

Get ahead, get a mat!

WHY IS IT THAT A SCHOOL-CLUB LINK IN HALIFAX SHOULD FEATURE SO STRONGLY IN YORKSHIRE UNDER-15'S CRICKET? THE ANSWER MAY LIE ON A REVOLUTIONARY COACHING MAT INVENTED BY GEOGRAPHY MASTER DAVID COOPER, 48, WHO TAKES UP THE STORY...

I STARTED teaching in 1980 in a Southampton comprehensive school. There was no history of cricket in the school or in the children's background. What they did have was athleticism and a good eye for any type of ball.

By introducing cricket and playing every lunchtime and after school I managed to knock these lads into some form of shape so that they could take on the best in the county. It took three to four years, as Year 8s became Year 9s and then Year 10s.

I moved to Holy Trinity School, Halifax, 20 years ago, and ran the cricket, helping players like David Weston, now at Barkisland, and Robert Flack, of York CC. The school were the original winners of the Indoor Six-a-Side Competition held at the then new Yorkshire Cricket School in 1998.

The school did have its own square, and it was an excellent surface, but changes in the ways schools are financed led to it being incorporated into a football pitch and the facility disappeared.

From the classroom I would observe attempts to teach cricket: pupils would try to learn to bat on a poor surface against bowlers who could not put the ball anywhere near them. Wild swings or slogs were the only shots played, and I thought there must be a better way to teach the many and varied cricket strokes.

At club level the problems reappeared with my own children wanting to take up the game and the coach having to deal with large numbers in a limited amount of time. If this was the rate of progress something far more interesting would come along...and they would be lost cricket.

I retired from playing 10 years ago, and I had a dabble on golf-driving ranges — where you hit plenty of shots in a short period. You hit from one size of tee with several sizes of clubs.

"This could be applied to a cricket context," I thought. I switched things around to have several sizes of tee and one size of club — the bat.

The coaching mat was born.

I drilled lines of holes into a piece of artificial matting: some lines would be well outside off-stump, another just outside, one line on middle, another just outside leg and the final line well outside leg-stump.

I looked into length: the batsman plays practically every shot from the crease — the



Magic carpet: Teacher David Cooper does his homework in the garden.

balls bounce and are hit at different heights from one step in front of the crease or one step behind.

Four heights of tee would cover most of the variations: two would be small and used for front-foot shots; two would be taller and used for the back foot. With 39 holes to choose from covering five lines and four choices of tee height any shot could be played.

Final problem was of where to place your feet for each shot: I cut out some feet shapes from sheets of rubber, and placed a strip of Velcro on the underside. These now stay in the correct place to play your chosen shot.

Having developed the hardware, I looked at the ways children learn things. Some are kinaesthetic learners: they learn by "doing" a physical activity frequently, like 100 times in 10 minutes. The muscles become trained and grooved so that the movements can be repeated successfully in the middle.

Others learn by seeing, so I made a video that they can watch. Finally, they learn by hearing, so I recorded a CD that they listen to

while practising, and then I produced a series of coaching pages they could study.

The mat can be used at home, in the garden or at the club...and players can practise at any time of day, month or year while receiving expert tuition in a variety of formats. How have they done?

My son, Mark, opens for Bradford Schools Under 13s. He batted No. 3 for West Yorkshire West, who recently won the Yorkshire Under-13 District Festival.

My daughter Beth, 11, made the final trial for Under-11 Bradford "boys", and is a regular for Burley CC Under-11s. My stepson, Tom, 13, plays for successful Ilkworth Under-15s.

Kathryn Doherty, one of the first girls to get into Yorkshire County Cricket Club Academy, was one of four Holy Trinity pupils in last year's Calderdale Schools Under-15 county-championship side, five members of whom do or did play for Ilkworth CC with whom the school is formally linked.

The mat is used at both school and club.