

## SECRETARY'S REPORT 2024

Friends and colleagues, this is my annual report as Honorary Secretary of NIACUS for 2024. I apologise in advance if it is similar to those of the past three years.

As with those previous reports, I start by extending a sincere thank you to everyone in the Association and with whom I dealt for their continued help, kindness and understanding, all of which better enabled me to discharge my secretarial duties.

As is perennially yet sadly the case, during the past 12 months colleagues and friends who many of us knew, and indeed once took the field with, have passed on, as have family and friends of some members and others in the cricketing world. On behalf of NIACUS, I extend condolence to the kith and kin of all who have departed; our thoughts and prayers are with them.

The autumn, winter and spring of 2023/24 saw much of the usual tidying up after the 2023 season and preparatory work for the 2024 season. The NIACUS AGM was held in October 2023 and, thereafter, four open meetings were held in January, February, March and April 2024, all of which were well-attended. The meetings were hugely informative, starting with a splendid presentation in January by Jonny Kennedy on handling disciplinary situations; a presentation by Paddy Grimes and Alan Waite from the NCU in February; an illuminating talk by Richard Kerr, the referee development officer at the Ulster Branch of the IRFU in March; and a general get together and briefing for the 2024 season in April.

Since the last AGM, the NIACUS Executive Committee has met on seven occasions and dealt with a wide range of matters, some of which I shall touch on. Attendance at those meetings was invariably high.

There are a couple of matters that I want to highlight at this point.

First, all the provincial umpire and scorer associations were consulted by IACUS on proposals to, inter alia, dissolve IACUS and replace it with a new structure for officials under Cricket Ireland (CI). Our Executive voted unanimously in favour of the proposals and IACUS was subsequently dissolved at a special general meeting held in February 2024. I feel it only fair to record that some members of the NIACUS membership expressed concern at the move and their views were recorded in the minutes of the open meeting held in January 2024.

The new CI structures for officiating have now been in place since February and some NIACUS members have been well to the fore in interim roles as contracted administrators and an increasing number of contracted positions for umpires and scorers. More recently, officiating has received what I believe to be long-overdue mention and recognition in CI's strategy for 2024 to 2027. That mention and recognition is indeed welcome, but it is important that action follows and that CI walks the walk, in addition to talking the talk, if you'll pardon the expression. There are a number of matters that the Executive wants to discuss with CI and a meeting has been scheduled with them and the other associations for 12 November, so hopefully we will be able to take matters forward, learn of progress and be able to report back to members in due course. I also believe that it would be sensible both for the Executive to review how the new CI officiating structures impacted on NIACUS during 2024 and that CI and the other officiating associations also review the outworkings of the new structure ahead of 2025.

Secondly, and this matter will, I am sure, be touched on by others, I think it important to record the situation regarding the "new" onfield clothing for umpires, which NIACUS took delivery of for the 2023 season. In essence, that clothing was acquired on the promise of sponsorship money being made available. Sadly, however, that money was not forthcoming with the result that the Association has had to bear more or less the full cost for the clothing, which in turn has reduced our financial resources.

In simple terms, the promise of sponsorship was on the basis of what would once have been termed a "gentleman's agreement" (this term is in no way intended to be sexist or discriminatory; it is the most apposite term to use and is recognised in virtually all reputable dictionaries!). The contemporaneous circumstances seemed more than satisfactory to the Executive, but ultimately the promise proved false and, despite efforts to alleviate the situation, no money was forthcoming. The Executive has reviewed its handling of the matter and will ensure that lessons are learned. Any future dealings will be handled formally and not done solely on the basis of trust and/or promises.

Our relationship with the NCU has, in my opinion, continued to flourish. NIACUS was invited to and attended the NCU's AGM in November 2023 (an invitation reciprocated by inviting the NCU to attend our 2024 AGM); as noted earlier, the NCU addressed our February open meeting; our Deputy Chairperson continues to have a seat on the NCU's Domestic Directorate; we provided advice and guidance in relation to the NCU byelaws and regulations and helped develop policies in relation to concussion management and the handling of situations involving thunder and lightning; I met with the then NCU Chief Executive, Paddy Grimes, regularly during the season; and most recently we met with the NCU in early September to review the season and discuss a variety of matters to progress ahead of the 2025 season. I also want to again record our thanks to the NCU for inviting members of the NIACUS Executive to a Volunteer Appreciation Event at the Challenge Cup Final in August, an invitation which several Executive members took up with gusto!

I would, therefore, like to take this opportunity to thank all of those in the NCU for their willingness to engage with us and the positive attitude they took. In particular, I would like to record my personal thanks to Paddy Grimes,

who has now moved on from his position. He was hardworking, invariably available, he was pleasant and helpful in his dealings with me and others, and I thank him sincerely for his efforts.

As always, a variety of other activities took place and they will be covered and recorded in separate reports to the 2024 AGM. However, one item of great note that must be highlighted is the fact that, after a two-year hiatus, the White Stick Trophy match was played on 21 September 2024. That it was able to happen was due largely to the efforts of Paul Black who took charge of the NIACUS team, assisted by Joe Moore as Team Manager, and, even more importantly, the multitude of arrangements that go with hosting such a match. Our thanks go to him and his good lady wife, Annas, who looked after the catering and ensured that everyone who attended did not go hungry or thirsty. I also wish to record our sincere gratitude to Waringstown Cricket Club who allowed us to play the match at The Lawn, despite it being in the middle of their efforts to put their ground to bed for the winter and another social event being held in their pavilion later that day. It was great to see the rebirth of the match and marvellous to see Paddy O'Hara in attendance because he was responsible for instigating the trophy in 1989. I shall not dwell upon the result other than to offer our Leinster colleagues congratulations on their victory!

The 2024 season in the NCU was more or less completed by the second week in September. The weather was far from ideal, notably at the start of the season, which again meant a considerable number of rearrangements and yet again created quite a challenge for our Appointments Secretary, Ian Houston. As always, and I am conscious I wrote more or less the same words in my report last year, "Housty" took it all in his stride and ensured that as many matches as possible were covered. In all, he made around 1,080 appointments over the course of the season. As in years gone by, the Association is indebted to Ian and his ever-understanding wife: a thousand thanks to them both!

However, more worryingly, I must also flag up the fact that our umpiring numbers were at times very low and on some weekends towards the end of the season we were able to cover only 13 or 14 matches on a Saturday, which in turn meant that some matches in Senior League Section Two and Junior League Section One were not covered. This is a serious issue and one that the Executive and indeed all of us will need to address.

In 2023 we had up to 46 regular active umpires, but, due to a variety of factors, including availability, illness and retirements, we effectively lost around 12 of that number. Fortunately, we welcomed 6 new umpires on board, including our first female umpire for some years. Nonetheless, our numbers reduced to only 25 on some weekends and it is very clear that we need to recruit and retain more umpires. That, of course, is easier said than done, and we are not alone in this situation, but I am sure that the incoming Executive will want to place this at the top of their agenda ahead of 2025. And I would implore all of our members to do their best to encourage others to join our merry band.

Regarding scorers, they played their usual invaluable but often unsung role and their contribution to the game was, as always, essential. Naming individuals can be "awkward", but must mention and congratulate David Irvine and Murray Power, who scored the first ever Test Match in Northern Ireland. The match, against Zimbabwe, ended in a historic win for Ireland and was a great occasion. It is also worth recording that Mark Hawthorne and Jonny Kennedy were part of the officiating team, and congratulations go to them as well.

For the record, 22 disciplinary reports (12 in 2023) were sent to the NCU by umpires and all were upheld; 6 reports (15 in 2023) were made regarding scorers not being provided by clubs for matches in Sections One and Two as required by the byelaws; and two reports were submitted about suspect actions, one of which was subsequently formally assessed.

In addition to appointments to NCU cricket and competitions, NIACUS members were again heavily involved in officiating at CI matches through the new CI officiating structures I mentioned earlier. Of the total of 21 umpires on the four umpiring panels announced before the start of the season, NIACUS had nearly 50% (10 places), including Mark Hawthorne and Jonny Kennedy on the international panel. Many congratulations, by the way, to Jonny for his debut season in the upper echelon and, as I mentioned earlier, he and Mark were part of the officiating team for the first test match ever to be held in Northern Ireland, which of course resulted in a marvellous win for Ireland against Zimbabwe at the end of July. I have no figures on the number of matches covered by NIACUS members, but I know from personal experience that they were incredibly busy. In addition, NIACUS member Phil Thompson was again one of the two referees on the ICC's international referees panel and he too had a very busy schedule.

On the scoring front, Stella Downes has advised me that the end-of-year report in respect of NIACUS scorers is very positive. There were 19 scorers on representative panels this year, 5 of whom were from NIACUS. In total, those scorers filled 88 appointments. David Irvine was promoted to the international panel and had an exceptionally busy year, having taken a career break from work to concentrate on scoring. As I mentioned earlier, the historic first Test to be played in Northern Ireland was scored by Murray Power and David and Stella said that it was a joy to appoint Murray to his first Test after all his service to scoring in Ireland.

Club scorers have continued to increase in number and Stella is hopeful that several more scorers from our numbers will join the representative ranks in 2025 when they have completed their Level-2 qualification.

The 2024 season was, of course, the Association's semi-sesquicentenary: our 75<sup>th</sup> season. We did not hold any special celebrations as such, but our 75<sup>th</sup> birthday did not go unnoticed. Is it too soon to start a centenary committee? Perhaps, but time does seem to fly and early preparation is key!

Looking ahead, I have already mentioned that we have met with the NCU to review the season past and to prepare for 2025. In addition, the Executive has agreed to hold a series of open meetings in January, February, March and April 2025 by way of preparing us as best we can for the new season.

As in years gone by, I again offer my congratulations to all our members wherever they found themselves and in whatever capacity they were acting as part of the NIACUS family.

I conclude my report by again thanking all who helped me during the course of the past year: may you all winter well!

**SIMON BURROWES**

**HON SECRETARY**

**29 October 2024**