

STALAG FIXTURES

Steve Pittard on the lengths taken by prisoners of war in camps such as Colditz to ensure their games of cricket were uninterrupted

The lack of games facilities in an all-British camp is a disgrace," bemoaned Charles 'Lucky' Lockett on first entering Colditz. He spent much of his leisure time in the attic with the Colditz Cock (the legendary glider), though his right to play cricket should have been covered by the Geneva Convention. Captors were duty bound to 'encourage as much as possible the organisation of intellectual and sporting pursuits'.

PoW camps received a standard Red Cross sports parcel, which contained numerous soccer and rugby paraphernalia but only two cricket balls (often composite). Sometimes the string proved more useful than the contents. At Stalag VIII B in Lamsdorf it was used to fashion cricket nets. Cricket balls soon became damaged or irretrievable and some individuals became adept at winding string around a pebble and then applying varnish to produce a serviceable cricket ball. Stumps and bats would be included in later Red Cross sets. With Linseed in short supply, bats became brittle, though at a push oil from sardine cans acted as



British officers at Oflag 4C, Colditz, in 1941

a substitute. Annoyingly, some bats became further weakened by well-meaning M19 boffins who inserted covert screwdrivers as escape aids into the handles. Pads and boxes were also scarce but cable knit sweaters abounded. Such items were practically de rigueur among British airmen, whether engaged in playing cricket or not.

Chaps incarcerated in Spangenberg Castle (Oflag IX A/H) found it virtually impossible to find a suitable

spot to pitch wickets, but remained undaunted. The only viable area appeared to be a curved section within the dry sunken moat, about 40 feet wide. Though littered with rubble, tin cans and debris, Major-General Fortune soon organised the levelling of the undulating surface and topped it off with three inches of soil. Having pounded the pitch into shape with croquet mallets, to keep it in good order, a by-law made it verboten for players to wear anything other than rubber-soled shoes. The wicket consisted of plywood boards trimmed to meet MCC specifications and propped up by stones. Tennis balls were used but needed fine tuning because



A standard issue WWII Red Cross cricket ball

of their steepling bounce. In overt ball tampering shenanigans worthy of a Pakistan Test bowler, Elastoplast patches were sewn on either side to provide a better weight. This refinement also aided spin and offered some protection against the rough-hewn stone walls.

A couple of Old Harrovians, familiar with the confines of house-yard cricket, adapted the rules to accommodate the idiosyncratic playing arena. On one side, a 4-foot high grassy bank sloped up to the 30-foot high curved castle wall and any rebounds remained in play. The unpredictable angle of the ricochets often made monkeys out of the fielders. Third man region contained a flowerbed. It was designated a boundary, though awarded only one run, to discourage hits there. Another allotment received similar dispensation, after an irate Colonel protested that reckless off drives played havoc with his tomato crop.

Matches consisted of two innings each, limited to fifteen overs, and took place between two and four o'clock. Thus nobody need bolt their lunch or be late for tea. Batsmen retired once they'd reached 20, though some bounders deliberately nudged singles when nearing this landmark. Then on 19 they would attempt to slog a six and depart with a score of 25. With all the rules finally ironed out, a team tally of 50 was considered par. No side exceeded 100, with the Highland Brigade capitulating to all out 0.

Officers bagged the pitch on Sundays for encounters against NCOs. Also rival huts challenged each other and 'club' fixtures took place between Gunners, Greenjackets, Commandos, etc. Though a terribly unreliable team player – he kept escaping – Terence Prittie sent a detailed account to Blighty documenting the queer cricketing arrangements. German censors



Nets fashioned from unwound cricket balls at Stalag VIII B in Lamsdorf, Germany

intercepted the report and, thinking it must contain a secret message, spent days trying to crack the hidden code. Completely stumped, they resorted to sending it to Lord Haw-Haw, whose department concluded that the text contained a perfectly ordinary explanation of a most irregular cricket game.

Many PoW cricket rules anticipated modern one-day regulations. At Spangenberg, any delivery passing even a whisker outside leg stump was signalled 'wide'. Lamsdorf introduced neutral umpires, resplendent in hospital white coats. This extremely well-organised camp hosted a triangular 'Test' tournament in 1943 between England, Australia and New Zealand, which often attracted an audience, admittedly captive, of 2,500. England failed to reach the final, leading to the selectors being sacked. For the following summer's competition, South Africa replaced the Kiwis and boasted 'Billy' Wade, a Test wicketkeeper, on the team.

Pitch invasions sometimes marred proceedings. Germans failed to respect boundary lines – notably the Polish border – and one goon trespassed on the outfield with his bicycle and German shepherd in tow. Another jackbooted Kraut received a volley of abuse and demanded to know the exact meaning of 'stupid bastard'. He was assured the English expression referred to 'a person who walks across cricket pitches instead of around them'. Sir Francis Lacey, a former MCC secretary, blamed the war on Europeans not playing cricket: "Had Hitler and Mussolini been cricketers, I do not think we should have had all this trouble that is going on in Europe today". Hitler did toy with cricket but considered the sport insufficiently violent for the tastes of German Fascists. To make it more appealing/sadistic, he advocated the removal of pads. 🐾