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Vitality Blast – county-by-county preview

SOUTH GROUP

ESSEX

Previewed by Martin Smith – ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Simon Harmer

Overseas players: Simon Harmer (South Africa), Daniel Sams (Australia).

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

Titles: One (2019)

2023 finish: Finalists

2023 leading run-scorer: Daniel Sams (419)

2023 leading wicket-taker: Daniel Sams (25)

Key winter moves: Essex reacted cannily to the loss of Dan Lawrence. They replaced him with Kent's livewire Jordan Cox, who outperformed the Oval-bound defector in the Blast last season (averaging 52.50 against 29.69 with a superior strike-rate of 165.78 compared to 153.17).

The big question: Will Essex make their passage through the group stage a little less stressful for all concerned? They were rightly being written off when losing their penultimate group match to last season's whipping boys Middlesex only to pull off a shock win against Surrey two days later and qualify.

Wildcard watch: The Hundred selectors have swept up the majority of those eligible from the Essex camp. However, Feroze Khushi has been Bazball-ing in the Championship and will forever be remembered for the last-ball six at the Kia Oval that carried Essex to a quarter-final place enroute to last season's final.

Final thought: The return of the Australian all-rounder Daniel Sams for a third successive overseas stint could be key. Sams won the tournament's MVP last year after topping both Essex's batting and bowling lists with 419 runs and 25 wickets (he also held 13 catches). A whole heap of expectation rests on his shoulders.

GLAMORGAN

Previewed by Peter Miller - ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Kiran Carlson

Overseas players: Marnus Labuschagne (Australia), Colin Ingram (South Africa).

Finals Day appearances: Two (2008, 2017)

Titles: None

2023 finish: Eighth (South Group)

2023 leading run-scorer: Chris Cooke (419)

2023 leading wicket-taker: Jamie McIlroy (19)

Key winter moves: The arrival of Mason Crane over the winter is the big signing for Glamorgan's white-ball hopes. An attacking spinner with a proven track record in the Blast, Crane adds some firepower to the Glamorgan attack.

The big question: Last year Glamorgan started with four wins out of their first five matches before a long injury list meant they fell away, winning just one more match before the end of the group stage. The question for 2024 will be whether they can perform consistently throughout the tournament.

Wildcard watch: Mason Crane is thriving on the back of playing every game for his new county, and with leg spinners being a much sort after commodity there is a good chance of him using his Championship form as a springboard to success in the Blast and into one of The Hundred squads.

Final thought: With a strong batting line up and a tidy white-ball bowling attack Glamorgan should be targeting a quarter-finals place. From there three good games would see them claim their maiden T20 title.

GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Previewed by Richard Latham - ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Jack Taylor

Overseas players: Beau Webster (Australia), Cameron Bancroft (Australia), Zafar Gohar (Pakistan)

Finals Day appearances: Three (2003, 2007, 2020)

Titles: None

2023 finish: Seventh (South Group)

2023 leading run-scorer: Ben Charlesworth (299)

2023 leading wicket-taker: Tom Smith (17)

Key winter moves: Aussie seamer Beau Webster has been recruited to boost the bowling attack and will hope to use his 6ft 7ins frame to make scoring difficult against him, while fellow countryman Cameron Bancroft is back for a second spell in the batting ranks and has been playing regularly in the Championship.

The big question: Can Gloucestershire translate their improvement in red ball cricket under new head coach Mark Alleyne this season, winning a first Championship game since 2022 and running up their highest ever first-class score, to the shortest format of the game?

Wildcard watch: David Payne claimed 15 Blast wickets last summer, having not played any red ball cricket leading up to the tournament because of injury. The experienced left-arm seamer has again missed the first half of the Championship season to be fit and fresh for T20 and will be keen to make an impact.

Final thought: Mark Alleyne proved himself a shrewd leader in one-day cricket as captain during Gloucestershire's glory years of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Now he has the opportunity to influence the side tactically from within the dressing room as a head coach with a shrewd cricketing brain for

the shorter formats of the game.

HAMPSHIRE HAWKS

Previewed by Alex Smith - ECB Reporters Network

Captain: James Vince

Overseas players: Ben McDermott (Australia), Michael Naser (Australia, first eight matches), Ottniel Baartman (South African, last six matches and knockouts)

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

Titles: Three (2010, 2012, 2022)

2023 finish: Semi-finals

2023 leading runscorer: James Vince (670)

2023 leading wicket taker: Nathan Ellis (23)

Key winter moves: Nathan Ellis hasn't been retained despite two glorious seasons, instead seamers Michael Naser and Ottniel Baartman – a two-time SA20 champion under Adi Birrell – share his place. Domestically, Ali Orr is in, Ross Whiteley and Aneurin Donald are out, while Scott Currie and Mason Crane are away on loan for now.

The big question: Can John Turner hit the same heights as last season? The uber-quick bowler began with a double wicket maiden, took 21 wickets at an average of 11.76 and an economy of 6.67, and ended with an England contract. Injuries have restricted him to three first-team matches since Finals Day though.

Wildcard watch: Joe Weatherley has more middle-order Blast runs than anyone since 2021, but hasn't been kept on by the Southern Brave after two years of mostly carrying drinks. He could be a shrewd Vitality Wildcard pick, as could Chris Wood's experience and Brad Wheal's pace.

Final thought: The Hawks know how to get to Finals Day, and an 11th appearance, which would be a fourth in a row, is certainly the minimum requirement. There are deep depths to the batting – a run of Dawson, Howell, Fuller, Nesar from six to nine is opulent, especially after Vince up top – and the bowlers have all bases covered, especially with the dynamic quick attack.

KENT SPITFIRES

Previewed by Fred Atkins - ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Sam Billings

Overseas players: Xavier Bartlett (Australia), Wes Agar (Australia), Charlie Stobo (Australia), Beyers Swanepoel (South Africa)

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

Titles: Two (2007, 2021)

2023 finish: Fifth (South Group)

2023 leading run-scorer: Daniel Bell-Drummond (600)

2023 leading wicket-taker: Grant Stewart (24)

Key winter moves: Jordan Cox may have defected to Essex, but Matt Parkinson's arrival from Lancashire provides the frontline spin option that George Linde conspicuously didn't last year. The overseas players will be rotated, with Bartlett limited to eight appearances and Swanepoel expected

to provide some lower-order pyrotechnics.

The big question: Will the rotation policy actually work? At the very least it has to be an improvement on the negligible contributions provided by Linde and an injured Kane Richardson last season. The Spitfires' form improved significantly after Agar was drafted in from the red-ball squad.

Wildcard watch: The obvious choice is Jack Leaning, but Grant Stewart and Joey Evison can also bat and bowl, as can Joe Denly. A real wildcard choice as a specialist spinner would be Parkinson. He has 139 Blast wickets at 18.96 and has significantly improved his batting over the winter.

Final thought: The Blast brings first-class sport to an area 50 miles from the nearest Premier League football and rugby grounds, and 55 from the nearest franchise. The Spitfire Ground is a sold-out bearpit on Blast nights and the Spitfires are a genuine title chance.

MIDDLESEX

Previewed by Ben Kosky - ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Stephen Eskinazi

Overseas players: None

Finals Day appearances: One (2008)

Titles: One (2008)

2023 finish: Ninth (South Group)

2023 leading run-scorer: Stephen Eskinazi (462)

2023 leading wicket-taker: Tom Helm (12)

Key winter moves: Financial restrictions mean Middlesex go into the tournament without any imports, but former Derbyshire skipper Leus du Plooy is an excellent addition to their middle order while Henry Brookes should take some pressure off Tom Helm's shoulders in the seam bowling department.

The big question: While Middlesex possess batting brawn up top, with Eskinazi, Max Holden and Joe Cracknell, their tendency has been to stumble in the middle overs. Can Du Plooy provide the cool head required to manage an innings – arguably lacking ever since Eoin Morgan called it a day.

Wildcard watch: Jack Davies steered Middlesex across the line in last year's thrilling run-fest against Surrey, recording an overall strike rate north of 150 during the tournament. The big-hitting wicketkeeper-batter should be guaranteed plenty more opportunities to shine in the wake of John Simpson's departure to Sussex.

Final thought: Although Middlesex's decision to switch two home games to Chelmsford was controversial, it's unlikely to put them at a disadvantage. The perennial T20 under-achievers belatedly found form on the road in last year's Blast, winning three of their last four group matches after losing 10 in a row – including every game at home.

SOMERSET

Previewed by Richard Latham - ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Lewis Gregory

Overseas players: Riley Meredith (Australia)

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

Titles: Two (2005, 2023)

2023 finish: Champions

2023 leading run-scorer: Will Smeed (523)

2023 leading wicket-taker: Matt Henry (31)

Key winter moves: Australia quick Riley Meredith has been signed to replace Matt Henry, who played such a big part in lifting the trophy last season. Roelof van der Merwe is back on a white-ball contract having not been named in the Netherlands squad for the World Cup.

The big question: Can Tom Kohler-Cadmore return from a disappointing Indian Premier League campaign with Rajasthan Royals in confident enough mood to repeat the outstanding success of his first season at Somerset, which saw him average almost 35 in scoring 489 Vitality Blast runs?

Wildcard watch: Ben Green's innocuous looking medium-paced bowling brought him 30 Blast wickets last summer, many of them to catches as opponents looked to increase their run-rate. That was only one less than leading wicket-taker Matt Henry and the 26-year-old Devonian all-rounder will go into this season's competition high on self-belief.

Final thought: As champions, Somerset will be the team everyone is gunning for this summer. But they boast a formidable batting line-up to cash in on their true home pitches and can again count on fantastic support and a vibrant atmosphere at the Cooper Associates County Ground, which has become an intimidating venue for visiting sides.

SURREY

Previewed by Mark Baldwin - ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Chris Jordan

Overseas players: Sean Abbott (Australia), Spencer Johnson (Australia) – both available for first eight matches.

Finals Day appearances: Eight (2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2013, 2014, 2020, 2023)

Titles: One (2003)

2023 finish: Semi-finals

2023 leading run-scorer: Laurie Evans (563)

2023 leading wicket-taker: Sunil Narine (20)

Key winter moves: Surrey have pulled off something of a coup by signing the exciting Australian international left-arm quick Spencer Johnson, for the first eight group games. Johnson grabbed English audiences' attention when he took an extraordinary 3 for 1 in 20 balls in last summer's The Hundred, for Oval Invincibles against Manchester Originals.

The big question: A significant monkey on Surrey's back is the constant reminder that their only previous T20 triumph came under Adam Hollioake's captaincy in the inaugural tournament way back in 2003, despite eight appearances overall at Finals Day. Last year they were beaten by 24 runs in the semi-final by eventual winners Somerset.

Wildcard watch: You might describe him more as a forgotten man of English cricket, rather than a wildcard, but Jason Roy will be desperate to remind everyone of his world-class top-order hitting powers in the eight group matches he plays before departing for Major League Cricket in the USA. Expect early fireworks from Roy.

Final thought: This year's Blast is another big test of the Surrey squad's famed strength in depth. With four players initially away at the ICC Men's T20 World Cup – skipper Chris Jordan, all-rounders Sam Curran and Will Jacks, plus paceman Reece Topley – other major talents like Roy, Ollie Pope, Jamie Smith, Gus Atkinson, Tom Curran and Dan Worrall will be expected to step up into on-field leadership roles until the England quartet return for the later group games in July.

SUSSEX SHARKS

Previewed by Bruce Talbot - ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Tymal Mills

Overseas players: Daniel Hughes (Australia), Nathan McAndrew (Australia)

Finals Day appearances: Five (2007, 2009, 2012, 2018, 2021)

Titles: One (2009)

2023 finish: Sixth (South Group)

2023 leading run-scorer: Ravi Bopara (408)

2023 leading wicket-taker: Tymal Mills & Ravi Bopara (12)

Key winter moves: Tymal Mills, one of only three players who took part at Finals Day in 2021 still at Sussex, takes over as captain. Daniel Hughes, the experienced Australian left-hander who has played 105 Big Bash games, will be joined by compatriot Nathan McAndrew, who played seven Blast matches for Sussex in 2023.

The big question: Neither of Sussex's two top scorers in 2023 – Ravi Bopara and Michael Burgess – are around this year so who is going to fire the batting? A lot depends on Daniel Hughes, who is experiencing the Blast for the first time, while Danny Lamb will look to take on Bopara's all-rounder role.

Wildcard watch: James Coles played 11 games last year without producing a match-winning performance but with that experience under his belt the 20-year-old could be crucial this season, as a tempo-setting batter in the top four and with his improving left-arm spin in the middle overs.

Final thought: Sussex won five games away but only once at Hove and coach Paul Farbrace has prioritised improving that home record. They are set to lose

young Scotland internationals Brad Currie and Charlie Tear to the World Cup and lack obvious star quality. They will need to start well if they are to threaten the big hitters in the South Group.

NORTH GROUP

BEARS

Previewed by Brian Halford – ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Alex Davies

Overseas players: Hasan Ali (Pakistan), Aamir Jamal (Pakistan)

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

Titles: One (2014)

2023 finish: Quarter-finals

2023 leading run-scorer: Sam Hain (481)

2023 leading wicket-taker: Dan Mousley (21)

Key winter moves: The Bears have fleshed out their bowling options with the signings of seamers George Garton and Richard Gleeson. Garton has signed a three-year T20 contract while 36-year-old Gleeson has signed just for this year.

The big question: Can the Bears overcome the knockout freeze that has seen them exit the tournament at the quarter-final stage in the past three seasons? In recent years they have played some scintillating T20 cricket during the group stage but choked when the format turned to all-or-nothing.

Wildcard watch: All-rounder Ed Barnard's form in his first season and a half

since arriving from Worcestershire has been hugely impressive, especially with the bat. He has the tools and the talent to radically improve on his forgettable first T20 campaign for the Bears last year.

Final thought: Despite a flurry of success which brought three Finals Day appearances between 2014 and 2017, the Bears' Blast history has been largely fallow. A decade separated their first two Finals Day appearances and it is now seven years since they last figured in the showpiece day in their own back yard.

DERBYSHIRE FALCONS

Previewed by Nigel Gardner – ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Samit Patel

Overseas players: Blair Tickner (New Zealand), Daryn Dupavillon (South Africa), Mohammad Amir (Pakistan, last six group games)

Finals Day appearances: One (2019)

Titles: None

2023 Finish: Fifth (North Group)

2023 Leading run scorer: Wayne Madsen (580)

2023 Leading wicket taker: Zak Chappell (26)

Key winter moves: Patel has won the Blast twice with rivals Notts Outlaws and his experience and quality in white-ball cricket could be key for the Falcons this summer. Amir's scheduled arrival after the ICC Men's T20 World Cup brings international pedigree to the team.

The big question: The Falcons missed out on the quarter-finals in the last

group game in 2023 and given the recruitment since then, will be confident of mounting a challenge this season. Along with Patel and Amir, head of cricket Mickey Arthur has signed players with one-day honours to their names.

Wildcard watch: Patel, Ross Whiteley and Zak Chappell have tasted success in The Hundred so could be snapped up if they have strong Blast campaigns. Aneurin Donald is capable of batting pyrotechnics while Pat Brown's variations with the white ball make him another contender.

Final thought: Although he turned 40 in January, Madsen is one of the top exponents of improvisation in T20 cricket. His hockey background allows him to conjure shots all around the wicket and if he has another strong tournament, the Falcons could soar this summer.

DURHAM

Previewed by Graham Hardcastle – ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Alex Lees

Overseas players: David Bedingham (South Africa), Ben Dwarshuis (Australia), Ashton Turner (Australia)

Finals Day appearances: Two (2008, 2016)

Titles: None

2023 finish: Seventh (North Group)

2023 leading run-scorer: Ollie Robinson (380)

2023 leading wicket-taker: Nathan Sowter (24)

Key winter moves: Durham have strengthened their stocks on the domestic

and international front. They have signed experienced white-ball duo Colin Ackermann and Callum Parkinson from Leicestershire added to Australian overseas pair Ashton Turner and Ben Dwarshuis, the latter two both Big Bash winners.

The big question: Could Durham be a dark horse? They have underachieved in recent times - just one quarter-final appearance in the past seven years. But they have added some notable knowhow in the aforementioned quartet and will have gained confidence from winning Zimbabwe's domestic title whilst on pre-season tour in March.

Wildcard watch: Six Durham stars are Hundred bound; Brydon Carse, Graham Clark, Callum Parkinson, Matthew Potts, Ollie Robinson and Nathan Sowter. Veteran Dutch all-rounder Colin Ackermann has Hundred experience and contributed 180 runs and seven wickets with his off-spin to that Zimbabwean success. Good Blast form, and he might be Durham's magnificent seventh.

Final thought: Durham's squad will include three overseas players, but only two can play. South African Test batter David Bedingham is registered just in case there are any last-minute unavailability dramas. The county are not planning for England Men's Test captain Ben Stokes to feature over the next month before the Test summer starts, but expect crowds to swell if he does.

LANCASHIRE LIGHTNING

Previewed by Graham Hardcastle – ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Keaton Jennings

Overseas players: Tom Bruce (New Zealand), Chris Green (Australia)

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

Titles: One (2015)

2023 finish: Quarter-finals

2023 leading run-scorer: Daryl Mitchell (435)

2023 leading wicket-taker: Luke Wood (18)

Key winter moves: Lancashire have lost Daryl Mitchell's overseas runs but hope fellow New Zealander Tom Bruce fills the void. Australian all-rounder Chris Green adds valuable experience following a change to Nathan Lyon's availability. Matt Parkinson, one of only two Lightning bowlers to take 100 T20 wickets, has joined Kent. England T20 quick Richard Gleeson is another departure, replaced by fellow speedster Mitch Stanley.

The big question: Have Lancashire got the experience in their squad to win a second Blast title? Former captain Dane Vilas also departed late last summer, while they may not see much of England quartet Jos Buttler, Tom Hartley, Liam Livingstone and Phil Salt due to World Cup duty.

Wildcard watch: Jos Buttler, Tom Hartley, Liam Livingstone, Saqib Mahmood, Phil Salt, Mitch Stanley, Luke Wells and Luke Wood are already signed up in the Hundred. Watch out for all-rounder Tom Aspinwall, though. He is yet to debut in T20 cricket. But, in bowling fast and batting down the order, he plays his cricket in overdrive.

Final thought: This season's Roses matches will provide some friendly fire, because Lancashire coach Dale Benkenstein and his opposite number at Yorkshire, Ottis Gibson, are the closest of mates. They are former team-mates at Durham and regularly socialise when their teams play against each other. There won't be much else friendly about those meetings, though.

LEICESTERSHIRE FOXES

Previewed by Jon Culley – ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Peter Handscomb

Overseas players: Wiaan Mulder (South Africa), Peter Handscomb (Australia)

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

Titles: Three (2004, 2006, 2011)

2023 finish: Ninth (North Group)

2023 leading run-scorer: Rishi Patel (390)

2023 leading wicket-taker: Callum Parkinson (17)

Key winter moves: Nine players from the Foxes' 2023 campaign have departed, notably former skipper Colin Ackermann and left-arm spinner Parkinson. Liam Trevaskis (ex-Durham) is a like-for-like replacement for the latter. Ben Mike returns from Yorkshire and Ben Cox (ex-Worcestershire) will keep wicket, with on-loan Hampshire duo Scott Currie and Ian Holland added to the squad.

The big question: The Foxes' familiar slow start was compounded by a woeful finish as they finished rock bottom of the North Group with 12 defeats, many by emphatic margins. They found a winning formula over 50 overs in 2023 - can they reproduce it in the shortest format?

Wildcard watch: A wildcard pick for Trent Rockets after taking 15 wickets in the 2022 Blast campaign, Ben Mike missed out on The Hundred last year following his switch to Yorkshire. Always good for a few late runs too, he'll be keen to put himself back in the frame.

Final thought: With Ackermann's departure in particular, it feels like a new era for the Foxes - but one that sees the one-time T20 kings in need of a revival. Just seven home victories in three seasons has left things feeling flat at times on a ground that needs atmosphere and excitement. Australian international Handscomb takes over the captaincy, with a morale-boosting opening-night win against Yorkshire his first objective.

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE STEELBACKS

Previewed by Jeremy Blackmore – ECB Reporters Network

Captain: David Willey

Overseas players: Sikandar Raza (Zimbabwe, first eight games), Ashton Agar (Australia – last four games), Matthew Breetzke (South Africa)

Finals Day appearances: 4 (2009, 2013, 2015, 2016)

Titles: Two (2013, 2016)

2023 finish: Sixth (North Group)

2023 leading run-scorer: Chris Lynn (364)

2023 leading wicket-taker: Andrew Tye (19)

Key winter moves: Former England all-rounder Ravi Bopara joins the Steelbacks for the Blast, while ex-Derbyshire paceman George Scrimshaw will be hoping to impress the selectors after his ODI debut last summer. South African Matthew Breetzke arrives following blistering form in his country's domestic T20 tournaments, alongside highly-experienced Zimbabwe T20 captain, all-rounder Sikandar Raza.

The big question: Northamptonshire relied heavily on the firepower of big-hitting Australian Chris Lynn during the past two seasons. With some impressive signings and a more balanced side this year, can the young guns step up to support the more experienced, but older hands?

Wildcard watch: Ricardo Vasconcelos is fresh from two big Championship tons, the second scored at a white-ball rate in a run chase. Holding his own alongside Lynn at the top of the T20 batting order last year, Vasconcelos offers firepower and the ability to bat deep – and an extra wicketkeeping option.

Final thought: Without a County Championship win in seven games, Northamptonshire are looking to relaunch their season with a successful Blast campaign. Skipper David Willey has a wealth of experience around him in Bopara and Sikandar Raza (and Ashton Agar for the final four games) and this squad could mount a serious challenge for the knockout stage.

NOTTS OUTLAWS

Previewed by Jon Culley – ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Joe Clarke

Overseas players: Dane Paterson (South Africa), Will Young (New Zealand), Ben Lister (New Zealand, 30 May - 21 June), Fazalhaq Farooqi (Afghanistan, 5-19 July)

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

Titles: Two (2017, 2020)

2023 finish: Quarter-finals

2023 leading run-scorer: Joe Clarke (432)

2023 leading wicket-taker: Shaheen Shah Afridi (22)

Key winter moves: Leading 2023 wicket-takers Shaheen Shah Afridi and Jake Ball have gone, as have club legend Samit Patel and off-spinner Matt Carter. New Zealand's Ben Lister and Afghanistan's Fazalhaq Farooqi fill the Afridi left-arm quick vacancy, while New Zealand batter Will Young and ex-Worcestershire duo Jack Haynes and Dillon Pennington are more new faces.

The big question: Can Joe Clarke shoulder the burden of captaincy and still deliver big runs? Despite his lack of experience in the role, Clarke takes over the armband following Steven Mullaney's move into coaching. Yet with Alex

Hales missing the later group games, much may rest on Clarke's batting too.

Wildcard watch: After two seasons on the main roster, wicketkeeper Tom Moores kept his Trent Rockets shirt via a wildcard last year after outscoring Alex Hales in the Blast, when only Clarke totalled more than his 371 runs. He will be looking to do the same again with another big showing.

Final thought: After two below-par seasons, Outlaws have refreshed their squad enough to be early favourites. Whether they can justify that remains to be seen, but the addition of batters Young and Haynes can balance Hales' reduced availability and while bowler Josh Tongue, another winter recruit from Worcestershire, is sidelined by injury, fit-again England quick Olly Stone will feel like a new signing.

WORCESTERSHIRE RAPIDS

Previewed by John Curtis – ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Brett D'Oliveira

Overseas players: Usama Mir (Pakistan), Nathan Smith (New Zealand).

Finals Day appearances: Two (2018, 2019)

Titles: One (2018)

2023 finish: Quarter-finals

2023 leading run-scorer: Mitchell Santner (404)

2023 leading wicket-taker: Pat Brown (24)

Key winter moves: Acquiring Usama Mir for a second campaign is crucial to the Rapids chances of further success. He was initially signed last summer for just three games but Michael Bracewell's injury meant he returned to finish

top of the batting and bowling averages.

The big question: Can Adam Hose put a challenging start to the season in County Championship cricket behind him and show the white-ball form he demonstrates around the world. Finished as the Rapids' second highest run scorer in first season at New Road. A destroyer of attacks at his best.

Wildcard watch: Nathan Smith will be tasting Blast cricket for the first time and looking to repeat the red ball form he has shown during the last few months for Wellington in the Plunket Shield and in the Championship for Worcestershire. A lionhearted player whose extra pace may be crucial in the powerplay and death overs.

Final thought: Worcestershire made massive strides forward in the Blast last summer after winning just two games in 2022. Their squad looks to have sufficient quality and balance to be able to challenge to again climb out of the group stages if they can overcome having four of their first five games being away from New Road.

YORKSHIRE VIKINGS

Previewed by Graham Hardcastle – ECB Reporters Network

Captain: Shan Masood

Overseas players: Donovan Ferreira (South Africa), Shan Masood (Pakistan)

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

Titles: None

2023 finish: Eighth (North Group)

2023 leading run-scorer: Dawid Malan (546)

2023 leading wicket-taker: Jordan Thompson (20)

Key winter moves: Yorkshire signed emerging South African international Donovan Ferreira to add power to their middle order. The 25-year-old will also take the wicketkeeping gloves. Left-arm spinner Dan Moriarty has arrived from Surrey, while Dawid Malan converted his contract at Headingley into a white-ball only deal.

The big question: Are Yorkshire going to have the bowling depth to make an impression? Seamers Mickey Edwards (foot) and Matt Milnes (back) have already been ruled out for the season with stress fractures, leaving little room for rest and rotation.

Wildcard watch: Eight Yorkshire players, including Jonny Bairstow, Harry Brook, Donovan Ferreira, Adil Rashid and Joe Root, will be involved in this summer's Hundred. Leg-spinner Jafer Chohan was on Southern Brave's roster last year but didn't play. He should be key for the Vikings, and good form can catch the eye again.

Final thought: Yorkshire could do with a Blast boost. They have been a long way short of their pre-season title favourites tag in the first half of the County Championship Division Two campaign. With their seam-bowling stocks depleted, it could be a case of spin it to win it, with Dom Bess, Dan Moriarty and Jafer Chohan all good to go.

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Contacts



Matt Somerford

Press Contact

Communications Manager - Domestic Cricket

media@ecb.co.uk

+44 (0)7551 134 716