

Harold 'Mudgee' Cranney – A Parramatta Cricket Giant

Harold Cranney was unquestionably one of the paramount figures in the history of the Parramatta (Cumberland) District Cricket Club – for 26 years he held sway as a champion batsman and a committed administrator, and he remained a devoted member of the club for seventy years (he was still viewing 1st grade games at Parramatta Oval into the late 1960s). Born at North Parramatta in 1886, he passed away in 1971 aged 84 years a lifetime bachelor, apart from seven years spent as a Hotelier in Tamworth, he resided in the town his entire life.

A boy prodigy Mudgee first came to prominence in 1901 as a tiny slight 14-year-old playing in short trousers, when his herculean efforts in the final series propelled his club the Endeavours to win the premiership triumph in the Parramatta B Grade competition – against adult bowlers he made **107** in the Semi-Final, and then he lifted up a gear and showed exceptional composure for such a youngster in the Grand Final, cracking **124** runs in the first innings and then backed this effort up with **123*** in the second innings to pilot his team to victory.



Fortunately for Cumberland, 1st grade captain Les Pye and club officials A.W. Green and G. Coates were on hand to watch much of this match and recognise the marvellous potential Cranney possessed. So impressed was Pye that at the start of the next grade season young Cranney found himself, at **14 years** and **340 days** the second youngest player to play 1st grade cricket in Sydney. Ironically, in his debut match against Glebe he encountered Test spearhead Tibby Cotter, who ranks as the youngest ever 1st grade player (14 years and 98 days).

In this debut match, the Cumberland innings was in shambles at **3/14**, when the tyro Cranney joined his skipper Les Pye at the crease – not overawed by the situation Mudgee dug in and they added a partnership of 142 runs to resurrect the Cumbos innings, Cranney contributed 42 and Pye a century – not a bad effort for a youngster making his first outing in long pants). Pye knew he had a good-un under his wing.

At 1st grade level Mudgee was a masterful batsman, a remarkably consistent run-maker over a sustained period that ranged from **1901** to **1926/27** (excluding 3 years of World War 1). He made his runs in a most pleasing fashion, in common with all the club's very best batsmen he possessed an orthodox technique coupled with a great attacking impulse – *'believing the ball was there to be hit often'*. Club oldtimers who had seen them both bat, likened his style and approach to the later day Test player John Benaud, with a tad more aggression.

Cranney remains the only player to score in excess of 9,000 runs in 1st grade for the Parramatta club – in 217 matches he made **9,414 runs @ 36.91**, with **18 centuries** (only exceeded by Pye 20 and Doug Walters 19) and an incredible **61** half-centuries, and a top score of **177** – his most prolific season was in 1911/12 when in just 11 matches he scored **831** runs, with 2 centuries thrown in (a club Belvidere cup record that John Benaud bettered with 834 in 1966/67, and subsequently Nick Bertus with 844 in 2018/19 and lastly Ryan Hackney (961 runs in 2022/23). His level of performance over such a substantial passage of time is quite remarkable, especially considering he batted on uncovered wickets and often had to contend with the difficulties inclement weather conditions placed upon the pitches.

Club reports abound with tales of Mudgee flogging the opposition's poor suffering bowlers, and it would be most appropriate to recall a few of his daring assaults:

1920/21 was a shocking year for Cumberland batsmanship, but Cranney made 680 runs @ 57.00, and produced 3 of his most memorable efforts:

- Paddington at Rushcutters Bay - against an attack including Test bowlers Jack Gregory and Herbie Collins he made 105 in 75 minutes.
- Middle Harbour – Test legend Arthur Mailey spun the other batsmen to quick destruction, Mudgee scored 57 (out of 106), and 96 in 70 minutes (out of 161) – this performance demonstrated his genuine quality as a batsman.
- North Sydney – Cranney smashed **34** off an **8 ball** over bowled by former Test Medium-pacer Bert Hopkins – the scoring sequence being 4 – 6 – 6 – 4 – 6 – 2 – 6.
- 1912/13 v. Waverley – he pulverised Newton's bowling to the tune of **26** in a **6 ball** over, 6 – 6 – 4 – 2 – 2 – 6.
- In 1925 v. Northern Districts – he compiled 127 in 95 minutes, *"Rambler in the The Referee 28/10/1925"* wrote – *"His footwork was splendid, and his shots were made in a charming way"*.
- 1910 v. Waverley – he stroked **154** in 130 minutes; he also snared **5/87** with the ball.

For many years he opened the Cumberland batting in partnership with the equally swashbuckling right-handed batsman and State player E.L. "Gar" Waddy, together they were the scourge of the opposition new ball bowlers. Legend says that defence was a distant thought from these two stroke-makers, and they took delight in denting the egos and reputations of many of Sydney's fast bowlers. A classic example was in a match against Waverley in 1912/13, after dismissing their opponents for 88 on a nasty damp wicket – Cranney and Waddy passed the required total in just 29 minutes and 42 balls (Cranney 91 in 50 minutes).

A less mentioned and underrated aspect of Mudgee's cricket was his bowling capability, that was highly versatile and more than handy – **216 wickets @ 29.62**, which included **ten** 5 wicket hauls (best **5/18**) – he generally bowled leg-breaks with a well concealed googly on good wickets, fastish off-spinners on damp wickets or when the occasion warranted it he bowled medium-paced swingers with the new ball.

Generally, Les Pye and later Gar Waddy captained the Cumberland teams in which Mudgee played, but late in his career he became captain in his own right and proved to be a most able and popular leader.

Unique to the Cumberland club is the wonderful affiliation the 'Cranney Clan' had with it – in all six brothers played cricket for the 'Cumbos' and their father Tom (Senior) was made a Life member – a record for Sydney grade cricket was made when during the 1918/19 season four of the brothers Harold, Tom, George and Arthur played together in the Cumberland 1st grade side – another brother Brian went on to become a highly regarded 1st grade Umpire during the 1920s. Mudgee and his brother George were both elected **Life Members** of the Club in recognition of their incredible contribution and dedicated service over a prolonged period both as players and administrators.

Club officials and many grade cricket followers were bewildered by the lack of consistent opportunities afforded Cumberland aces Cranney and Pye by the State selectors, despite their undeniable credentials presented by their 1st grade deeds – the tide of opinion seems to be that had they been City club products the eyes of the selectors might have glanced more favourably upon them. Mudgee did however, average a respectable **31.70** for his **856** runs at first-class level, from only 15 matches spread between 1912/13 and 1921/22. In his last match as a 35-year-old he showed '*what might have been*' with some loyal support at the selection table. In the Adelaide Sheffield Shield match in which NSW were narrow victors by 17 runs, Mudgee demonstrated all his class making **70** in the first innings and followed up in the second innings with a brilliant **144** made in just 160 flashing minutes.

Unfortunately for him '*minds had been set in concrete*', when early in his career, he scored a dashing century for NSW 2nds v. NSW 1sts in trial match, and the selectors led by cricket powerhouse M.A. Noble, are reputed to have tabbed him '**Brilliant but impetuous**', and this impacted negatively on his future selection prospects – NSW's loss was Cumberland's gain.

Cranney's work for Cumberland did not end on the field. At the age of 20 years, he was Club Secretary and delegate to the N.S.W.C.A., but night work associated with his duties at the Sydney Weather Bureau caused him to resign the delegate post. However, post World War 1 he was again holder of both offices, and between 1934 and 1937 he filled the dual roles again, followed by a year as Club Treasurer. In 1926/27 he was appointed a State Selector, he also regularly filled club selector roles and his work with brother George in maintaining Parramatta Oval until it was handed over to the Park Trust in 1936 was monumental. Both brothers were made **Life Members** for their selfless service to the Cumberland Club. What a contrast to the 21st Century Parramatta players, who as a rule show virtually no interest in the welfare and administration of their club either during or post their playing days.

'Mudgee' like many sportsmen of his vintage shone in other codes, and in his younger days he played 1st Grade Rugby Union for Western Suburbs, as an elusive Centre three-quarter.

[By Tom Wood – Parramatta District Cricket Club Historian]