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## 2025 Vitality Blast men's competition - county-by-county preview

The Vitality Blast men's competition county-by-county preview compiled by journalists from the ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay.

### NORTH GROUP

#### BEARS

**Captain:** Alex Davies

**Overseas players:** Tom Latham (New Zealand, full competition), Hasan Ali (Pakistan, availability tbc)

**Finals Day appearances:** Four (2003, 2014, 2015, 2017)

**Titles:** One (2014)

**2024 finish:** Quarter-finals

**2024 leading run scorer:** Sam Hain (569)

**2024 leading wicket taker:** Danny Briggs (29)

**Key winter moves:** It was all change off the field during the close season but the Bears' T20 side on the field is likely to be little changed beyond the arrival of New Zealand batter Tom Latham. Aussie all-rounder Beau Webster was initially signed for the Blast but has been called up by his national team.

**The big question:** After four successive quarter-final defeats, the big question among the Bears' fans is can they overcome the nerves of big knockout games? Clearing the memory of last year's quarter-final implosion against Gloucestershire at Edgbaston, when they failed to chase 138, will surely be a driving force.

**Wildcard watch:** Ethan Bamber. Short-format cricket thrives on exuberance and Bamber has it by the bucketload. An attacking player with ball or bat, he makes things happen and has infectious energy in the field. Bamber moved from Middlesex to Warwickshire to kick-start his career and the early signs are he has done exactly that.

**Final thought:** There is much talk of the quarter-final hoodoo but a lot of hard work remains ahead before that even becomes an issue, The Bears have scintillated at times in the group stage in recent years only to then falter. To reach a fifth successful quarter-final would be a notable effort in itself...then

they can try to get their heads round the hoodoo!

## **DERBYSHIRE FALCONS**

*Preview by Nigel Gardner for ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay*

**Captain:** Samit Patel

**Overseas players:** Caleb Jewell (Australia, all group stage), Allah Mohammad Ghazanfar (Afghanistan, all group stage), Blair Tickner (New Zealand, all group stage)

**Finals Day appearances:** One

**Titles:** None

**2024 finish:** Sixth (North Group)

**2024 leading runscorer:** Wayne Madsen (336)

**2024 leading wicket taker:** Pat Brown (22)

**Key winter moves:** Jewell provides both quality at the top of the order and a winning mentality after he helped Hobart Hurricanes lift the Big Bash trophy for the first time last winter. Martin Andersson was top scorer for Middlesex in last year's Blast and the all-rounder is set to play a key role for the Falcons this summer.

**The big question:** Can the Falcons get over the line in 2025? They fell at the final hurdle in the past two seasons when victory would have secured a place in the knock-out stages. The current squad looks impressive and will expect to be among the front runners in what is traditionally a competitive North Group.

**Wildcard watch:** For a 19-year-old, Ghazanfar has already made a big impression in white-ball cricket. The right arm off-spinner can turn the ball both ways and was named in the ICC Men's ODI team of the year in 2024. For

a player who is said to have "the world at his feet," he could be one of the stars of the tournament.

**Final thought:** If experience counts, the Falcons could go deep into the competition with five of the squad tasting T20 success at home and abroad while Wayne Madsen and Zak Chappell were part of the Rangpur Riders team coached by Derbyshire's head of cricket Mickey Arthur that won the Global Super League in December. Patel, Brown and Ross Whiteley are past Blast winners while Jewell and Ghazanfar could help the Falcons soar.

## **DURHAM**

*Previewed by Graham Hardcastle, ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay*

**Captain:** Alex Lees

**Overseas players:** David Bedingham (South Africa, full competition alongside South Africa commitments), Zak Foulkes (New Zealand, all group stage), Jimmy Neesham (New Zealand, full competition), Codi Yusuf (South Africa, all group stage).

**Finals Day appearances:** Two (2008, 2016)

**Titles:** None

**2024 finish:** Quarter-finals

**2024 leading runscorer:** Graham Clark (322)

**2024 leading wicket taker:** Ben Raine (21)

**Key winter moves:** Batter David Bedingham's availability will be limited due to South African Test commitments, including the World Test Championship final against Australia. But Durham have recruited Kiwis Zak Foulkes and Jimmy Neesham and all-rounder Codi Yusuf from South Africa. Two can play at any one time, so rest and rotation will come into play. Sam Connors, Emilio Gay and Will Rhodes were domestic signings ahead of the summer.



**The big question:** Will Durham follow Gloucestershire's lead and secure a first Blast title? Glos won this competition for the first time in 2024, taking the number of counties never to have triumphed in T20 cricket down to four. Coach Ryan Campbell has assembled an exciting looking squad. Graham Clark, Nathan Sowter, captain Alex Lees and Jimmy Neesham all jump out on paper as key men.

**Wildcard watch:** Callum Parkinson. The left-arm spinner impressed with 18 wickets in last season's run to the Blast quarter-finals, his first as a Durham player following his move from Leicestershire. An up-and-at-you spinner whose change of pace can be difficult to combat. Spent the first four years of The Hundred with the Northern Superchargers but was not retained for this summer.

**Final thought:** Ryan Campbell has banged the drum for leg-spinner Nathan Sowter in recent seasons, believing he has the capability to play for England in white-ball cricket. Sowter has taken 43 wickets combined in the past two Blast campaigns and brings a real x-factor to Durham's bowling attack. With a T20 World Cup coming up in India and Sri Lanka during the early stages of next year, this is a particularly key campaign for 32-year-old.

## LANCASHIRE LIGHTNING

*Previewed by Graham Hardcastle, ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay*

**Captain:**Keaton Jennings

**Overseas players:**Chris Green (Australia, all group stage), Ashton Turner (Australia, all group stage)

**Finals Day appearances:**Nine (2004, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2018, 2020, 2022)

**Titles:**One (2015)

**2024 finish:**Quarter-finals

**2024 leading runscorer:**Keaton Jennings (278)

## **2024 leading wicket taker:**Chris Green (14)

**Key winter moves:** Former Blast-winning captain Steven Croft called time on his 250-game T20 career last September to join the coaching staff full-time, but Lancashire's overseas recruitment has replaced that experience in the form of Australian all-rounders Chris Green and Ashton Turner. Green impressed last season and has signed a new two-year Blast deal. Dynamic Scotland batter Michael Jones has joined from Durham.

**The big question:**Will a change in format help Lancashire build momentum after a difficult start in the Rothesay County Championship? Midway through this month, the Red Rose dropped to the foot of Division Two, and Keaton Jennings stepped down as club captain. However, freeing themselves up in the Blast may well aid their promotion bid during the second half of the summer. Jennings remains in charge in the Blast.

**Wildcard watch:**Sir James Anderson. The England fast-bowling legend will be 43-years-old by the time The Hundred starts in August, but he has made himself available for the Blast because he's keen to have another crack at T20 cricket, which he hasn't played since 2014. If he has success for the Lightning, surely teams will be clamouring for his signature.

**Final thought:**No county has won more T20 matches than Lancashire since the start of the Blast in 2003. The Lightning have won 150 of the 260 matches they have played, and they are particularly strong at home. But they will be hoping to change the key statistic, titles won - 1. There would be no better way than to celebrate the 10-year anniversary of their only triumph, victory in the 2015 final against Northamptonshire at Edgbaston, than adding to that number.

## **LEICESTERSHIRE FOXES**

*Previewed by Jon Culley, ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay*

**Captain:** Louis Kimber

**Overseas players:** Logan van Beek (Netherlands, full competition), Shan Masood (Pakistan, full competition)

**Finals Day appearances:** Five (2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2011)

**Titles:** Three (2004, 2006, 2011)

**2024 finish:** Fifth (North Group)

**2024 leading runscorer:** Rishi Patel (413)

**2024 leading wicket taker:** Scott Currie (20)

**Key winter moves:** With club captain Peter Handscomb choosing to skip the Blast this season, the Foxes have turned to Pakistan international Shan Masood to plug the gap in their batting left by the Australian's absence. This will be the 35-year-old's fifth consecutive Blast season with his fourth county. Something similar to his 2022 campaign for Derbyshire, which yielded 555 runs at 42.69, would suit Leicestershire nicely.

**The big question:** Will the left-field choice of Louis Kimber as captain prove to be an inspired move? Best known for smiting 243 off 127 balls against Sussex in red-ball cricket last season, Kimber's numbers in Blast cricket have been relatively modest so far. Yet he has the potential to be destructive in this format, and will have Masood's leadership experience to tap into as he finds his way as skipper.

**Wildcard watch:** Sol Budinger is still looking for consistency in his T20 game but a 25-ball fifty against Yorkshire last season offered a glimpse of his potential. Never shy about taking on the new ball, he maintains a strike rate of around 80.00 even in red-ball cricket. A good eye and an instinctively explosive approach looks perfect for The Hundred's all-action format.

**Final thought:** The Foxes are flying at the moment following a sensational start to the Rothesay County Championship that has them 31 points clear at the top of Division Two. The question is can they take that form into the T20 arena? They narrowly missed out on the quarter-finals last season and if they can snatch a few early wins will then welcome back Rehan Ahmed and Josh Hull from England Men and England Lions duties.

**NORTHAMPTONSHIRE STEELBACKS**

**Captain:** David Willey

**Overseas players:** Matt Breetzke (South Africa, all group stage), Lloyd Pope (Australia, all group stage)

**Finals Day appearances:** Four (2009, 2013, 2015, 2016)

**Titles:** Two (2013, 2016)

**2024 finish:** Quarter-finals

**2024 leading runscorer:** Matt Breetzke (460)

**2024 leading wicket taker:** David Willey (16)

**Key winter moves:** The Steelbacks moved quickly to re-sign two stars of last year's run to the quarter-finals, with leading run scorer South African international Matthew Breetzke and veteran England all-rounder Ravi Bopara both returning to Wantage Road. Leg-spinner Lloyd Pope, recently named in the Big Bash Team of the Tournament, joins after fellow Australian Ashton Agar was ruled out through injury.

**The big question:** Northamptonshire's batting frailties were much in evidence during the Rothesay County Championship. Will the change in format and addition of experienced hands in Willey, Breetzke and Bopara inspire the crop of talented young guns to fire? They will be buoyed by the excellent form of Saif Zaib whose all-round contributions played an important role last summer.

**Wildcard watch:** Young quick Raphy Weatherall, a former England Under-19 star, showed maturity behind his years in his debut senior season last summer and was entrusted with key overs in the Blast. Returning from injury this season he has clearly put on an extra yard of pace and has caused real problems for opposition batters in the Championship.

**Final thought:** Darren Lehmann and Willey make a formidable head coach



and captain pairing with a wealth of international and franchise trophies to their names and will look to mastermind a second consecutive Steelbacks run to the knockout stages. Bopara proved talismanic in 2024 with bat and ball and while Northamptonshire will miss Agar's runs, they swiftly secured the dangerous mystery spin of Pope in a like-for-like swap. Ben Sanderson's accuracy and Weatherall and George Scrimshaw's pace add potency with the ball.

## **NOTTS OUTLAWS**

*Previewed by Jon Culley, ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay*

**Captain:** Joe Clarke

**Overseas players:** Daniel Sams (Australia, full competition), Moises Henriques (Australia, full competition)

**Finals Day appearances:** Six (2006, 2010, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020)

**Titles:** Two (2017, 2020)

**2024 finish:** Ninth (North Group)

**2024 leading runscorer:** Joe Clarke (306)

**2024 leading wicket taker:** Olly Stone (15)

**Key winter moves:** There will be no Alex Hales at Trent Bridge for the first time in 17 seasons after the county's 36-year-old all-time record runscorer opted not to return. But an Outlaws side in transition will benefit from having two experienced Australian all-rounders as overseas players in 32-year-old former Essex and Trent Rockets star Daniel Sams and 38-year-old Sydney Sixers captain Moises Henriques.

**The big question:** The Outlaws' decline in this format was put in sharp focus by last season's bottom-of-the-table finish. Can their failings be corrected in 2025? Joe Clarke will have Henriques's leadership skills to tap into in his second season as skipper but as well as the loss of Hales, last season's

leading wicket-taker Olly Stone will miss the tournament through injury.

**Wildcard watch:** Freddie McCann. The 20-year-old top-order batter, with three first-class centuries to his name already, made his Blast debut against Yorkshire in the final 2024 group match and had an immediate impact, hitting 44 from 32 balls in a rare Outlaws victory. If he gets the chance to build on that as Notts seek a winning blend he could well catch someone's eye.

**Final thought:** Is there a touch of back to the future about the signing of Henriques? Notts fans will hope the dynamic all-rounder carries a little of what his close friend and Big Bash-winning ex-Sydney Sixers teammate Dan Christian brought to Trent Bridge when he led the Outlaws to Blast glory in 2017 and 2020.

## **WORCESTERSHIRE RAPIDS**

*Previewed by ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay*

**Captain:** Brett D'Oliveira

**Overseas players:** Ben Dwarshuis (Australia, full competition), Jacob Duffy (New Zealand, first eight matches)

**Finals Day appearances:** Two (2018, 2019)

**Titles:** One (2018)

**2024 finish:** Eighth (North Group)

**2024 leading run-scorer:** Ethan Brookes (321)

**2024 leading wicket-taker:** Tom Taylor (17)

**Key winter moves:** The Rapids have strengthened their bowling with overseas duo Jacob Duffy, who is available for eight games, and Ben Dwarshuis while Ben Allison has signed permanently from Essex. Dwarshuis is a tried and

tested T20 all-rounder, Duffy should hit the ground running after four impressive Rothesay County Championship games while Allison will be available this season to add further depth to a handy attack. Two-time Blast winner Josh Cobb left after a one-year white-ball contract.

**The big question:** Can they win the close ones? T20 cricket is about fine margins and the Rapids learned that the hard way last season. Their campaign was put on the skids by four successive losses by 11 runs or less – after impressive early wins against Lancashire and Notts - and they lost a further three games in the last over when defending. Bringing in veteran Dwarshuis to pick up the tough overs and supply some late hitting seems a clever piece of business with that in mind.

**Wildcard watch:** Ethan Brookes. The 24-year-old showed his all-round quality in the Blast last season to be the Rapids' leading runscorer while also chipping in with 11 wickets. His power hitting was on full display in the Rothesay County Championship at Essex earlier this season when he smacked a quickfire 88 to almost haul his side over the line against the odds.

**Final thought:** There's clearly room for the Rapids to improve on last season if they can win the close ones and better a home record that saw them win just twice at Visit Worcestershire New Road. Their attack looks strong with Tom Taylor and Matt Waite sharing 54 wickets to start the red-ball season and Allison taking 21. Add in the international class of Dwarshuis and Duffy and there's reason to be optimistic so long as the batters can put up better numbers than last term when only Brookes past 300 runs.

## **YORKSHIRE**

*Previewed by Graham Hardcastle, ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay*

**Captain:** Dawid Malan

**Overseas players:** Will O'Rourke (New Zealand, first eight group games with possible extension), Will Sutherland (Australia, all group stage)

**Finals Day appearances:** Three (2012, 2016, 2022)

**Titles:** None

**2024 finish:** Seventh place in the North Group

**2024 leading runscorer:** Dawid Malan (420)

**2024 leading wicket taker:** Jordan Thompson (20)

**Key winter moves:** While Yorkshire have recruited two exciting overseas signings in all-rounder Will Sutherland and x-factor New Zealand fast bowler Will O'Rourke, the biggest moves have come in the leadership department. Club legend Anthony McGrath returned as coach to replace Ottis Gibson, while the responsibility of replacing Shan Masood as captain was handed to Jonny Bairstow in red-ball cricket and Dawid Malan in the Blast.

**The big question:** Can Yorkshire finally break their duck in T20 cricket? The White Rose, no longer the Vikings in this format, are one of only four counties never to have won the Blast, alongside Derbyshire, Durham and Glamorgan. With the quality of players they've had at their disposal down the years, that they are part of that statistic is a significant surprise.

**Wildcard watch:** James Wharton. More recognised as a top-order batter, but he has the power to bat a bit further down as well and could, for example, finish an innings. He scored a brilliant 111 not out in a 2023 home win over Worcestershire. Yorkshire's management rate the 24-year-old incredibly highly, and believe he is not miles away from England honours.

**Final thought:** Yorkshire's squad looks very well balanced. Power and poise with the bat, depth in the all-rounder options, quality spin and significant pace with the ball. The prolonged availability of Jonny Bairstow and Dawid Malan will be vital, while it's a big campaign for the continued progression of England fringe leg-spinner Jafer Chohan. Fit again seam-bowling all-rounder Matt Milnes (back stress fractures) will be like a new signing. To be successful, Yorkshire must gain the consistency their early-season Championship cricket has lacked.

## **SOUTH GROUP**

### **ESSEX**

**Captain:** Simon Harmer

**Overseas players:** Simon Harmer (South Africa, full competition), Mohammad Amir (Pakistan, full competition).

**Finals Day appearances:** Six (2006, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2019, 2023)

**Titles:** One (2019)

**2024 finish:** Fifth (South Group)

**2024 highest run-scorer:** Michael Pepper (535)

**2024 highest wicket-taker:** Paul Walter (17)

**Key winter moves:** With Sam Cook likely to be requisitioned by England for much of the summer, Essex reacted by re-signing Mohammad Amir to replenish their seam-bowling stocks. The experienced Pakistan international left-armers returns after taking 24 wickets across two Blast spells in 2017 and 2019, the latter helping Essex along the road towards their only success in the competition.

**The big question:** Can Essex shrug off their perennial enigmatic form in T20 cricket? Their entire history in the short format has been littered with fits and starts, false dawns and letdowns. Now, will the new management axis of (coach) Chris Silverwood and (captain) Simon Harmer align to produce something more concrete and significant?

**Wildcard watch:** Matt Critchley has played in all four iterations of The Hundred – for Welsh Fire (2021-2022) and London Spirit (2023-24) – but was overlooked in the 2025 Draft. The golden-arm all-rounder was Essex's second-highest wicket-taker in last season's Blast with 14, evidence that leg-spinners are more than worth their weight in white-ball cricket. What's more, he's also an explosive bat.

**Final thought:** Michael Pepper has established himself as one of the most



exciting of big-hitting gunslingers. In a personal 2024 Blast campaign that included two centuries, he peppered the stands and terraces of South Group venues with 32 sixes – seven more than anyone else and that during a season in which Essex failed to qualify for the latter stages. He toured West Indies with England's white-ball team in the winter; is he ready to step into the first XI at international level?

## GLAMORGAN

*Previewed by Blake Bint, ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay*

**Captain:** Kiran Carlson

**Overseas Players:** Colin Ingram (South Africa, full competition), Hayden Kerr (Australia, full competition)

**Finals day appearances:** Two (2004, 2017)

**Titles:** None

**2024 finish:** Sixth (South Group)

**2024 leading runscorer:** Kiran Carlson (380)

**2024 leading wicket-taker:** Mason Crane (19)

**Key winter moves:** Glamorgan's biggest miss for the T20 campaign this season will be Marnus Labuschagne. The all-action Australian joined for a couple of Rothesay County Championship matches, but international duties mean he's not available for the Blast. But Glammy have made a smart move to bring in Aussie all-rounder Hayden Kerr who has been a mainstay with the Sydney Sixers and offers flexibility in the batting as well as a left-arm option.

**The big question:** Can interim head coach Richard Dawson bring his Midas Touch in white-ball cricket to Glamorgan? He led Gloucestershire to 50-over success in his first season across the Severn Bridge and the club reached the knockout stages of the Blast in four of his finals five seasons. He coached England U19s to a World Cup final and was on the England staff when the

men's team won the 2022 T20 World Cup.

**Wildcard watch:** Mason Crane is currently the only Glamorgan player in a The Hundred squad where he'll continue to work with Dawson at Welsh Fire. Ben Kellaway will have eyes on him after his breakout white-ball campaign in 2023 and enters the tournament with solid red-ball form which could propel the ambidextrous 21-year-old's hopes.

**Final thought:** After securing a white-ball title last year when winning the Metro Bank One-Day Cup, Glamorgan will feel as though they underperformed in the Vitality Blast. They did show their quality in the final group game with a record-breaking win over eventual runners-up Somerset by 120 runs. They have players who will push at the door with Alex Horton, a potential replacement for veteran wicket-keeper Chris Cooke, and all-rounders Tom Bevan and Dan Douthwaite ensuring plenty of selection headaches.

## GLOUCESTERSHIRE

*Previewed by Richard Latham, ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay*

**Captain:** Jack Taylor

**Overseas players:** D'Arcy Short (Australia, all group matches), Cameron Bancroft (Australia, full competition)

**Finals Day appearances:** 4 (2003, 2007, 2020, 2024)

**Titles:** One

**2024 finish:** Winners

**2024 leading run-scorer:** Cameron Bancroft (534)

**2024 leading wicket-taker:** David Payne (33)

**Key winter moves:** Dynamic with the bat and a capable wrist spinner, Aussie

international D'Arcy Short looks sure to prove an exciting replacement for fellow countryman Beau Webster, who featured in 13 of Gloucestershire's 17 Blast matches last season. Aged 34, Short has represented his country 23 times in T20s and in eight ODIs.

**The big question:** Gloucestershire have always revelled in the role of underdogs and did so again to become surprise winners of last year's Blast. As holders of the trophy, no one will be underestimating them this season, so can they perform as well with the added pressure of being among the favourites to reach Finals Day?

**Wildcard watch:** Only Cameron Bancroft scored more Blast runs for Gloucestershire last season than Miles Hammond, who notched 54 fours and 23 sixes in averaging 32.46 as an ever-present throughout the competition. The 29-year-old left-hander will again be a key figure in defending the trophy.

**Final thought:** Mark Alleyne's influence on Gloucestershire's one-day cricket promises to be as important as when he captained the side in their glory years. No one expected a trophy last season, his first since returning to the club as head coach, but his shrewd tactical brain and winning mentality quickly transferred to the team as they beat hot favourites Somerset in a one-sided final to become Blast champions.

## **HAMPSHIRE HAWKS**

*Previewed by Alex Smith, ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay*

**Captain:** James Vince

**Overseas players:** Lhuan-dre Pretorius (South Africa, 10 matches from June 13), Dewald Brevis (South Africa, full competition)

**Finals Day appearances:** 10 (2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2021, 2022, 2023)

**Titles:** Three (2010, 2012, 2022)

**2024 finish:** Seventh (South Group)

**2024 leading runscorer:** Joe Weatherley (324)

**2024 leading wicket taker:** John Turner (15)

**Key winter moves:** The Hawks have completely refreshed their overseas contingent with two of the most exciting young players in the world. Lhuan-dre Pretorius was the top run-scorer in the SA20 over the winter and wunderkind Dewald Brevis. Fast bowler Sonny Baker is also added from last year's Blast.

**The big question:** Can James Vince feel at home again? The Hawks skipper is only playing in the Blast for Hampshire this year after moving to Dubai over the winter. He had a rare lean 2024 – understandable after attacks on his family house – but the Blast's all-time leading run scorer has been tearing up franchise leagues around the world and is ready to return to the UK with his destructive brand of cricket.

**Wildcard watch:** Dewald Brevis. Has been mentored by South African great AB de Villiers and it shows. He burst onto the scene by breaking the most runs at the 2022 U19 World Cup. He ended that year by smashing 162 in 57 balls – the joint third highest T20 score of all-time. More recently, he won the SA20 with MI Cape Town with the competition's highest strike-rate. Also bowls very useful leg-spin.

**Final thought:** Having won the Blast in 2022, before reaching Finals Day the following year, 2024 was underwhelming, filled with a series of overseas not arriving and general under performance. The new Proteas contingent provides an exciting new headline but the core squad, that knows the unique challenges of the expansive Utilita Bowl, is still there. Vince should return fresher without two months of Rothesay County Championship cricket in his legs but with PSL form.

## **KENT SPITFIRES**

*Previewed by Fred Atkins, ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay*

**Captain:** Sam Billings

**Overseas players:** Wes Agar (Australia, all group matches) Tom Rogers (Australia, all group matches)

**Finals Day appearances:** Four (2007, 2008, 2009, 2021)

**Titles:** Two (2007, 2021)

**2024 finish:** Ninth (South Group)

**2024 leading runscorer:** Sam Billings (411)

**2024 leading wicket taker:** Matt Parkinson (16)

**Key winter moves:** Rogers was an emergency signing last year and enjoyed himself so much he said he'd come back for free (although he is being paid). Agar was only supposed to play red-ball cricket last year but did enough as emergency cover to earn a multi-format deal. Chris Benjamin's arrival from Bears should add some firepower.

**The big question:** Will the return of Fred Klaassen galvanise a bowling unit that was badly exposed last year? The Dutch international missed most of 2023 and all of 2024. Inexperienced replacements were severely punished for the slightest lapses in length, line or both, but Klaassen offers both a wicket-taking threat and a level of discipline and control severely lacking last season.

**Wildcard watch:** Daniel Bell-Drummond. The stylish right-hander is without a The Hundred team after previous stints at London Spirit and Birmingham Phoenix. He's a safe bet for any team looking for top-order hitting with more than 4,000 Vitality Blast runs to his name at a strike rate close to 140, while he enjoyed a profitable 2024 with 373 runs which included three half-centuries.

**Final thought:** Does any side blow as hot and cold as Kent have done in the last few seasons? They won the Blast in 2021, finished bottom of the South Group in 2022, were unlucky not to reach the quarter-finals in 2023 and struggled again in 2024. If this pattern continues they should be due a good season, and seven of the 2021 champions (Crawley, Bell-Drummond, Joe Denly, Billings, Leaning, Stewart and Klaassen) remain at the club.



## MIDDLESEX

*Previewed by Jon Batham, ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay*

**Captain:** Stephen Eskinazi

**Overseas players:** Kane Williamson (New Zealand, full competition) and Josh Little (Ireland, full competition)

**Finals Day appearances:** One (2008)

**Titles:** One (2008)

**2024 finish:** Eighth (South Group)

**2024 leading runscorer:** Martin Andersson (282)

**2024 leading wicket taker:** Luke Hollman (23)

**Key winter moves:** The signings of a world-class batter in Kane Williamson and left-arm seamer Josh Little, a man with stacks of experience of franchise cricket, is a statement of intent. Last year's leading run-scorer Martin Andersson has left for Derbyshire and it remains to be seen if another new arrival, Zafar Gohar will form a two-pronged spin attack alongside Luke Hollman.

**The big question:** Can Middlesex live up to head coach Richard Johnson's great expectations? Johnson declared pre-season it was time to move from 'developing to winning'. Williamson and Little's presences will help, but youngsters invested in over recent years need to emulate Hollman's feats from 2024 if the Seaxes are to improve on their record since lifting the trophy in 2008.

**Wildcard watch:** Joe Cracknell. The 25-year-old regressed a little last season, when shifted around the order and unable to settle into a specific role. However, whether in the powerplay or as a finisher he's shown his ability as a big-hitter and a return to his best could see him add to the three appearances made for London Spirit in the inaugural Hundred of 2021.

**Final thought:** The only way is up for Middlesex, but their long-suffering supporters have heard that before. Andersson was 41<sup>st</sup> among tournament runscorers last season while Max Holden's strike-rate of 160 was strong but he rarely batted long enough. Williamson's presence should help the pace the innings, which had some good starts but too many collapses. Hollman, fifth in last season's list of wicket-takers can shine again, while Little's experience in the powerplay and death overs will be key to any improvement.

## **SOMERSET**

*Previewed by Richard Latham, ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay*

**Captain:** Lewis Gregory

**Overseas players:** Riley Meredith (Australia, full competition), Matt Henry (New Zealand, first 11 group matches)

**Finals Day appearances:** 10 (2005, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2018, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024)

**Titles:** Two (2005, 2023)

**2024 finish:** Runners-up

**2024 leading run-scorer:** Tom Banton (515)

**2024 leading wicket-taker:** Ben Green (21)

**Key winter moves:** Australia T20 international pace bowler Riley Meredith was signed to replace Kiwi Matt Henry last season. Now both have been recruited to form an exciting new-ball partnership, which promises to be as potent as any in the Blast, with Craig Overton as an accomplished back-up.

**The big question:** Can the likes of Will Smeed and Tom Kohler-Cadmore hit the ground running with their powerful stroke play, without the benefit of some red-ball cricket behind them this summer? The hugely talented Smeed averaged only 21 in last year's Blast and needs to reestablish himself as a destroyer at the top of the order.

**Wildcard watch:** Lewis Goldsworthy has not featured in Championship cricket for Somerset this season, but his ability as a spinner allied to his prowess with the bat could make him a candidate to replace Roelof van der Merwe, whose Somerset T20 career has ended after two impressive spells with the club.

**Final thought:** The burning memory of a shock defeat by arch-rivals Gloucestershire in last year's Blast final should be all the incentive Somerset need to drive them to another Finals Day with a team that looks stronger in the bowling department than last season and equally explosive with the bat.

## **SURREY**

*Previewed by Mark Baldwin, ECB Reporters Network, supported by Rothesay*

**Captain:** Sam Curran

**Overseas players:** Mitchell Santner (New Zealand, available after IPL and knockout matches), Nathan Smith (New Zealand, full competition)

**Finals Day appearances:** Nine (2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2013, 2014, 2020, 2023, 2024)

**Titles:** One (2003)

**2024 finish:** Semi-finals

**2024 leading run-scorer:** Jamie Smith (285)

**2024 leading wicket-taker:** Tom Curran (16)

**Key winter moves:** New Zealand's white-ball captain, Mitchell Santner, is available when the rescheduled IPL finishes and will also be available for the knock-out stages in September if the team – now captained by Sam Curran – qualify for the knockout stages of the competition. Left-arm spinner Santner's fellow Kiwi, all-rounder Nathan Smith, has already impressed in the Rothesay County Championship as the club's other new overseas signing this season.

**The big question:** As ever, and especially after a second successive semi-final exit against Somerset, who beat them by 24 runs in 2023 and then by six wickets last year, Surrey are desperate to jettison the tag of only winning the T20 Cup once before – the inaugural tournament under Adam Hoolioake's captaincy in 2003. There have now been eight unsuccessful Finals Day appearances since that triumph.

**Wildcard watch:** Dom Sibley. England's erstwhile 22-times capped Test opener reinvented himself in last season's Vitality Blast by unveiling some previously unseen strokes – including an extraordinary reverse-scoop for six in his quarter-final winning 67 not out against Durham. Sibley scored 269 runs in 11 matches at the top of the order, at the highly creditable strike rate of 133.83.

**Final thought:** Surrey are used to it by now – 24 players appeared in last summer's Blast campaign – but juggling their resources around international call-ups means another big test of the squad's envied depth. A major plus, however, is Sam Curran's availability throughout the group stages. Surrey's new T20 captain, at present surplus to England's white-ball requirements, played only five Blast innings last year but smashed 13 sixes while scoring 237 runs at a strike rate above 150.

## **SUSSEX SHARKS**

*Previewed by Bruce Talbot, ECB Reporters Network supported by Rothesay*

**Captain:** Tymal Mills

**Overseas players:** Nathan McAndrew (Australia, all group stage), Gurinder Sandhu (Australia, all group stage), Daniel Hughes (Australia, full competition).

**Finals Day appearances:** Six (2007, 2009, 2012, 2018, 2021, 2024).

**Titles:** One (2009)

**2024 finish:** Semi-finalists

**2024 leading run scorer:** Daniel Hughes (596)

**2024 leading wicket taker:** Tymal Mills (24)

**Key winter moves:** No major changes. Tall Australian seamer Gurinder Sandhu, who has played for three teams in the Big Bash, has mainly been signed for red-ball cricket in June and July but will be another option for Mills.

**The big question:** Mills was outstanding in his first season as captain. Calm and composed under pressure, he revelled in the responsibility, and rather than affecting his bowling he finished with 24 wickets – more than any other Sussex bowler and his most productive season since debut 14 years earlier. He will relish the opportunity to prove that reaching Finals Day was no fluke and going one better than the semi-finals.

**Wildcard watch:** Harrison Ward has been on Sussex's staff since 2021 but until last season didn't seem to have a defined role and sometimes came in as low as number eight. Mills gave him clarity by making him Hughes' opening partner and he responded with 350 runs, three fifies and a strike rate of 157.65, form that earned him a chance in The Hundred.

**Final thought:** Sussex were unexpected semi-finalists last year, having won ten games out of 28 in the previous two seasons, but Mills led them superbly and with virtually the same squad there's no reason why they shouldn't be competitive. Head coach Paul Farbrace has set the bar high again, and both he and Mills will regard not reaching the knockout stages at least as failure.

ends





## Contacts



### **Matt Somerford**

Men's Communications Lead

[matt.somerford@ecb.co.uk](mailto:matt.somerford@ecb.co.uk)

07551134716