



Brian Boobbyer 1939-41

Brian Boobbyer, who died on January 17th aged 82, was one of the finest all-round sportsman of his era, but one who, rather like CT Studd and Eric Liddell before him, chose to give up his sporting career in his prime. By 1952 he had won 9 England rugby caps as a centre and was possibly the most inventive and exciting back in the five nations that year. He was also coveted by Middlesex to open the batting following four years in the Oxford University side, but at the age of 24 he turned his back on both games to work and travel overseas with Dr. Frank Buchman's Moral Rearmament movement.

Boobbyer was born in 1928, the second son of an Ealing doctor. Sport was his passion and cricket in particular. Indeed in 1939, as an 11 year old, he opened the batting for Durston House prep school in Ealing and went the whole season without getting out. That year he went on to Ripley Court for two years before going up to Uppingham in 1941. Here he excelled at cricket, spending four years in the team and representing England Schoolboys, scoring a century at Lord's against the Combined Services. He was also head boy. However the most significant moment occurred aged fifteen when, playing rugby, a game he had hitherto disliked because he hated tackling, he found himself unable to get out of the way of a large opponent rushing at him and had no option but to tackle him hard. 'Overnight, 'he used to say, 'a game I hated became a game I loved.' In fact he showed such flair for it that within three years he was again playing for England Schoolboys.

After school, while doing his national service, he played rugby for Rosslyn Park and he went up to Oxford in 1948 to read history at Brasenose with a reputation as a cricketer and a rugby player. He showed first as a cricketer, getting his Blue slightly fortunately in 1949 as a fresher. His first ball in first class was from Fred Trueman. As he struggled to cope he remembered Norman Yardley, captain of Yorkshire and England, walk past him and say, 'Don't worry Brian, you're doing well.' He always remembered those words of encouragement. Those were the halcyon days of university cricket and over the next four years he played alongside and against the likes of Carr, Dewes, Doggart, Subba Row, May, Cowdrey and Sheppard. He was good enough to score two first class hundreds against Sussex and Lancashire and a match-winning 80 in the 1951 varsity match. He was a determined rather than a fluent player, 'the type of opener to be 30 not out at lunch.'

While he was a doughty rather than a spectacular cricketer, the same was not true of his rugby. He broke into the Oxford side in his second year and played three varsity matches, all on the winning side. By Christmas 1949 he was catching the eyes of the England selectors and he made his debut against Wales the term after. He went on to win 9 caps in the next three seasons, scoring against France and against Ireland in 1952 when England won 3-0, with Boobbyer getting the only score. The original match had been postponed on the death of King George VI and the rearranged match was played in the snow. In 1951 a combined Oxford and Cambridge side toured South Africa and Boobbyer caught everyone's eye, with his breaks and his speed. Local commentators felt that he was better than anything that the South Africans had at the time and that was in a backline that included fellow internationals Lou Cannell, Chris Winn and JV Smith.

At the end of his second year Boobbyer's tutor took him aside and told him he had a choice: do a special paper and go for a first (but it would take its toll on his sporting commitments) or don't do the special paper and settle for a third. His tutor strongly recommended the latter course, to which he happily acquiesced. How times have changed.

He was also an outstanding sevens player, winning the schools sevens at Rosslyn Park with Uppingham and going on to win the very prestigious Middlesex and Melrose Sevens with Rosslyn Park.

Boobbyer had always taken his Christian faith seriously and while at Oxford had met the work of Frank Buchman. Buchman had been a Lutheran pastor and his Moral Rearmament movement, originally known as the Oxford group, was challenging students to take faith seriously and make their Christian commitment relevant to national life. Boobbyer was among many who accepted the challenge. Following his last term at Oxford he again went on a rugby tour, this time to Japan, but when it was over, and the others were heading home, he stayed out there to work with an international group, the first overseas delegation invited to come to Japan since the war. That decision was not popular with everyone back home and even his family were split, but the result was that he never played rugby or cricket ever again at a serious level. Mind you he was not the only international sportsman to take up this challenge. Others included Peter Howard, journalist and captain of England at rugby, Conrad Hunte, the great West Indies batsman, Dickie Dodds, the Essex opening bat and most famously of all Bunny Austin, still the last British player to get to the men's singles final at Wimbledon.

The next few years took him to all parts of the world: the Philippines, America, India. He found that he had a gift as a public speaker and a way of presenting spiritual truths in ways that everyone could understand and appreciate. He devoted the rest of his life to that work and there are people on every continent who are grateful for what he gave them. In 2005 the family collected together the best of his talks and writings and published them into a book called 'Like a Cork out of Bottle,' which is how he was described in a book on the history of the varsity match, a reference to his rugby originally but appropriate also to his approach to his faith.

In 1957 he married Juliet Rodd, daughter of Lord Rennell of Rodd and they eventually settled in Oxford, where they worked for many years among the students, while continuing to be in demand to speak at conferences abroad. Juliet survives him along with their two sons, Philip and Mark, and five grandchildren.

Mark Boobbyer
18th January 2011