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2025 Rothesay County Championship preview

DIVISION ONE

DURHAM

Previewed by Graham Hardcastle - ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: Alex Lees

Head Coach: Ryan Campbell

2024 finish: Fifth (Division One)

2024 highest run-scorer: David Bedingham (1,331)

2024 highest wicket-taker: Matthew Potts (33)

Key winter moves: Experienced Australia A seamer Brendan Doggett has signed an overseas deal for the first two months of the season, supplementing prolific South African batter David Bedingham, who is available all summer aside from any Test Match commitments. Scotland batter Michael Jones has moved to birth-county Lancashire, but three domestic recruits have arrived in the North East; opening batter Emilio Gay, all-rounder Will Rhodes and fast bowler Sam Connors.

What we're looking forward to seeing: After winning Division Two in 2023, Durham consolidated their top-flight position last season by finishing mid-table courtesy of four wins and five draws. Can they kick on now and give champions Surrey something to think about? England Test captain Ben Stokes, currently sidelined following hamstring surgery, could return to county colours during the early stages of the summer as he builds up to blockbuster series against India and Australia this year.

Final thought: It will be fascinating to chart the progress of three highly-rated homegrown youngsters as they tackle a summer in which Alex Lees will captain Durham's Championship team alongside their white-ball sides. Opening batter Ben McKinney scored an England Lions century against Australia A this winter and is targeting a breakthrough campaign, while fast bowlers Daniel Hogg and James Minto can further progress after brief - and exciting - exposure in last summer's Rothesay County Championship.

ESSEX

Previewed by Martin Smith – ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: Tom Westley

Director of cricket: Chris Silverwood

2024 finish: Fourth

2024 highest run-scorer: Dean Elgar (1,144)

2024 highest wicket-taker: Jamie Porter (56)

Key winter moves: Essex plans were thrown into disarray when Indian Shardul Thaker pulled out of his intended seven-match arrangement at late notice when called up as an IPL replacement. Unless Essex can unearth another available overseas bowler to ease the burden on the pace attack, returning director of cricket Chris Silverwood will have to revive his Midas touch of yore and bring out the best from the existing squad.

What we're looking forward to seeing: By his own extraordinary standards, Simon Harmer had a distinctly below-par campaign in 2024. For the first time in eight seasons at Chelmsford he failed to add to his tally of 35 five-fers and ten 10-wicket hauls achieved in Essex colours. He still took 45 Championship wickets with his off-spin, but at an uncharacteristically high cost and strike-rate. We're looking forward to seeing a revitalised Harmacy.

Player to watch: Jordan Cox's summer was dogged by injury, yet he still topped the Essex averages with 918 runs at 65.57. It earned him a call to arms from England and he was all set to make his Test debut in New Zealand in the autumn before suffering another setback. Another flying start this time around would keep him firmly on the selectors' radar – and bolster Essex's middle-order.

Final thought: It may be seven-and-a-half years since Silverwood left Essex for England, but there could be as many as half-a-dozen familiar names in the first XI he selects on April 4. Promising opener Charlie Allison was 12 back in 2017, but such has been his rapid rise that his should be a name on Silverwood's team sheet for the next decade and more.

HAMPSHIRE

Previewed by Alex Smith - ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: Ben Brown

Head Coach: Adi Birrell

2024 finish: Second

2024 highest run-scorer: James Vince (986)

2024 highest wicket-taker: Liam Dawson (54)

Key winter moves: The winter has been tumultuous with James Vince moving to Dubai – after attacks on his family house last summer - while Mo Abbas hasn't been retained as overseas. That is over 1,000 runs and 36 wickets from last season alone to recover. Experienced top-order batter Mark Stoneman has been added to somewhat fill the Vince void, while a battery of fast bowlers will replace Abbas. Sonny Baker, who has arrived from Somerset, is one of them.

What we're looking forward to seeing: The fastest of fast bowling attacks. Abbas' exit frees up space for some of the quickest young talent on the circuit. Baker, John Turner, Scott Currie, Brad Wheal and Eddie Jack can all bowl in the vicinity of 90mph. Kyle Abbott will once again lead the attack, with the experienced heads of Keith Barker and James Fuller helping to oversee the crop of wunderkinder.

Player to watch: Tom Prest will soften the blow of Vince's migration. He ticks the batting aesthetic, quick-scoring and slip fielding boxes, and most importantly the run scoring. Prest is quite simply a Vince clone with 24 rather than 14 on his back. Three centuries last year at an average of just over 48 suggest he could not only get out of Vince's shadow in 2025, but eclipse it.

Final thought: Hampshire have finished in the top three in each of the past three seasons, with 2024's second-place finish their highest since 2005. One further step shouldn't be that big, and yet without Vince it feels massive. Ben

Brown is now captain, with the likes of Nick Gubbins and the increasingly impressive Liam Dawson crucial in filling the leadership and batting vacuum. Indian-based GMR Group took over Hampshire over the winter – making them the first overseas-owned county - although little is expected to change off the field in 2025.

NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

Previewed by Jon Culley - ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: Haseeb Hameed

Head Coach: Peter Moores

2024 finish: Eighth

2024 highest run-scorer: Haseeb Hameed (1,091)

2024 highest wicket-taker: Dillon Pennington (31)

Key winter moves: South African seamer Dane Paterson's move to Middlesex after 180 wickets in four seasons at Trent Bridge came as a surprise, although international cricket may now limit his availability. Australia's 24-year-old pacy all-rounder Fergus O'Neill (four matches in April) and Pakistan quick Mohammad Abbas (six rounds, in May and September) arrive as overseas bowlers. Conor McKerr from Surrey further boosts the seam stock. South African wicketkeeper-batter Kyle Verreynne can offer significant middle-order runs.

What we're looking forward to seeing: Remember Josh Tongue? Some 20 months after his move from Worcestershire to Trent Bridge was announced, the 27-year-old pace bowler is at last ready to make his Nottinghamshire debut after a torrid time with injuries that has restricted him to just 12 first-class matches since June 2021. As a contracted England player, his workload will be controlled but at least three appearances in the first block of Rothesay County Championship fixtures is on the cards.

Player to watch: After he burst on the scene with 22 wickets in four matches at the end of last season, Nottinghamshire accept it will be hard to keep record-breaking 17-year-old off-spinner Farhan Ahmed out of their line-up irrespective of the need to manage his physical development. Even with talented leggie Calvin Harrison and quality left-arm spinner Liam Patterson-White offering competition, Farhan is in pole position to be the side's No 1 choice as specialist slow bowler.

Final thought: After looking more like relegation candidates than title prospects since returning to Division One two seasons ago, Nottinghamshire are sensibly not setting their ambitions higher than finishing in the top half of the table in 2025. Although they have a decent hand of bowlers, more is needed from the batters, particularly the middle order, and particularly in the first innings, where they have fallen notably short.

SOMERSET

Previewed by Richard Latham – ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: Lewis Gregory

Head Coach: Jason Kerr

2024 finish: Third

2024 highest run-scorer: Tom Lammonby (941)

2024 highest wicket-taker: Jack Leach (45)

Key winter moves: New Zealand seamer Matt Henry is expected to rejoin the club for seven Championship games, starting with the second round of matches against Sussex at Hove, subject to recovery from shoulder and knee problems. South African all-rounder Migael Pretorius has been re-signed for the whole of the 2025 season and should be available for all formats, strengthening both the batting and bowling departments.

What we're looking forward to seeing: How Will Smeed will adapt to Championship cricket. At the age of 23, the scorer of the first-ever century in The Hundred has changed his mind about concentrating solely on white-ball cricket and is ready to add his considerable skills to a Somerset team who have struggled for consistent top-order runs in the four-day format. Smeed may have to be patient in awaiting his chance, but provides a hugely talented new option for a top six batting place.

Final thought: Somerset are employing a Performance Psychologist this season and much could depend on how the players respond mentally to the bitter disappointment of making a sustained challenge for all three domestic trophies last season without winning any of them. The finale of that campaign proved a huge anti-climax, but the team still finished third in the Championship and there is no reason why they should not be up there fighting for a first ever title again.

SURREY

Previewed by Mark Baldwin - ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: Rory Burns

Head Coach: Gareth Batty

2024 finish: Champions

2024 highest run-scorer: Rory Burns (1,073)

2024 highest wicket-taker: Dan Worrall (52)

Key winter moves: The arrival from Yorkshire of Matt Fisher is expected to strengthen still further Surrey's all-powerful fast-bowling stocks. Fisher, at 27, sees the move as a chance to push on an already promising career and reach new levels in both county and international cricket. From the start of May, too, the champions' enviable pace battery will be boosted by Nathan Smith, who joins as Surrey's latest overseas signing and who is available,

outside any New Zealand commitments, for the rest of the summer.

What we're looking forward to seeing: Can anyone stop Surrey, champions for the last three seasons, completing a fourth consecutive title triumph? And will newly-qualified pace ace Dan Worrall, the spearhead of the glorious 'three-peat' with 139 wickets at 21.17 since joining Surrey for the start of the 2022 season, continue his remarkable late-career Surrey surge by winning an England Test call at 33?

Player to watch: Although many eyes will be on Fisher, who won his only England Test cap of an injury-studded career to date in March 2022, expect exciting 22-year-old Tom Lawes to kick on this season. Lawes, who can also bat in the lower middle order, already has 74 first-class wickets at 24.36 but – swinging the ball both ways at sharp pace – he can get much better yet.

Final thought: As ever, Surrey will have to juggle their considerable resources cleverly given the many calls from England red-ball and white-ball squads, plus the Indian Premier League during the county season's early stages. The spine of the championship team, however, looks as reassuringly solid as before: skipper Burns and Dom Sibley at the top of the order, Ben Foakes to keep wicket peerlessly and add consistent runs to a strong and deep batting line-up, while Jordan Clark (116 wickets in the last three years) helps Worrall (and Lawes) lead the attack.

SUSSEX

Previewed by Bruce Talbot - ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: John Simpson

Head Coach: Paul Frbrace

2024 finish: Champions (Division Two)

2024 highest run-scorer: John Simpson (1197)

2024 highest wicket-taker: Jack Carson (50)

Key winter moves: Ex-Somerset top-order batter George Thomas spent part of the winter working for a power-tool company in Melbourne. Farbrace regards him as a player with unfulfilled potential. After trials in January, another 21-year-old signed in slow left-artermer Troy Henry whose wages for the first year of his contract will be paid by the ACE programme. Medium-fast bowler Nantes Oosthuizen, nurtured at Seaford College by former skipper Chris Adams, joined on a rookie contract.

What we're looking forward to seeing: Once again Paul Farbrace has recruited a group of solid, proven overseas players with Dan Hughes, Jayden Seales, Nathan McAndrew and Jaydev Unadkat all returning for a second - and in Unadkat's case third - season while Australian seamer Gurinder Sandhu arrives during June and July. Their contributions will be pivotal to hopes of staying up and having another good run in the Blast, where they were semi-finalists last year.

Player to watch: Opener Tom Haines, who signed a new three-year deal in the winter, averages 37.60 and has made 4,588 first-class runs but none of them against Division One attacks. If he can flourish against better bowlers - and there's never been any doubt about his technique or temperament - then it will help Sussex's chances of establishing themselves in Division One a lot and perhaps enhance his claims for a Test place as well.

Final thought: Sussex return to Division One after a ten-year absence and Paul Farbrace has targeted a top-four finish. He'll have a better idea of whether that's achievable after the first month when Sussex face Warwickshire, Surrey, Somerset and Nottinghamshire - all established top-flight counties. There shouldn't be many concerns about their bowling attack, but can Sussex score enough runs? Contributions from skipper John Simpson and a strong middle order may be crucial again.

WARWICKSHIRE

Previewed by Brian Halford - ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: Alex Davies

Head Coach: Ian Westwood

2024 finish: Seventh

2024 highest run-scorer: Alex Davies (1,115)

2024 highest wicket-taker: Olly Hannon-Dalby (50)

Key winter moves: The era of transition continues at Edgbaston with a new head coach, Ian Westwood replacing Mark Robinson, and performance director, James Thomas replacing Gavin Larsen. Two key players have departed (Will Rhodes to Durham and Michael Burgess to retirement). In has come Ethan Bamber from Middlesex while the squad will be patched up with four overseas players: Tom Latham (all season), Vishwa Fernando (April), Beau Webster (May-July) and Hasan Ali (May-September).

What we're looking forward to seeing: New Zealand batter Tom Latham arrives for his first sustained crack at county cricket, having previously paid fleeting visits to Durham, Kent and Surrey. Two of their linchpin runscorers having chosen to leave during the winter, Warwickshire will look to the 32-year-old for match-shaping runs. Latham will be aiming to harvest more happy memories of Edgbaston where he scored the winning runs in New Zealand's eight-wicket Test victory in 2021.

Player to watch: Ed Barnard's first two seasons at Edgbaston have not been successful ones for the team but the former Worcestershire player has quietly, impressively enhanced his own reputation as an all-rounder potentially capable of pushing himself into England contention. Productive and, at times, imperious with the bat, he was also a key member of the seam attack in 2024, finishing second top wicket-taker behind the excellent Olly Hannon-Dalby.

Final thought: Warwickshire's supporters are becoming impatient after several seasons of drift, particularly in red-ball cricket. Ian Westwood, having completed the path from Under 10s player to head coach, must get some stability and consistency into the team. Warwickshire's 1972 County Championship triumph was followed by a miserable decade. A strong season

is needed to assure their supporters that their 2021 triumph will not be followed by a similarly thin era.

WORCESTERSHIRE

Previewed by John Curtis - ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: Brett D'Oliveira

Head Coach: Alan Richardson

2024 finish: Sixth

2024 highest run-scorer: Kashif Ali (767)

2024 highest wicket-taker: Tom Taylor, Joe Leach, Nathan Smith (all 27 wickets)

Key winter moves: All-rounder, Ben Allison, and spinner, Fateh Singh, have signed three-year deals after moving from Essex and Nottinghamshire respectively following successful loan spells at Visit Worcestershire New Road. Pace bowler, Jacob Duffy, is the latest in a lengthy line of New Zealanders to enjoy a spell with Worcestershire. He is available for Rothesay County Championship and Vitality Blast cricket throughout the first half of the summer until the end of June.

What we're looking forward to seeing: Worcestershire were the bookies favourites last summer to make an instant return to Division Two but achieved their highest finish since the competition was split into two divisions in 2000. They aimed from pre-season for a top six spot rather than just survive and the positive attitude and never-say-die spirit demanded by club captain Brett D'Oliveira, despite several key injuries, will again be at the fore in 2025 and there is more depth to the squad to give genuine hope of securing a third successive year in the top flight.

Player to watch: Although he has spent several winters playing franchise

cricket plus The Hundred, Adam Hose is determined to make his mark in the red-ball format. One the reasons he moved from Warwickshire was to have more Championship opportunities and Hose has played 25 of 28 four-day games and, although lacking consistency, has made several vital contributions including in the 2024 memorable away wins over Durhan and Essex.

Final thought: Worcestershire know they will have to again perform well to have a realistic chance of maintaining Division One status with newly-promoted Yorkshire and Sussex both looking strong. But, despite go-to pace bowler Joe Leach retiring, there is genuine belief they will not be whipping boys especially if they avoid what was at times a shockingly lengthy injury list in 2024, particularly in the bowling department. The likes of Jake Libby, Gareth Roderick and Kashif Ali are capable of providing ample runs at the top of the order but they also have a posse of all-rounders like Matthew Waite, Tom Taylor and Ben Allison which mean they bat very deep.

YORKSHIRE

Previewed by Graham Hardcastle - ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: Jonny Bairstow

Head Coach: Anthony McGrath

2024 finish: Second (Division Two)

2024 highest run-scorer: Adam Lyth (1,215)

2024 highest wicket-taker: Ben Coad (56)

Key winter moves: Head coach Anthony McGrath has returned home following nine successful seasons as Essex's assistant coach, head coach and director of cricket, while ex-international all-rounder Gavin Hamilton has filled the newly-created general manager of cricket post. Seamer Jack White has signed from Northamptonshire, helping replace Surrey-bound Matthew

Fisher. New Zealand quick Ben Sears and Australians Jordan Buckingham (seamer) and Will Sutherland (all-rounder) will fulfil overseas duties during the first half of 2025.

What we're looking forward to seeing: Promoted Yorkshire's star-studded batting line-up during the early stages of the season. If things work out as they hope, you could see a top order including Jonny Bairstow, Harry Brook, Joe Root and Dawid Malan at some point during the first block of matches in April and May. That really is a mouthwatering prospect for Yorkshire's supporters, but perhaps not so much for Division One bowlers.

Final thought: A new era at Headingley sees the county under new leadership both on and off the field. Jonny Bairstow's appointment as their new red-ball captain indicates his availability across the entire campaign - a huge boost for a county who finished second behind Division Two champions Sussex last season courtesy of five wins in their last seven games. Yorkshire are hopeful they can follow up promotion by winning county cricket's main prize.

DIVISION TWO

DERBYSHIRE

Previewed by Nigel Gardner - ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: Wayne Madsen

Head Coach: Mickey Arthur

2024 finish: Eighth

2024 highest run-scorer: Wayne Madsen 1005

2024 highest wicket-taker: Zak Chappell 31

Key winter moves: The 27-year-old Tasmanian opener Caleb Jewell has been

signed for the season to bring aggression to the top order while 31-year-old New Zealand fast bowler Blair Tickner returns for a second season after his first spell was cut short following his wife's leukaemia diagnosis. With Sarah now on the road to recovery, Tickner will bring his international quality and experience to the seam attack.

What we're looking forward to seeing: Derbyshire have points to prove as well as play for after a desperately poor red-ball season in 2024 when they won only one game and lost six. David Lloyd has stepped down as captain to focus on his own game and will be looking to forge an attacking opening partnership with Jewell.

Player to watch: Although he only turns 18 in April, Harry Moore has already made a big impression. The fast-bowling product of the club's academy won plaudits with his control and accuracy after making his first-class debut in September and his potential has been recognised by call-ups for England Under-19s and England Lions along with a three-year contract until the end of the 2027 season.

Final thought: At the age of 41, the evergreen Madsen resumes the captaincy role he relinquished in 2016 to take on the challenge of reviving the county's fortunes in four-day cricket. For the team to be competitive, it will require another productive season from one of Derbyshire's greatest players plus far better support from the rest of the batting unit which mustered only two centuries between them in 2024.

GLAMORGAN

Previewed by Blake Bint – ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: Sam Northeast

Head Coach: Richard Dawson (interim)

2024 finish: Sixth

Highest run-scorer: Colin Ingram (1,351)

Highest wicket-taker: Timm van der Gugten and James Harris (30)

Key winter moves: On and off the pitch there's been changes in South Wales. A new coaching staff to accompany a new overseas – Asitha Fernando – who will join Colin Ingram for the first seven matches of the season. Meanwhile, Mir Hamza and fan favourite, Marnus Labuschagne, aren't renewed. Somerset duo, Ned Leonard (permanent) and Shaoib Bashir (three-match loan) also sign alongside local youth prospect Callum Nicholls.

What we're looking forward to seeing: A third head coach in as many years, Richard Dawson already has vast experience taking Gloucestershire to white-ball success and has been part of the England set-up across the Men's, Lions and U19s teams. Timm van der Gugten always provides excitement with the ball, with the addition last year of Mason Crane, the frontline spinner Glamorgan have cried out for. Will Smale's breakout season can hopefully transfer to red-ball success and combine with Eddie Byrom for a formidable opening partnership; another area of question marks in recent years.

Final thought: Colin Ingram is plying his trade in Cardiff once again and with Sam Northeast and Kiran Carlson for top-order company, Glamorgan will be disappointed to win just two matches in their sixth-placed finish in 2024. The area of concern this year could be the all-rounder slot. Ambidextrous-bowling, hard-hitting 21-year-old Ben Kellaway could turn heads if preferred to Dan Douthwaite and Zain-Ul-Hassan.

GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Previewed by Richard Latham - ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: Cameron Bancroft

Head Coach: Mark Alleyne

2024 finish: Seventh

2024 highest run-scorer: James Bracey (1,089)

2024 highest wicket-taker: Marchant de Lange (30)

Key winter moves: Australian Test all-rounder Cameron Green will strengthen Gloucestershire's batting with five appearances in the first block of Championship matches, starting with the third game against Kent at Canterbury. The 25-year-old is recovering from back surgery and unlikely to bowl. But he boasts a top score of 174 not out in Test cricket and will be keen to score runs ahead of Australia's World Test Championship Final against South Africa at Lord's in June.

What we're looking forward to seeing: Gloucestershire's pace attack may well turn out to be the quickest in the Second Division, with Marchant de Lange, Ajeet Singh Dale and England Lions seamer Zaman Akhter all capable of generating pace and bounce. With quality back-up in Matt Taylor, Josh Shaw and Tom Price, bowling points should be plentiful.

Final thought: The shrewd Alleyne was expected to make an impact on his return to the club as head coach last season and duly delivered when his unheralded team were crowned T20 champions, beating arch-rivals Somerset on a memorable day for players, staff and supporters at Edgbaston. That success will surely breed confidence for red ball cricket and new four-day captain Cameron Bancroft can realistically target promotion in his first season at the helm.

KENT

Previewed by Fred Atkins - ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: Daniel Bell-Drummond

Head Coach: Adam Hoolioake

2024 finish: 10th (Division One)

2024 highest run-scorer: Daniel Bell-Drummond (853)

2024 highest wicket-taker: Matt Parkinson (36)

Key winter moves: Adam Hollioake's appointment as Head Coach was a surprise to everyone, including the man himself. Chris Benjamin will provide competition to Harry Finch in the wicket-keeper/batter role, although arguably the biggest surprise was the news Ben Compton had decided to stay put, as he was rumoured to be leaving after being inexplicably excluded from the 50-over squad.

What we're looking forward to seeing: Not turning up to every single match in the sure and certain knowledge of a looming, heavy defeat. Before Hollioake was appointed there was a suggestion that white ball-cricket would be prioritised, but senior players like Joe Denly dismissed this idea as "rubbish" and the new coach won't tolerate playing in any other way than to win.

Player to watch: Harry Finch has one of the great back stories in county cricket. Having all but given up on his career after he was released by Sussex, he was given a chance by Kent when the entire first team squad went into isolation during the 2021 season. He scored a century on debut (against Sussex), reinvented himself as a wicket-keeper, was player-of-the-year last year and has even been tried as an opener in pre-season.

Final thought: The top order still looks strong and against Division Two attacks they should post enough to give Parkinson something to work with on day four. The worry is that a bowling unit ruined by injuries last year still looks vulnerable and Director of Cricket Simon Cook is finding that trying to sign overseas players is like trying to nail jelly to a wall.

LANCASHIRE

Previewed by Graham Hardcastle - ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: Keaton Jennings

Head Coach: Dale Benkenstein

2024 finish: Ninth (Division One)

2024 highest run-scorer: Keaton Jennings (1,006)

2024 highest wicket-taker: George Balderson (36)

Key winter moves: The Red Rose have signed versatile Scotland international batter Michael Jones from Durham. Jones was a Lancashire junior before moving away in search of greater opportunity. Experienced Australian opener Marcus Harris is locked in for the bulk of this season's promotion push, while West Indian quick Anderson Phillip returns until the end of July. Aussie T20 Blast recruits Chris Green and Ashton Turner will also be available for any mid-summer Championship cricket.

What we're looking forward to seeing: Jimmy Anderson's return! Test Match Cricket's most prolific seamer (704 wickets) has signed a one-year contract to feature in this summer's Championship and Blast, a deal which takes his career beyond his 43rd birthday. Anderson hasn't played at all since his final Test against the West Indies at Lord's last July. Lancashire begin their campaign against Middlesex at the same venue. His second appearance of 2025 will be the 300th of his first-class career.

Final thought: Lancashire are the bookmakers' firm favourites to win Division Two, something which will be the main aim for the players and coaching staff this summer. As much as the county have some exciting youngsters in their ranks - none more so than teenaged England Lion Rocky Flintoff - they really need their senior players to stand up. That was something which hurt them badly as they were relegated last summer.

LEICESTERSHIRE

Previewed by Jon Culley - ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: Peter Handscomb

Head Coach: Alfonso Thomas

2024 finish: Fifth

2024 highest run-scorer: Peter Handscomb (894)

2024 highest wicket-taker: Scott Currie (29)

Key winter moves: Leicestershire's off-season signings suggest that winning promotion to Division One of the Rothesay County Championship is at the top of their priorities. Aussie Peter Handscomb, who hit five hundreds in his first two seasons at the club, returns for a third as captain. In a strong hand of overseas players, he is joined by the New Zealand-born Netherlands international seam bowler Logan Van Beek and Pakistan captain and master batter Shan Masood.

What we're looking forward to seeing: Masood made 1,074 runs in eight Championship matches for Derbyshire in 2022, including a double hundred against Leicestershire at Grace Road, so he clearly has a liking for the Uptonsteel County Ground. After two years skippering Yorkshire this will be his fourth consecutive English summer, so no time will be needed to adjust to conditions here after a winter in which he has made Test hundreds in India (against England) and in South Africa.

Player to watch: After the emergence of two precociously-talented teenage bowlers in leg-spinner Rehan Ahmed and beanpole pace man Josh Hull in the last couple of seasons, the Foxes have another up their sleeve in Alex Green, a fast bowler potentially in the Hull mould, standing just an inch shorter than his lanky team-mate at 6ft 6ins. Leicestershire have already backed the England Under-19 international for a big future by handing him a three-year professional contract.

Final thought: Bottom of the Division Two table without a win as recently as 2022, the erstwhile perennial whipping boys of the County Championship have proved a different proposition over the past two seasons. A good crop of home-grown youngsters, combined with some shrewd signings, have made for a properly competitive team. If Shan Masood can add some magic, there's a genuine possibility that a 21-year-exile from the top flight might be about to end.

MIDDLESEX

Previewed by Ben Kosky - ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: Toby Roland-Jones

Head Coach: Richard Johnson

2024 finish: Third

2024 highest run-scorer: Ryan Higgins (1,133)

2024 highest wicket-taker: Toby Roland-Jones (52)

Key winter moves: With no overseas players in 2024, Middlesex have now secured one of the world's best in Kane Williamson. New Zealand's top Test run-scorer will feature in at least five Rothesay County Championship games later this summer, while seasoned South African seamer Dane Paterson joins for the first half of the campaign. Top-order batter Ben Geddes has crossed the Thames after leaving Surrey, with spinner Zafar Gohar also signing from Gloucestershire.

What we're looking forward to seeing: Watching Williamson in action at Lord's is an exciting prospect in itself, but the greater question is how much impact his runs can make on Middlesex's expected bid for promotion. A botched second-innings display with the bat against Gloucestershire in September effectively cost Middlesex a top-two place last season, so calm, experienced heads could prove vital at the business end of the campaign.

Player to watch: The departure of ex-England opener Mark Stoneman leaves a vacancy at the top of the order and Nathan Fernandes could well be handed an opportunity to fill it. Having hit a red-ball debut hundred as opener against Northamptonshire, the 20-year-old reverted to a middle-order spot later in the summer but he strikes the ball with power and would maintain a left and right-hand combination alongside the experienced Sam Robson.

Final thought: Toby Roland-Jones topped the 50-wicket mark last year, while Paterson is more than proven at this level – yet the pair will be 37 and 36 respectively when the season begins. Ethan Bamber was earmarked as the next leader of Middlesex’s seam unit, but his winter move to Warwickshire means the county may need younger pacemen like Henry Brookes and Noah Cornwell to step up and fill more prominent roles.

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

Previewed by Jeremy Blackmore – ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay

Captain: Luke Procter

Head Coach: Darren Lehmann

2024 finish: Fourth

2024 highest run-scorer: Luke Procter (923)

2024 highest wicket-taker: Ben Sanderson (41)

Key winter moves: Darren Lehmann’s appointment as head coach was a real statement of intent. Indian leg-spinner Yuzvendra Chahal, who made a huge impact late last season, returns from 22 June for the Championship run-in and One-Day Cup. Lehmann has bolstered the seam bowling stocks, providing extra pace and variety by signing left-arm quick Liam Guthrie on a three-year deal and former Australian U19s seamer Harry Conway for four Championship matches in May.

What we’re looking forward to seeing: Lehmann has promised an Australian brand of attacking cricket with an emphasis on trying to win games and not settling for draws. With the head coach’s infectious optimism rubbing off on the players, it should make for some entertaining cricket at Wantage Road after two tough seasons.

Player to watch: James Sales scored his maiden century last summer and

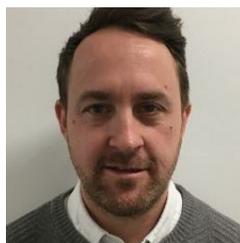
backed it up with another ton when moved up the order later in the season. A winter playing grade cricket in Brisbane has given the young all-rounder valuable experience, finishing his stint with an average of 64 with the bat and 23 with the ball.

Final thought: With Emilio Gay's departure and Matt Breetzke unavailable through IPL commitments, the club needs its talented young batters to fire, but this year will provide plenty of opportunities for them to step up under the charismatic Lehmann. If Northamptonshire's attack has lacked variety of late, its new Australian quicks offer more depth. Chahal's return at the business end meanwhile, should help Northamptonshire's promotion push provided they record some wins early season.

ends



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