exclusive to students at the Cambridge and Oxford Universities.

"The ECB put the UCCE's into the structure of first-class cricket, which has certainly helped the players to develop their game," said Stewart.

"Cambridge and Oxford were involved for many years, but the UCCE'S have opened it up to a much broader academic spectrum, and provided more students with the chance to pit their wits against the professionals."

The most successful UCCE in 2007 was the Cardiff/Glamorgan centre, who claimed the MCC Universities Championship for the first time, as well as the One-Day Challenge Trophy following a 14-run Duckworth-Lewis victory over Durham UCCE at Lords.

Coach Kevin Lyons is no stranger to the professional game following a successful career with Glamorgan, and he feels the MCC Universities offer a much-needed boost to the prospects of home-grown youngsters.

"The MCC invests a lot of money into this scheme, and it provides an excellent opportunity for young cricketers," said Lyons.

"When I was at Glamorgan, the likes of Steve Watkin took much longer to make the breakthrough into the county and national side, as they weren't able to work on their game and play regular cricket in the first half of the summer.

"This scheme allows youngsters

to play frequent competitive cricket from April to June, as well as the opportunity to receive technical coaching in the winter.

"As a result, many of the players from the scheme are regular county players by the age of 21, and don't find themselves stuck behind their fellow pros in terms of fitness and match practice.

"They still have to work very hard to make it in the game, but this scheme ensures they are given the best possible chance."

The Cardiff/Glamorgan centre currently boasts four young bowlers who are contracted to county sides. Glamorgan captured the 19-year-old trio of Will Owen, Chris Ashling and Alex Jones, while 20-year-old Tom Allin became Ashley Giles' first signing at Warwickshire, giving him the opportunity to work with legendary South African paceman Allan Donald.

However, Stewart believes more of the UCCE students deserve recognition, and has called on the county sides to provide further opportunities for the MCC's young students.

"If they're not good enough then fair enough, but they have to be given a chance," he argued. "We strongly believe there is untapped talent within the scheme, and we are desperate for this to be recognised. We have introduced a scheme this year with two counties, to allow the best non-contracted players to go out on loan from July to September at the MCC's expense."

"It will effectively be like a summer contract for them, and will give more of our players the chance to prove themselves."



Panesar is a graduate of the MCC scheme

Panter aiming for a medal in Beijing

In our final *Road to Beijing* interview George Kotschy caught up with Anne Panter of the Great Britain women's hockey team.

May is a stressful time for every student; with exams, essay deadlines and dissertations looming large and it's an equally busy time for 23 year-old Loughborough Maths and Economic student Anne Panter. Unlike her fellow academics though, Anne is not fretting about the result she wants in her degree. She is flying out to Cologne with her club side Leicester to compete in the European Championships and preparing for the Beijing Olympics with the Great Britain team.

Anne has deferred her exams until next year to allow her to prepare for the Olympics, explaining "the final selection for Beijing is done at the end of June so I didn't want to be worrying about exams that close to the selection." But Anne has other things on her mind as she attempts to help her club side go one better than last

by George Kotschy

year in the European Championships by winning the competition.

Anne's progression to playing at the elite level of European hockey and competing for a place in the Great Britain Olympic team is the latest chapter in a passion-filled career that began at the age of 9. Anne joined national league division two outfit Kettering Hockey Club at the age of 13 and then moved on to Premier League side Leicester where she won the league last year. Anne attributes this success to her parents and, most of all, her "hockey fanatic" P.E. teacher, an England junior team goalkeeping coach.

Having reached the high standard she now enjoys, Anne admits it is tough to balance a student life with training and preparing for hockey. She trains three days a



Panter watching on as a team mate strikes the ball

week with the GB squad at Bisham Abbey and, with individual strength and speed workouts as well as club training, she undertakes a total of 11-12 sessions a week. Anne admits that, with it being an Olympic year, her club have consequently missed out; "I've managed to play in three games and we've only done two weeks of club training prior to this tournament."

With such a heavy training

schedule it is vital, especially with a degree as challenging as Maths and Economics, that Anne has the support of her lecturers and tutors. Fortunately Anne's tutors "have been really understanding. I spoke to them about it and they've just let me suspend all my exams and stuff until next year so they've been really supportive over it all."

With her exams suspended Anne is free to concentrate on Beijing in August. She explains

that the team's preparations for the competition will include warm weather training, 10 days at a training camp in Macaw and heat chamber sessions during which the climate can be controlled in a small room containing treadmills and exercise bikes.

With such a young team heading to the Olympics (the average age is 22), Anne is philosophical but optimistic about their chances this summer; "I think it will be a learning curve but if we play at our best we could sneak a medal. It's a case of us playing to our potential every game." She is also well aware that Holland will be the team to beat in China; "They're ranked number one in the world and they're a very difficult team to overcome."

Beyond this summer, the obvious goal is the hugely exciting opportunity to play in the first Olympics in London in over sixty years. Anne states that the future is bright for British hockey whatever happens this summer; "The thought of playing in an Olympics in your own country is massive. Obviously we're going to Beijing with aspirations there but also, in four years time I think we'll be in a good position to be challenging for the gold medal."