

Greener Futures

NO.3 PLANT-BASED KIT AND THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Next in our series examining how cricket is tackling the climate crisis, Jo Harman investigates how vegan leather and a more enlightened approach to recycling could make the game more sustainable



As director at the Centre for Sustainable Design (CFSD) and a former club cricketer, Professor Martin

Charter has become frustrated at the game's inaction when it comes to the sustainability of cricket gear. He had conversations with the ECB but found them to be "quite blinkered", focusing their energy on macro issues relating to climate change and failing to address an area which has potentially serious implications for the game's future.

"From the ECB downwards, nobody is really looking at the sustainability issues associated with cricket gear, and there's very little research produced on it," Charter tells WCM.

He started to explore how much waste is created in the sector and to look at more environmentally friendly alternatives in the production of batting pads and gloves. The CFSD have since produced 18 reports on 'sustainability-driven innovation in cricket equipment'. Part of the research included four surveys of 1,600 club cricketers which found that between 85-90 per cent of respondents have an interest in using vegan leather alternatives.

"Vegan leather is a bit of a catch-all term," he says, "but essentially it means a substitute for animal leather and generally it's a mix between a natural fibre and a polymer binder. There's a lot of smoke and mirrors. A number of those vegan leathers might be, say, 60 per cent polymer, and a lot of the suppliers don't want to share the composition because they're surfing the wave of environmental interest. The nirvana is to move towards 100 per cent fibres."

Charter's team have produced prototype vegan leather pads and gloves which are currently being trialled.

"The feedback was that the pads felt good and worked when facing bowlers of 60mph, but they needed more protection for quicker bowlers. We're now refurbishing pro pads with vegan leather and they're being trialled in the Surrey Championship, along with vegan inner gloves. We believe the products are feasible and will perform."

There are, he acknowledges, economic hurdles to overcome. "We can make the working prototypes; the question then is how to produce them in the UK. There aren't the skills, and even if you could retrain people, the labour costs are too high when you're competing with 17p an hour in India or Pakistan, where 90-95 per cent of the gear is produced."

Investment is needed and Charter suggests a social enterprise which would not only have the benefit of producing more sustainable kit, but could also involve retraining refugees or the long-term unemployed to make the product.

Equally as important as producing more environmentally friendly kit is making use of the gear which is already out there, particularly in the midst of a cost of living crisis that is making the game inaccessible for some low-income families. To address the issue, Charter's team have undertaken a series of reuse pilot projects.

"There's a lot of unused gear in garages, attics and cricket clubs. We ran three pilots with two clubs in Surrey and we had

about 400 items donated, probably 90-95 per cent of it was ready to reuse. We even had kit with the price tag still on it."

They were then able to redistribute that kit to local state schools, Afghan refugees and cash-strapped households.

"We believe there is a need for this in the UK because of the cost of gear going up. The positive impact is that people can play the game who otherwise might not be able to, and there are carbon benefits that we've measured too. We're now in conversation with a county cricket club about expanding the project and we're also looking at partnering with a major retailer."

And if the kit isn't immediately reusable, it needn't go straight in the bin. The CFSD ran a repair and refurbishment session with 10 Afghan refugees at Headingley who "were able to repair products to a decent standard pretty quickly and with very little training".

For the sake of the planet and the game's future, Charter wants cricket to broaden its horizons.

"I have no doubt there will be less waste of cricket gear," he says, "provided that more reuse, repair and refurbishment services and schemes are made available. As for plant-based vegan leather cricket gear, watch this space." ■

