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Rachael Heyhoe Flint Trophy 2024 - team-by-team guide

The Blaze

Previewed by Jon Culley - ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Kirstie Gordon

Head Coach: Chris Guest

2023 finish: Runners-up

2023 highest run-scorer: Tammy Beaumont (317)

2023 highest wicket-taker: Grace Ballinger (18)

Key winter moves: The return of South Africa all-rounder Nadine de Klerk for a full season is a big boost. In just seven appearances in the competition last year, the 24-year-old took 13 wickets including a career-best 7-33 against Northern Diamonds.

The big question: After reaching two domestic finals but losing both in their debut season in 2023, Blaze will be keen to repeat the feat in this competition. Can they get there again *and* deliver a winning performance on the day?

Player to watch: The 19-year-old leg-spinner Josie Groves, who has already played in an Under-19 World Cup final and is part of the Trent Rockets squad in The Hundred, took 12 wickets at 20.50 in last year's competition, including 3-39 in the final.

Final thought: Although they faltered in the second half of last year's 50-overs campaign, The Blaze delivered some stand-out performances along the way, the highlight perhaps an away win against Southern Vipers when none of their three England players were available. They have a squad with a good depth of talent but maintaining momentum for the full season will be key.

Central Sparks

Previewed by Brian Halford - ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Eve Jones

Head Coach: Lloyd Tennant

2023 finish: Fifth

2023 highest run-scorer: Eve Jones (440)

2023 highest wicket-taker: Georgia Davis (27)

Key winter moves: New Zealand international Justine Dunge has brought her experience to Sparks to assist Lloyd Tennant and Dominic Ostler in the coaching set-up. No player signings.

The big question: Can the Sparks' on-field results reflect sustained investment in their playing squad and coaching staff, and a pre-season trip to Mumbai, as they seek the consistency needed to finally bring some silverware to the West Midlands?

Player to watch: Georgia Davis. An excellent 2023 season earned the off-spinner selection for England A in the winter. Quitting the police to become a full-time cricketer has moved her game to another level and she could soon be knocking on the senior England team's door.

Final thought: With plenty of talent in the squad and a number of individuals, having come through the Sparks pathway, gaining international recognition,

it is time the sum of the parts added up to a trophy-winning whole.

Northern Diamonds

Previewed by Graham Hardcastle - ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Hollie Armitage

Head coach: Dani Hazell

2023 finish: Sixth

2023 highest run-scorer: Lauren Winfield-Hill (663)

2023 highest wicket-taker: Katie Levick (24)

Key winter moves: Experienced Australian all-rounder Erin Burns has signed an overseas deal through to the start of The Hundred in July, and emerging fast bowler Sophia Turner has moved across the Pennines permanently following a brief loan spell last September. Director of cricket James Carr departed this winter.

The big question: Can the Diamonds repeat their glorious 2022 title triumph? A number of experienced heads at the heart of that campaign - Jenny Gunn, Linsey Smith to name just two - departed immediately afterwards, paving the way for a core of homegrown youngsters to come through. The hope is they are now ready to challenge the Southern Vipers again.

Player to watch: Captain Hollie Armitage has only recently made her senior England debut and also captained England A this winter. Her top-order runs will be key, while she should chip in with her handy leg-spinners. Widely regarded as one of the best captains on the circuit.

Final thought: The Diamonds have a number of talented youngsters capable of winning matches. Grace Hall, Lizzie Scott, Phoebe Turner and Jess Woolston are amongst them. But key to their hopes of success will be the continued excellence of local legends Lauren Winfield-Hill and Katie Levick, who finished last season's competition as its leading run-scorer and second leading wicket-taker respectively.

SE Stars

Previewed by Jon Batham - ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Bryony Smith

Head Coach: Johann Myburgh

2023 finish: Third (Lost in play-off)

2023 highest run-scorer: Paige Scholfield (439)

2023 highest wicket-taker: Danielle Gregory (21)

Key winter moves: The re-signing of South Africa international batter Tazmin Brits marks Stars' best business of the winter. Wicketkeeper-batter Chloe Hill makes last season's loan from Southern Vipers a permanent as one of several new arrivals bolstering Stars to a 21-strong squad.

The big questions: Stars' batting efforts widely fluctuated last year, so will Brits' longer stay help bring greater consistency? As always there is the question of how much they will be disrupted by England call-ups?

Player to watch: Danielle Gregory continues to be underrated despite being third on the tournament's wicket-takers list last term. Young quick Emma Jones could be another to keep an eye on after returning from two years of injury horrors.

Final thought: Stars underperformed last year, in part because in their quest to play positive cricket they were sometimes too aggressive too early whether setting or chasing. They have the bowling bases covered with Tash Farrant returning to join the likes of Ryana MacDonald-Gay, Alexa Stonehouse, and previously mentioned Jones and Gregory among others, so should pose opposition batters plenty of problems.

Southern Vipers

Previewed by Alex Smith - ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Georgia Adams

Head Coach: Charlotte Edwards

2023 finish: Winners

2023 highest run-scorer: Georgia Adams (546)

2023 highest wicket-taker: Georgia Adams (20)

Key winter moves: Freya Davies arrives from South East Stars to bolster the fast bowling unit after losing her England contract. Australian spin bowling all-rounder Charli Knott has been recruited for the majority of the summer after an eye-catching WBBL series.

The big question: Can they win it again? 2023 was quietly a difficult summer, despite winning the double, due to England availability. 2024 will likely test their squad depths once again but they'll still be favourites to make it four RHFT successes out of five.

Player to watch: Mary Taylor burst onto the scene with 14 RHFT wickets last year – only four pace bowlers claimed more. Tall, bowls with good pace and has skills to expose batters; she spent this winter with England Under 19s alongside fellow Vipers Ava Lee and Abi Norgrove.

Final thought: Having reached the final in nine of the 11 competitions they have been a part of (winning six of them) and developed countless players for

England (11 current Vipers wore an England shirt at some point this winter), 2024 should be a victory lap for the Vipers and leave as the undisputed queens of the KSL and regional eras.

Sunrisers

Previewed by Ben Kosky - ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Grace Scrivens

Head Coach: Andy Tennant

2023 finish: Fourth

2023 highest run-scorer: Grace Scrivens (398)

2023 highest wicket-taker: Jodi Grewcock/Eva Gray (14)

Key winter moves: Retaining last year's squad was the top priority and Sunrisers have achieved that, as well as promoting seam prospect Charley Phillips from their Academy programme. Australian bowler Nicola Hancock has joined for the first six games of the tournament.

The big question: After finally breaking their duck in the 50-over format at the start of last season, Sunrisers reeled off five more wins, including four in a row to finish the campaign. Can they pick up where they left off?

Player to watch: Teenager Jodi Grewcock enjoyed a breakout tournament in 2023, developing into a consistent top-order batter and taking wickets regularly with her leg-breaks. Her experience gained on England Under-19s' recent Sri Lanka tour can only be to Sunrisers' benefit.

Final thought: Having proved themselves as a competitive unit, the expectations around Sunrisers may be higher than in previous years. However, with their players a year older and wiser and now captained by star all-rounder Grace Scrivens on a permanent basis, Sunrisers should feel optimistic about winning more often than they lose – and maybe even breaking into the top three.

Thunder

Previewed by Graham Hardcastle - ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Ellie Threlkeld

Head Coach: Chris Read

2023 finish: Seventh

2023 highest run-scorer: Ellie Threlkeld (287)

2023 highest wicket-taker: Olivia Bell (14)

Key winter moves: Former England men's wicketkeeper Chris Read has replaced Paul Shaw as head coach. Australian top order batters Katie Mack and Georgia Voll will share overseas duties through the competition. Mack starts and finishes the campaign, while Voll, who also bowls handy off-spin, plays four games in the middle.

The big question: Thunder have struggled to make an impression in this competition, winning only nine of 34 matches across four seasons. But an emerging squad has shown shoots of progression in that time. Can they rubber-stamp that progression with success this year and can Read provide the missing ingredient?

Player to watch: A few candidates for this tag, but Stockport-born Scotland off-spinner Olivia Bell broke through to senior cricket in stunning fashion last season, claiming 25 wickets in 11 regional appearances, including 14 in four in this competition. Signed her maiden pro contract with Thunder this winter.

Final thought: While Thunder struggled in this competition last season, winning only three times, a run to Finals Day in the Charlotte Edwards Cup has given the squad huge belief. They truly feel they can be a force to be reckoned with this season. New coach Read, alongside highly-rated captain Ellie Threlkeld, have now put the emphasis more on performance than progression.

Western Storm

Previewed by Andy Stockhausen - ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Sophie Luff

Head Coach: Trevor Griffin

2023 finish: Eighth

2023 highest run-scorer: Fran Wilson (404)

2023 highest wicket-taker: Chloe Skelton (14)

Key winter moves: Australian international Amanda-Jade Wellington has been recruited to add much-needed know-how to a youthful squad. The 26-year-old spinner has previous experience of English conditions following a stint with Southern Vipers in 2019 and will be available for the entire season.

The big question: Will Storm's collection of talented but inexperienced youngsters be able to turn occasional stellar performances into the week-in-week-out consistency needed to translate last season's near misses into regular victories?

Player to watch: Emma Corney enjoyed a breakthrough season in 2023, establishing herself at the top of the order and scoring 296 Trophy runs at an average of 29.6. Expect further improvement and for the Devonian to provide

a solid batting platform.

Final thought: Storm will again be denied the services of star players Heather Knight, Dani Gibson and Lauren Filer, who will be engaged with England for long periods of the season. New signing Wellington will make a difference, but a side that is big on potential and relatively short on experience may still be short of what it takes to challenge for honours.

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