

After years in the doldrums, Leicestershire follow example of football team. By Simon Wilde

Resurrection is all the rage in Leicester. It happened to Richard III. It has happened to Leicester City football club. And Wasim Khan, the chief executive of Leicestershire cricket club, winners of the championship wooden spoon in five of the past seven years, is driven by a belief that it can also happen to them. Judging by the emphatic manner in which they won at Glamorgan in their opening match, the players believe it too.

A visit to their home — no longer called simply Grace Road because a five-year naming deal means it is now officially the Fischer County Ground, Grace Road — reveals a place transformed and workmen scurrying to complete tasks ahead of today's game against Kent. The aim is to enhance the spectator experience with public wi-fi, a wider range of food outlets, an open public bar and parasols. A perimeter wall has been replaced by railings to show that, in Khan's words, "we're your local community club, we're accessible, come in".

Perhaps most significant is the addition, with the help of an ECB grant, of six floodlight pylons, meaning Twenty20 matches can be staged at more convenient evening times.

Thanks to a marketing drive, last year's average attendance rose from 2,100 to 3,100; Khan hopes that the floodlights — a scheme pushed through in six months — will help to lift this figure nearer to sell-outs of 5,500.

Khan, who took over last year, is a man in a hurry and reckons he needs to be. "It was critical to do things quickly. We've done a huge amount in 12 months but we needed to, just to get to the basic level of a 21st-century club. There was a big threat, particularly given how Leicestershire had performed on and off the field.

"We haven't spent money we don't have. We have ramped up commercial income by 70% [an Elton John concert is scheduled for June] and turned a £250,000 loss into a profit. We don't have any senior debt. Andrew McDonald [the first-team coach] and I wanted to change the culture and you don't need money to do that."

Has Leicester City's story helped? "There's definitely a feelgood factor around the place. I'm sure our guys are inspired by what City have done. There's a team that was rock-bottom and became hardened by their experiences. We're probably similar. Perhaps the euphoria will leave people trying to fill a void in the summer by getting behind us.

There are always a lot of Leicester City flags here when we play Twenty20 matches and we know we'll get a spillover of City supporters. Leicester Riders won the British Basketball League and Leicester Tigers are in the [rugby] European Cup semi-finals.

"Everywhere you go there's only goodwill. This city is hugely loyal and sponsors support all sports. They want us to become better again. That was why it was so important to win the first game and send out a statement that there could be good times ahead. People may remember us as whipping boys but we are a different outfit now."

Crucially, Khan and McDonald managed to recruit three thirtysomethings to bolster a batting unit that badly underperformed last year: Neil Dexter, Paul Horton and Mark Pettini, who will lead the white-ball teams. It was important they didn't come

simply in search of a last pay-day. "We sold them a vision about where we want to go," says Khan. "We didn't break the bank to bring them here and they could have gone elsewhere. All three want to be part of something fresh and are hungry. We think we've got a highly competitive squad."

Arguably the club will never fulfil its potential until it



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capitalises on the passion for cricket among its large non-white community, a formidable task that Khan, as the first Asian chief executive of a first-class county, was partly brought in to address.

"I was uncomfortable that people thought I'd be some sort of saviour," he said. "A lot of mistrust has built up over the years. While they feel passionate about cricket, they feel disengaged, particularly in terms of decision-making. It's important we take small steps. I'm liaising with business and faith groups, asking what we can do and where we failed in the past. It could be a five-year project."

What he is convinced about is that Twenty20 is the key to attracting the Asian community, as it is with all sections, whether prospective players or supporters. "It's all about Twenty20s," he says. "They will be critical for us to ignite the passion. If we can get

people through the gate and engage with them, we can start to say, 'Come down again... there's more'."

The signing of Pakistan's Umar Akmal is an important step in this process, as is the cultivation of exciting local Asian talent such as Aadil Ali, 21, who played match-winning innings across various formats last year.

Equally important is a new initiative called "Search for a Star", involving a series of open trial days available to those aged 16-24. "As I know from my own playing experiences in Birmingham, there's huge untapped talent outside the formal club structure and we want to attract people who have the talent but don't feel part of the system. The best 11 players we find will play against our second XI and if there's an exceptional talent we'll bring them on the staff. There will also be the opportunity for some to join our academy system. This is not a gimmick. We're trying to provide hope and a clear pathway."

Like all smaller clubs, Leicestershire's challenge is that unless they win trophies and produce England players, people will ask for what purpose they exist. It is worth remembering that they won the Twenty20 in 2011 and Stuart Broad and James Taylor played their first Tests for England only shortly after leaving for Nottinghamshire, but Khan makes no excuse for the club being unable to hang onto them. "If you've got a good structure and good coaches, people will stay. It is up to us to create the right environment."

THE LAST TIME LEICESTER WAS ENGLAND'S TOP SPORTING CITY

The late Nineties and early 2000s were a fine time for sports fans in the city. Martin O'Neill's Leicester City, promoted to the Premiership in 1996, won the League Cup in 1997 and 2000, while their rugby counterparts collected four successive Premiership titles from 1999 and won back-to-back Heineken Cups in 2001 and 2002. The cricket team, right, celebrated county championship titles in 1996 and 1998

