

Humble and tough

John Saint

Athletic, skilful and intensely competitive, John Saint dominated Sydney University cricket for two exceptional seasons, winning the O'Reilly Medal—awarded to the outstanding player in the First Grade competition—twice in succession.

After representing New South Wales at Under-17 level, John made his First Grade debut for Penrith against Randwick in 1986-87. At the age of 17, he scored a valuable 16 not out on his debut, and in only his fourth game in the top grade he plundered a brutal 84 (in little more than an hour) against Waverley in 1988-89. But for reasons that remain hard to understand, his opportunities at Penrith were limited. He tended to bat low in the order, because he was an all-rounder, but little use was made of his bowling. Frustrated, he telephoned the Sydney University secretary in the middle of winter: did University have room for an all-rounder?

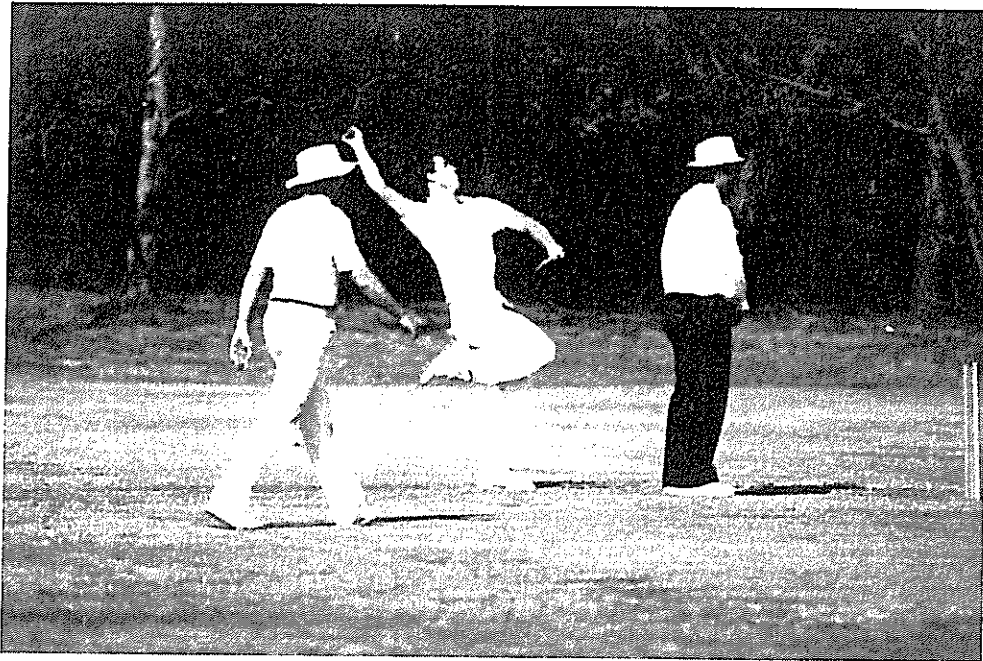
University had room. And Saint wasted no time making his presence felt: in his first match for his new club, he demolished Mosman to take six for 30. He was a key member of a revitalised First Grade side that, under Craig Tomko's captaincy, almost claimed a place in the semi-finals. In the four years that followed, John was an integral member of the University team, without ever quite doing justice to his talent. There were few batsmen in Sydney who hit the ball as cleanly; his fielding was sure and swift; and he had the high, side-on action of a natural bowler. Unusually for the University teams of the time, he was exceptionally fit, a legacy from his days as a Rugby League player with Balmain and punishing hours in the gym. But somehow his performances fell a little short of the level promised by his ability.

And then, in 1993-94, people stopped talking

about his "potential", unless it was to describe him as a potential State player. He had developed into a high-class all-rounder, who created match-winning positions for his team most weekends. His batting was technically tighter, but still he punished the loose ball mercilessly. His fielding was as committed and dynamic as ever. And he was always a threat with the ball, adapting intelligently to changing conditions. Usually, he kept to a relentless off-stump line, just short of a length, jaggling the ball either way off the seam. Later in the season, he bowled a fuller length and swung the ball sharply.

From the first match of 1993-94, it was apparent that he was a player at the peak of his powers—he scored a blistering 96 against a powerful Bankstown attack, led by Wayne Holdsworth, and then removed Steve Waugh for a third ball duck. He atoned for that near miss by scoring a brilliant maiden century against St George at Hurstville, demoralising the State Colts leg spinner, Robert Smith, in the process. Throughout the season, he could be relied upon to claim the big wicket when his team most needed it: Jason Gallian, Phil Emery, Martin Haywood and Rod Bower all joined Waugh in his collection. In all, he scored 599 runs and took 39 wickets. The last game of the season pitted Saint against the only player capable of beating him for the O'Reilly Medal, the Hawkesbury all-rounder Anthony Kershler. Kershler scored a determined 58, but Saint won the game with 6-62, and the Medal was his.

If the O'Reilly Medal was a close contest in 1993-94, Saint had built an unbeatable lead near the end of the following season. His 173 against Petersham included no fewer than 11 sixes and 21 fours, and he took 31 runs (666661) from a single over from former State off-spinner Wayne Mulherin. In a single



*John Saint
bowling at St
Paul's Oval
against
Fairfield,
1989.*

day's play, he took eleven wickets against a strong North Sydney team. But perhaps the most memorable moment of his season came during a matchwinning innings against Waverley, when he drove off-spinner Greg Matthews onto the roof of the University Grandstand.

"I think of him in reverent terms", admitted his captain, Craig Tomko, "To me he epitomises integrity, the rewards of discipline and practice, the value of confidence and self belief, and the fairness and virtues of this fantastic sport. He supports others in his team and although goal-oriented, he has the view that no one person is more important than the team. He is both humble and tough. He is a terrific role model." And it was his example that meant as much to the Club as his runs and wickets, because here was a player who showed what could be done through the right blend of talent, hard work and desire. He had the undiluted respect of every member of the Club, and every First Grader in Sydney. But the New South Wales selectors remained unimpressed, refusing to choose him for even a Second Eleven game. At the end of the 1994-95 season he accepted an offer to move to Tasmania.

Saint was chosen for three Sheffield Shield games in 1995-96. At first-class level, he was probably best equipped to bat in the middle order and bowl first change—Tasmania wanted him as an opening bowler and had little interest in his batting. He did not adjust to the new role especially well, but had some successes. On his debut, he dismissed Brendon Julian and Tom Moody; in his second match, against Queensland he followed his first innings 3 for 44 with the wicket of Matthew Hayden. And in his last first-class match, against the Pakistanis in 1996-97, he returned the spectacular figures of 4 for 10 from 12 overs as the tourists collapsed for only 67 in their second innings. He actually captured all four wickets in a spell of ten balls without allowing a run. He remained a fixture in the Tasmanian side for the rest of the season—but as twelfth man, a role he played in no fewer than eleven games during the season.

So if his first-class career was unfulfilled, he did enough in his limited opportunities to justify the talents that had carried him into inter-State cricket. John and his young family settled easily in Hobart, where he became a gym manager.

John Michael Saint was born at Auburn on 31 January 1969. His first-class record was:

<i>Seasons</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Inns</i>	<i>NO</i>	<i>HS</i>	<i>Runs</i>	<i>Av</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>Ct</i>
<i>1995-97</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>5.83</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>5</i>
		<i>Balls</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Runs</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>Av</i>	<i>Best</i>	<i>5w</i>	<i>10w</i>
		<i>767</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>443</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>36.91</i>	<i>4-10</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>-</i>

His record in First Grade was:

<i>Club</i>	<i>Seasons</i>	<i>Inns</i>	<i>NO</i>	<i>HS</i>	<i>Runs</i>	<i>Av</i>	<i>Ct</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>Runs</i>	<i>Av</i>	<i>Best</i>
<i>University</i>	<i>1989-95</i>	<i>85</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>173</i>	<i>2200</i>	<i>28.20</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>141</i>	<i>3512</i>	<i>24.91</i>	<i>6-30</i>
<i>Penrith</i>	<i>1988-89</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>84*</i>	<i>232</i>	<i>19.33</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>449</i>	<i>37.41</i>	<i>3-18</i>
<i>Total</i>	<i>1988-95</i>	<i>99</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>173</i>	<i>2432</i>	<i>27.02</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>153</i>	<i>3961</i>	<i>25.88</i>	<i>6-30</i>