

Canny experience prevails over youthful enthusiasm

There have been better sides to challenge the TCC, but none braver than the Blacksmiths, who arrived in a convoy from their hometown of Gabrovo, in central Bulgaria, to take on the TCC in two 20/20 matches last Sunday. Ranked third of Bulgaria's eight cricket clubs, it was a measure of the growing popularity of the game in that country to learn that every member of the side was a native Bulgarian.

A violent electrical storm on Saturday evening in Bucharest and a heavy shower early the following morning had caused some doubts over the day's cricket beginning on time, so players were pleasantly surprised to find not only the Berceni pitch dry but the outfield bereft of moisture as well. Nor did the threat of rain and thunderstorms materialise throughout the day, although it was amidst cloudy, overcast conditions that the Blacksmiths began their innings, having lost the toss and been invited by the TCC to bat.

From the outset the TCC's seamers took advantage of the bowler-friendly conditions and it was not long before Rajput, Agarwal and Kodor had prised out the Blacksmiths top and middle order, including the highly valued wicket of captain Ivo Katzarski after Pena took a memorable outfield catch, running with the flight of the ball, off Agarwal's bowling. Despite a plucky rearguard innings from Debchev, whose 26 included two of the Blacksmiths' three boundaries, the visitors were dismissed for 76, including 36 extras. The modest target gave TCC skipper Begg the luxury of revising the batting order, and Niculae's wicket was the sole loss as lusty hitting from Asthana and Thakur secured victory for the home side in less than 11 overs.

The same aggressive attitude from the TCC was apparent in the second game when, having won the toss and batted, openers Begg and Agarwal set about the Blacksmiths' bowling, sharing a first wicket partnership of 98 before Begg (38) was bowled off an inside edge from Katzarski. After the in-form Agarwal retired on 50 – his second consecutive half-century – the TCC's innings wobbled with three wickets falling cheaply, but it's balance was reset as some late hitting from Jha (22no) pushed the score to 4 for 174 at the end of 20 overs, with Katzarski (3-29) the only wicket-taking bowler. Several Blacksmiths batsmen were unable to convert promising starts into meaningful innings, with the exception of Katzarski, whose 33 proved to be the highlight of the Bulgarians' reply. He was one of Kanth's five victims, whose 5-27 accounted for all but one of the last six wickets, including three in four balls; his burst brought the Blacksmiths' innings to a rather abrupt close four deliveries short of its 20 overs, for a total of 116, 58 runs adrift of the TCC's score.

The Blacksmiths had fought hard throughout the two matches and will no doubt benefit from their visit. Although the two victories were comprehensive, the TCC XI was strengthened by the inclusion of the ICCB's Thakur, Jha and wicketkeeper Gopalakrishnan, who are likely to appear as opposition when the TCC takes on the ICCB in its next home match at Berceni on 4th July.