



Mar 28, 2024 12:24 GMT

## Vitality County Championship - county-by-county guide

\*Available for immediate use via the ECB Reporters Network\*

### DIVISION ONE

Durham

**Captain:** Scott Borthwick

**Head Coach:** Ryan Campbell

**2023 finish:** Champions (Division Two)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** Alex Lees (1,347)

**2023 highest wicket-taker:** Ben Raine (60)

**Key winter moves:** Australia cult-hero Scott Boland has signed an overseas deal until the end of July; the seamer could play as many as nine Vitality County Championship matches alongside South Africa batter David Bedingham, who returns for a full summer. England Lions left-arm spinner Callum Parkinson and experienced Netherlands batter Colin Ackermann have signed from Leicestershire, while club legend Graham Onions returns as lead bowling coach from Lancashire with a burgeoning coaching reputation.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** Durham will not be returning to Division One to just survive. You just know with the positivity their coach Ryan Campbell exudes that they will be aiming big. Look out Surrey! Campbell has made no secret of his contempt for draws, so strap yourselves in, this could be a fun ride.

**Player most likely to Baz-Ball:** Alex Lees, last season's leading run-scorer in Division Two, was in possession of an England opener's berth at the start of the Brendon McCullum-Ben Stokes era and will be desperate to regain his place. Loves to dominate from the off.

**Final thought:** Durham's seam bowling unit has a fearsome look about it heading into 2024. Boland will begin his maiden county campaign with big expectations, while fellow quicks Ben Raine and Matthew Potts both topped 50 wickets in Division Two last season. Then there are the likes of Brydon Carse, Bas de Leede, Paul Coughlin and young gun Ollie Gibson. Add in the wily left-arm spinner Parkinson and you can see why there is plenty of excitement building in the North East.

## Essex

*Previewed by Martin Smith – ECB Reporters Network*

**Captain:** Tom Westley

**Head Coach:** Anthony McGrath

**2023 finish:** Second (Division One)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** Tom Westley (1,130)

**2023 highest wicket-taker:** Simon Harmer (61)

**Key winter moves:** Essex moved promptly and astutely to cover the retirement of Sir Alastair Cook and defection (to Surrey) of Dan Lawrence. They brought in another former Test captain at the top of the batting in South African Dean Elgar and prised away promising wicketkeeper-batter Jordan Cox from Kent to enhance the middle-order.

**The big question:** Who will be the next player to roll off the Academy production line? Charlie Allison, Luc Benkenstein and Noah Thain all represented England at under-19 level over the winter and showed enough promise in the Metro Bank One-Day Cup last season to warrant a look at some point this summer.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** For the first time since 2019 the two heavyweights of domestic red-ball cricket in the last decade – namely, Essex and Surrey – are scheduled to play each other home and away. It would be a sight to savour if the season's finale at Chelmsford in late September was winner-takes-all for the title.

**Player most likely to Baz-Ball:** If the circumstances are right, Matt Critchley is capable of stepping up to the plate, lighting the after-burners and taking the game away from the opposition in a whirlwind of boundaries. His leg-breaks can cause havoc, too.

**Final thought:** While there has been remedial surgery in the batting ranks with the loss of Cook and Lawrence, Essex are still able to field one of the most balanced and penetrative bowling attacks in the competition. Seamers Jamie Porter and Sam Cook will again soften up the opposition batters, weighing in with their fair share of wickets, before leaving Simon Harmer to bemuse any survivors with his relentless off-spin.

## **Hampshire**

*Previewed by Alex Smith - ECB Reporters Network*

**Captain:** James Vince

**Head Coach:** Adi Birrell

**2023 finish:** Third (Division One)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** James Vince (1,007)

**2023 highest wicket-taker:** Mohammad Abbas (53)

**Key winter moves:** Ali Orr has moved down the coast from Sussex to improve the top-order batting. Australian quick Michael Naser has joined predominantly for the Vitality Blast, but the door has been left ajar for him to feature in the Championship. Aneurin Donald is the only major departure, although Scott Currie and Mason Crane are spending season loans away from the newly-rebranded Utilita Bowl.

**The big question:** As it has been the same for the past couple of years - can Hampshire finally end their title drought? This will be the 52nd season since they last won the Championship, and with the likes of Kyle Abbott and Keith Barker into their twilight years, this could be the last dance for this highly-talented era.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** Seeing how Ali Orr gets on in Division One. Those who have watched the left-handed batter regularly have purred

at his shot-making and predicted England honours. Hampshire have been dreaming of a dependable opener since the days of Michael Carberry and Jimmy Adams, and the 22-year-old might be the man to set a platform for the likes of James Vince and Liam Dawson to cash in.

**Player most likely to Baz-Ball:** John Turner - England liked what they've seen in 31 professional matches so much that they have already given him a Development Contract. Very quick, very accurate and very much likely to skittle batting line-ups this season.

**Final thought:** After three straight third-placed finishes, all the ingredients are there for another tilt at the title...but can they finally do it? They ended last season by beating the top two, with only Surrey equalling their eight victories across the campaign. Erratic performances have stunted them in recent seasons but if they can find a smooth consistency in all sessions then silverware should follow. A trip to the Kia Oval in late April will be a good barometer of their hopes.

## **Kent**

*Previewed by Fred Atkins - ECB Reporters Network*

**Captain:** Daniel Bell-Drummond

**Head Coach:** Matt Walker

**2023 finish:** Eighth (Division One)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** Ben Compton (735)

**2023 highest wicket-taker:** Wes Agar and Matt Quinn (both 21)

**Key winter moves:** The angst caused by Jordan Cox's cross-Thames flit to Essex was more than offset by Matt Parkinson's arrival from Lancashire and Xavier Bartlett will be available for the first three months. George Garrett and Michael Cohen should bolster a bowling attack that was on its knees by the



end of last season.

**The big question:** Were Kent lucky or unlucky last year? Critics can claim that survival on the final day suggests the former, but after losing six potential overseas bowlers to injuries and having to do without Nathan Gilchrist for almost the entire season, the club could argue they were dealt a bad hand that they played as well as they could.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** A spinners' paradise at Canterbury? Parkinson is arguably Kent's biggest transfer coup in a generation, giving them a genuine match-winner and the front-rank spinner they've arguably lacked since James Tredwell retired. Hamid Qadri is improving all the time and 18-year-old Jaydn Denly, nephew of Joe, broke into the white-ball squad last year.

**Player most likely to Baz-Ball:** Grant Stewart tends to score quickly or not at all and his lower-order pyrotechnics have rescued a number of failing innings.

**Final thought:** Can Kent hope for anything more than survival this year? They stayed up by beating Northants twice and grinding out five draws, but 2023 was a frequently grim experience that ended with players, staff and fans alike huddling around phones and laptops to watch Middlesex's nerve-shredding defeat at Trent Bridge. Canny reinforcements at least offer some hope this time round.

## **Lancashire**

*Previewed by Graham Hardcastle - ECB Reporters Network*

**Captain:** Keaton Jennings

**Head Coach:** Dale Benkenstein

**2023 finish:** Fifth (Division One)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** Josh Bohannon (1,257)

**2023 highest wicket-taker:** Tom Bailey (50)

**Key winter moves:** Dale Benkenstein has replaced Glen Chapple as head coach, the ex-South Africa batter moving from Gloucestershire. The Red Rose have pulled off the winter's eye-catching overseas signing, bringing in Australian off-spin legend Nathan Lyon, initially for a full season before Cricket Australia recently revised his availability to seven matches during the first half of the summer. New Zealand batter Tom Bruce also arrives at Emirates Old Trafford for a full summer.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** The arrival of Lyon is mouthwatering prospect, no doubt, but from an England point of view it will be interesting to see if England Lions skipper Josh Bohannon, the county's new vice captain, can back up his brilliant 2023 summer, in which he was the top flight's leading run-scorer. If he does, a Test call might be in the offing.

**Player most likely to Baz-Ball:** Lancashire have a number of contenders, and dynamic young wicketkeeper-batter Matty Hurst is one if he gets a run in the side. But imposing and experienced opener Luke Wells is capable of taking a bowling attack apart if he gets going.

**Final thought:** Lancashire finished second in all three competitions in 2022, so a fifth-placed finish in last season's Championship stung. They struggled to get results on flat pitches at Emirates Old Trafford, hence the marquee signing of Lyon. But, after his recent 22-wicket return in the India v England Test series, a lot of focus will be on left-arm spinner Tom Hartley. How will Lancashire's management handle his development during the first half of the summer when playing two spinners in English conditions is not always possible?

## **Nottinghamshire**

*Previewed by Jon Culley - ECB Reporters' Network*

**Captain:** Haseeb Hameed

**Head Coach:** Peter Moores

**2023 finish:** Sixth (Division One)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** Joe Clarke (1,053)

**2023 highest wicket-taker:** Brett Hutton (62)

**Key winter moves:** After Steven Mullaney's switch to Second XI captain and player-coach, Haseeb Hameed skippers the red-ball side with Joe Clarke leading in T20. Samit Patel and Jake Ball depart, while fast bowler Dillon Pennington, England quick Josh Tongue (currently injured) and young batter Jack Haynes arrive from Worcestershire. New Zealand batter Will Young returns from mid-April until the end of the Blast.

**The big question:** With Stuart Broad retired, club legend Patel moving on, Mullaney effectively calling time on his senior career and Alex Hales prioritising the Lanka Premier League over the Blast, it feels like the end of an era at Trent Bridge. The big question is how smoothly they can transition to a new one while two new captains simultaneously try to find their feet.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** Whether Haynes, only 23, can make the impact many believe he can at a higher level after five Championship hundreds in the last two seasons for Worcestershire. The classy right-hander should bed in well with two New Road colleagues making the switch with him. He has the potential to be Nottinghamshire's most important winter signing.

**Player most likely to Baz-ball:** Ben Duckett was Bazballing even before it was a thing, but in his likely absence with England, Clarke or wicketkeeper-batter Tom Moores are the likeliest to take an up-tempo approach.

**Final thought:** How well Nottinghamshire have recruited will be measured by whether they can finish higher than last season's sixth, which was a fair reflection of their level. How much they see of the talented speedster Tongue is open to question, given that England will have first call on him once his latest injury has healed, but Pennington and Haynes look sound acquisitions and Young adds some proven quality. Members will welcome the promotion of exciting homegrown prospect Freddie McCann to the senior squad too.



## Somerset

*Previewed by Richard Latham - ECB Reporters Network*

**Captain:** Lewis Gregory

**Head Coach:** Jason Kerr

**2023 finish:** Seventh (Division One)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** James Rew (1,086)

**2023 highest wicket-taker:** Lewis Gregory (34)

**Key winter moves:** Matt Renshaw returns for a third spell in Somerset's batting line-up to cover for Tom Kohler-Cadmore's involvement in the Indian Premier League during April and May. Experienced former Nottinghamshire seamer Jake Ball will boost the bowling ranks, but hope of signing Will Sutherland were dashed when the Aussie all-rounder pulled out through injury. A replacement is being sought.

**The big question:** Will the forthcoming return of former captain Jamie Cox as chief executive help create the environment for Somerset to repeat the success of the Australian's spell as a player, which saw him lift the 2001 C&G Trophy while leading the team to runners-up spot in the Championship the same season.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** How the experienced Lewis Gregory will cope with replacing Tom Abell as skipper in four-day cricket. The all-rounder has set a tremendous example in overcoming a series of major back problems, but faces a tough task maintaining form as a key figure with bat and ball, while shouldering the responsibility of captaincy.

**Player most likely to Baz-Ball:** Matt Renshaw has scored five centuries for Somerset in 14 Championship appearances, including one before lunch against Yorkshire at Taunton in 2018. The Aussie is an exuberant character on and off the field and is sure to adopt a positive approach.

**Final thought:** Players and coaches alike are tired of being reminded about Somerset never having won the County Championship title, despite numerous near misses, and are desperate to make history. Last season began on a wave of optimism, but soon developed into a campaign of inconsistent performances without a victory until the sixth game. More top-order runs, particularly in the first innings, will be required to build winning positions this summer, while the return of the popular Steve Kirby as bowling coach will ensure a lively dressing room.

## **Surrey**

*Previewed by Mark Baldwin - ECB Reporters Network*

**Captain:** Rory Burns

**Head Coach:** Gareth Batty

**2023 finish:** Champions (Division One)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** Dom Sibley (746)

**2023 highest wicket-taker:** Jordan Clark and Dan Worrall (both 48)

**Key winter moves:** Dan Lawrence's arrival from Essex is much anticipated at the Oval. Head coach Gareth Batty says: "Without taking anything away from the wonderful work Essex have done with him in his career so far, we feel we can help him to become an even better cricketer." Expect, for instance, to see more of Lawrence's idiosyncratic spin bowling as well as big runs.

**The big question:** Can Surrey make it a hat-trick of titles after their triumphs of 2022 and last summer? Skipper Burns will actually be aiming for a fourth championship success in seven years, having led Surrey to the 2018 title in his own first season as captain, while Batty admits Alec Stewart's decision to step down as long-serving director of cricket at the end of 2024 will only "add to our desire as a squad" to achieve the hat-trick as a tribute to the true Surrey (and England) great.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** A key feature of Surrey's recent rise is the strength and depth of the homegrown core of their squad, with 10 of the 19 players who featured in championship cricket last summer qualifying on that count. Expect to see more evidence of that close-knit squad identity in this campaign.

**Player most likely to Baz-Ball:** Jamie Smith, a stylish and powerful 23-year-old with all the shots, will be looking to go up another gear after 736 championship runs last season with two hundreds and four fifties cemented his place in a multi-talented batting line-up.

**Final thought:** Surrey's dominance in recent seasons has been based on relentless fast-bowling power and a batting order of enviable depth. In 2023, while the overall batting effort might have been better, no fewer than 16 different players scored at least one championship half-century (from 33 in all) while six of them also featured in a total of nine hundreds. Much more impressive, though, were the records of a magnificent seven-strong seam attack: Clark and Worrall's 48 wickets apiece came at an average of 21.35 and 24.20 respectively, followed by Tom Lawes (39 at 19.76), Sean Abbott (37 at 24.78), Kemar Roach (26 at 26.26), Gus Atkinson (20 at 20.20) and Jamie Overton (14 at 24.64). Roach and Abbott both return as overseas players.

## **Warwickshire**

*Previewed by Brian Halford - ECB Reporters Network*

**Captain:** Alex Davies

**Head Coach:** Mark Robinson

**2023 finish:** Fourth (Division One)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** Sam Hain (706)

**2023 highest wicket-taker:** Olly Hannon-Dalby (54)

**Key winter moves:** Alex Davies has replaced Will Rhodes as captain, the latter having stepped down after an impressive tenure which included leading the side to the Championship title in 2021. Pakistan paceman Hasan Ali returns until at least the end of July to rejoin a seam attack which will be without Henry Brookes who has moved to Middlesex.

**The big question:** Which direction will Warwickshire take after an erratic 2023 red-ball season which brought some brilliant days and some very poor ones? Rhodes' departure as captain caused some disappointment among the fans who will be hoping that the focus of leadership helps Davies to improve a batting average of 27.15 for the Bears in first-class cricket.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** A seam-attack of the highly-skilled Olly Hannon-Dalby and Chris Rushworth (107 wickets between them last season) assisted by charismatic overseas star Hasan Ali and the fast-improving Ed Barnard with, who knows, perhaps the occasional pinch of Chris Woakes stirred into the mix.

**Player most likely to Baz-Ball:** Olly Hannon-Dalby – always hunting wickets with the ball, as shown by his 450 across the formats for Warwickshire, and increasingly effective as a polished, left-handed, lower-order hitter with a cover drive that has drawn comparison with David Gower.

**Final thought:** Warwickshire should have enough about them to stay out of relegation trouble. To challenge at the other end of the table they will need good fortune with injuries in the bowling department – 51% of their Championship wickets last season were taken by two men aged 34 and 37. They will also need considerably more match-shaping innings from their top order. Only Sam Hain and Rob Yates scored more than one Championship century for Warwickshire in 2023.

## **Worcestershire**

*Previewed by John Curtis - ECB Reporters Network*

**Captain:** Brett D'Oliveira

**Head Coach:** Alan Richardson

**2023 finish:** Second (Division Two)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** Jake Libby (1153)

**2023 highest wicket-taker:** Joe Leach (48)

**Key winter moves:** Rob Jones will strengthen the top order batting after his move from Lancashire on a three-year contract. All-rounder Tom Taylor from Northamptonshire will primarily add depth to the bowling department after penning a four-year move. New Zealand all-rounder Nathan Smith, leading wicket-tasker in the Plunket Shield, is available all summer for all formats.

**The big question:** Can Worcestershire finally establish themselves as a top division county after years of see-sawing in between the two divisions. It is a massive challenge particularly after losing established players Dillon Pennington, Jack Haynes and Josh Tongue to Nottinghamshire but a tightly-knit squad will help them through what are bound to be some challenging days.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** Captain Brett D'Oliveira put the accent on playing positive cricket last summer, not being afraid to lose in a bid to force a win, and he has indicated there will be a similar approach in 2024 although recognising the difference in quality of the opposition.

**Player most likely to Baz-Ball:** Kashif Ali played several destructive innings last summer, most notably his 88 off 36 balls in a Metro Bank One-Day Cup match against Derbyshire, and the signing from the South Asian Cricket Academy is capable of more similar heroics in 2024.

**Final thought:** Asley Giles has brought a positivity to the club in his role as CEO and quickly earned the support and respect of players, coaches and members alike despite his long-standing Warwickshire connections. He is aware of the demanding task ahead in trying to finish above the bottom two but there is a belief that Worcestershire can at least compete in Division One.

## **DIVISION TWO**

### **Derbyshire**

*Preview by Nigel Gardner – ECB Reporters Network*

**Captain:** David Lloyd.

**Head Coach:** Mickey Arthur

**2023 finish:** Sixth (Division Two)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** Leus du Plooy (1236)

**2023 highest wicket-taker:** Alex Thomson (31).

**Key winter moves:** Blair Tickner, who has signed until early July, will lead the attack. The 30-year-old right-arm fast New Zealander has "some serious pace" according to Arthur although plans to form an overseas new-ball pairing with Mohammad Amir were torn up when the Pakistani quick announced he was coming out of international retirement. Leus du Plooy has left for Middlesex.

**The big question:** Derbyshire failed to win a home match last season, losing twice with five of the six games at the Incora County Ground ending in a draw. The nature of the pitches will need to offer a better balance between bat and ball if the county is to mount a serious challenge for promotion.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** The former Glamorgan skipper David Lloyd is expected to bring an attacking ethos to a squad which has undergone an overhaul during the winter with Arthur recruiting players capable of delivering a positive and entertaining brand of cricket that will give the team a better chance of turning draws into victories.

**Player most likely to Baz-Ball:** Aneurin Donald can pepper the pickets as Derbyshire discovered when he shredded their attack, plundering an



astonishing 234 off only 136 balls for Glamorgan at Colwyn Bay in 2016, equalling what at the time was the fastest first-class double century.

**Final thought:** Although the loss of Amir so close to the start of the season is a disappointment, Derbyshire's seam attack still looks strong with Zak Chappell, Sam Conners and Ben Aitchison supporting Tickner. Lloyd and the evergreen Wayne Madsen should compensate for the departure of du Plooy to Middlesex while Luis Reece and Harry Came will look to build on the opening partnership they forged last season. Jack Morley's arrival on a season-long loan from Lancashire bolsters the spin department.

## **Glamorgan**

*Previewed by Peter Miller - ECB Reporters Network*

**Captain:** Sam Northeast

**Head Coach:** Grant Bradburn

**2023 finish:** Fifth (Division Two)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** Kiran Carlson (1,068)

**2023 highest wicket-taker:** Timm van der Gugten (39)

**Key winter moves:** The big news for Glamorgan was the arrival of new head coach, Grant Bradburn. He has secured the services of seam bowler Hamza Mir, who he coached when he was in charge of the Pakistan national team, and leg spinner Mason Crane has also joined the club on a season-long loan.

**The big question:** The issue for Glamorgan last year was a lack of wicket-taking prowess, with the batting unit all too often setting up a winning position that could not be seized upon. The real question is will the arrival of Bradburn, Mir and Crane lead them turning some of the 12 draws they managed in 2023 into wins this season.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** Local lad Kiran Carlson continuing his career progression will be high on the wish list for Glamorgan fans. It has been 19 years since the last time a player from the county appeared in an England team and another 1000-run season for Carlson must mean he is pushing for a place on an England tour at some level in the winter.

**Player most likely to Baz-Ball:** Dan Douthwaite. Loves bowling bouncers and hooking them for six when one is sent in his direction. Swings hard in every format.

**Final thought:** It is strange to think of a Championship campaign with just one loss as a disappointment, but last year felt as if it was a team that underachieved. The 12 draws in 2023 involved some good luck and some bad, but the overall issue was a lack of killer instinct when ahead. For 2024 to be an improvement on last term this needs to change. The ability of the bowlers, new and old, to take wickets is vital for this season.

## **Gloucestershire**

*Previewed by Richard Latham - ECB Reporters Network*

**Captain:** Graeme van Buuren

**Head Coach:** Mark Alleyne

**2023 finish:** 8th (Division Two)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** Miles Hammond (812)

**2023 highest wicket-taker:** Zafar Gohar (32)

**Key winter moves:** New head coach Mark Alleyne was delighted to announce the return of Australian Cameron Bancroft as an overseas player to boost the batting line-up for the whole of the 2024 Championship season, while fellow countryman Beau Webster, an all-rounder, will be available for two fixtures in June during his spell as an overseas signing in T20 cricket.

**The big question:** Can Gloucestershire remove the stigma of being the weakest side in the Championship, having failed to reach 100 points in 14 Second Division games last season, which saw them fail to register a single victory and suffer six defeats? The previous year saw them relegated in bottom place from the First Division with only two victories.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** The effect of the return of Alleyne to the club as head coach in place of Dale Benkenstein. There have been few more popular players in Gloucestershire's history and Alleyne will be hoping his shrewd cricket brain helps reproduce the winning mentality of the hugely successful one-day team he captained in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

**Player most likely to Baz-Ball:** Jack Taylor is guaranteed to attack with the bat in all forms of cricket while hoping the leg-spin he has developed in recent seasons, since being deemed guilty of an illegal action as an off-spinner, can tempt mistakes from opponents with similar intent.

**Final thought:** Gloucestershire will have to improve in all departments to erase memories of two desperately disappointing seasons. Their 23 batting points last season was the lowest in the Second Division, while no seam bowler managed more than 20 wickets. Injuries took their toll, but key players underperformed, Chris Dent and James Bracey contributing less than 1,200 runs between them. Both will need to recapture top form if the team are to mount a promotion challenge.

## **Leicestershire**

*Previewed by Jon Culley - ECB Reporters Network*

**Captain:** Lewis Hill

**Head Coach:** Alfonso Thomas

**2023 finish:** Fourth (Division Two)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** Rishi Patel (1,075)

## **2023 highest wicket-taker:** Chris Wright (48)

**Key winter moves:** A busy winter under new head coach Alfonso Thomas and assistant James Taylor saw eight players leave, with Ben Mike (Yorkshire), Liam Trevaskis (Durham), Scott Currie (Hampshire, on loan) and Ben Cox (Worcestershire, loan-to-permanent) coming in. Tying down Australia international Peter Handscomb to a second season is a coup, while fellow Aussie Marcus Harris returns to provide high-quality early-season cover.

**The big question:** The big question: Can Leicestershire build on the elation of winning a first one-day trophy for 38 years and mount a sustained promotion challenge? Away at Yorkshire in their season opener, the Foxes then host Sussex before travelling away to Derbyshire. A win in either of those could do wonders for confidence under skipper Lewis Hill.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** Young player of the year for 2023 Tom Scriven continuing his progress. Unable to establish himself in three seasons with Hampshire, the 25-year-old all-rounder is thriving at Grace Road, combining 62 wickets with 432 runs across all formats last season and playing a key part in giving the red-ball attack the depth that it has sometimes lacked in recent years.

**Player most likely to Baz-ball:** See-ball, hit-ball Sol Budinger is a natural Bazballer but Rishi Patel's strike rate in making his 1,075 runs last year was none too shabby - plus he averaged almost 45.

**Final thought:** Eight wooden spoons in 14 seasons had some cricket commentators writing off Leicestershire as a basket case. Last season, though, they looked to have the makings of a decent side, an impression confirmed when they ended the summer as Metro Bank One-Day Cup champions. There is plenty of scope for improvement, though, and promotion to Division One would be the perfect follow-up.

## **Middlesex**

*Previewed by Jon Batham - ECB Reporters Network*

**Captain:** Toby Roland-Jones

**Head Coach:** Richard Johnson

**2023 finish:** Ninth (Division 1)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** Ryan Higgins (955)

**2023 highest wicket-taker:** Ethan Bamber (41)

**Key winter moves:** Well publicised financial restrictions mean arrivals have been limited, but the acquisition of Leus du Plooy, prolific with Derbyshire last season, will strengthen the batting ranks while Henry Brookes' arrival from Warwickshire is timely given Tim Murtagh's retirement. John Simpson's departure to Sussex leaves big shoes to fill behind the stumps.

**The big question:** Middlesex's fragile batting was at the heart of their relegation last season, the decimation of the top order being the rule rather than the exception. Du Plooy's arrival should add consistent runs at three or four, which hopefully will give a lead to youngsters like Josh De Caires and Joe Cracknell, so helping them to continue their progress.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** The short answer is for Middlesex to be competitive in red-ball cricket again. Their batting woes meant they were constantly on the back foot in 2023 with little or no respite for bowlers constantly expected to produce rabbits from hats to get them back into games. The drop in level should lead to more runs on the board.

**Player most likely to Baz-Ball:** Ryan Higgins sometimes had to curb his aggressive instincts when rebuilding innings last season, but would be more explosive with runs behind him. Cracknell could be similarly belligerent in the middle order against an older ball.

**Final thought:** Middlesex need to get key decisions right if they're going to be one of the promotion contenders in a competitive Division Two. Those include what to do with Josh De Caires. Generally regarded as top-order batter, he spent last year as leading off-spinner often left stranded with the tail batting at eight. Whether he is restored to the top-order may depend on Cracknell winning the battle with Robbie White and Jack Davies for

wicketkeeping duties and dropping down the order accordingly.

## **Northamptonshire**

*Previewed by Jeremy Blackmore – ECB Reporters Network*

**Captain:** Luke Procter

**Head Coach:** John Sadler

**2023 finish:** Tenth (Division One)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** Rob Keogh (780)

**2023 highest wicket-taker:** Jack White (50)

**Key winter moves:** Indian batter Karun Nair, who scored a majestic 150 against Surrey during a brief stay last season, returns for the first seven Championship fixtures while countryman Prithvi Shaw is also back following his record-breaking 244 in the One-Day Cup. Meanwhile in-form Australian quick Chris Tremain returns until the end of April fresh from taking 50 wickets in the Sheffield Shield.

**The big question:** Northants surprised many with a tough, attritional style of cricket in 2022, but a batting slump saw them firmly rooted to the bottom of Division One in 2023 following five innings defeats. Can their fragile batting stand up and mount a bid for promotion? The return of Nair and Shaw provides much-needed ballast alongside promising former Somerset batter George Bartlett.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** Hopes will be high though for new signing George Scrimshaw from Derbyshire who provides a point of difference with his height and express pace. While most of his wickets have come in white ball cricket – and earned him an England debut – he is keen to make an impact in the Championship at Wantage Road.



**Player most likely to Baz-Ball:** Saif Zaib's white-ball form and impressive strike rate earned him a call-up for The Hundred last year. While his Championship batting form dropped off in 2023, his century against Surrey the previous year revealed a batter of immense talent.

**Final thought:** Jack White led the attack last year, his dependable fast-medium pace garnering a season's best haul, and he will be a key man again in 2024 alongside the evergreen Ben Sanderson. Meanwhile Tom Taylor's departure provides opportunities for the club's young seamers to stake their claim. Stepping away from the heat of Division One should help the batters recalibrate and find form, but Northamptonshire's season will be judged on whether they can earn promotion at the first time of asking.

## **Sussex**

**Captain:** John Simpson

**Head Coach:** Paul Farbrace

**2023 finish:** 3rd (Division Two)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** Fynn Hudson-Prentice (879)

**2023 highest wicket-taker:** Ari Karvelas (35)

**Key winter moves:** The vastly experienced John Simpson arrives from Middlesex and will captain Sussex for the first seven games when the position will be reviewed. Overseas trio Nathan McAndrew, Jayden Seales and Jaydev Unadkat are all lined up for spells leading the bowling attack while the prolific Cheteshwar Pujara returns for the first seven fixtures and the expectation of plenty of runs.

**The big question:** Sussex would have finished with the same total as promoted Worcestershire had they not been deducted 17 points for indiscipline against Leicestershire and a slow over-rate against Yorkshire, so they are not far away from ending a seven-year exile from Division One.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** There is the delicious prospect of Ollie Robinson and perhaps even Jofra Archer, who continued his rehab from injury on Sussex's pre-season trip to Bangalore, sharing the new ball in the early weeks of the season. Even if it was just Robinson it would give the attack a real spearhead.

**Player most likely to Baz-Ball:** Fynn Hudson-Prentice scored nine half-centuries from the lower middle-order last season with a better strike rate (73) than any of his top-order teammates. Farbrace has challenged the all-rounder to convert more of those fifties into hundreds and Hudson-Prentice definitely has the shots and temperament to do so.

**Final thought:** The squad looks stronger and better balanced while Tom Clark is talented enough to step up to open regularly following Ali Orr's departure. Simpson is an excellent signing, as long as the pressures of captaincy don't dilute his impact with the bat and gloves, while Farbrace should be able to rotate his bowlers to keep them fresh. But Sussex only won once before September last season and that record needs to improve if they are to mount a promotion challenge.

## **Yorkshire**

*Previewed by Graham Hardcastle - ECB Reporters Network*

**Captain:** Shan Masood

**Head Coach:** Ottis Gibson

**2023 finish:** Seventh (Division Two)

**2023 highest run-scorer:** Adam Lyth (1,019)

**2023 highest wicket-taker:** Ben Coad (36)

**Key winter moves:** Darren Gough departed as director of cricket last month, placing more responsibility on coach Ottis Gibson. Left-arm spinner Dan

Moriarty has signed permanently from Surrey following a brief loan spell last summer. Yorkshire will start the season with captain Shan Masood, who returns for a second campaign, as their only overseas player. But they have been boosted by excellent early-season availability for Joe Root and Harry Brook.

**The big question:** Yorkshire are the overwhelming favourites to win Division Two. Can they live up to that billing? A tumultuous three years off the field has had ramifications on it - they were deducted 48 points, for example, last season to kibosh a promotion push - the slate has been wiped clean and confidence is high that their primary goal can be achieved.

**What we're looking forward to seeing:** Yorkshire fans will be desperate to see prolonged fitness for key new ball seamers Ben Coad and Matthew Fisher, who have both had their injury issues in recent summers. They shared 64 wickets in 20 appearances last year. Better that in 2024 and the Headingley side will be difficult to stop.

**Player most likely to Baz-Ball:** George Hill could really push things on in the middle order if a good platform is set by opening duo Fin Bean and Adam Lyth, who excelled last summer. Hill can be particularly dominant against spin.

**Final thought:** Yorkshire are desperate for promotion to kick-start what feels like a new era at Headingley. A fast start would settle both the dressing room and the fanbase, and a mouthwatering batting line-up should help them do it. In the first block of seven Championship matches through until late May, they will field a top six of Bean, Lyth, Masood, Root, Brook and Hill. That would be the best batting line-up in the country, never mind Division Two. Root and Brook are available for five of those games apiece.

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## Contacts



### **Matt Somerford**

Press Contact

Communications Manager - Domestic Cricket

[media@ecb.co.uk](mailto:media@ecb.co.uk)

+44 (0)7551 134 716