

Alastair Mackenzie by Dick Warner (July 2015)

Alastair Mackenzie, who died in June 2015, aged 82, was a towering and much loved figure in the world of fives, well known as a first class player, especially at singles, and legendary for what he termed 'après-fives', which comprised great enjoyment of good food, convivial company, and alcoholic refreshment, in the form particularly of well-brewed beer and most especially wine, particularly the red-coloured variety.

Very much a renaissance man, Alastair took huge pleasure in a wide variety of arenas – from Classical Greece and Rome, to music and the arts, as well as many kinds of sport (not forgetting his pride in being Scottish) - and treasured most the many, wholehearted relationships he built up over a lifetime.

He believed that, if a thing was worth doing, it was worth doing well, and this thoroughness, and seriousness, ran through all his enthusiasms – as well as the rigour of his Classics teaching at St Paul's, to which he devoted his working life. No dilettante, he: he completed the Marathon in a very creditable time. Who else remembers him, at the National Doubles, combining watching and learning by heart the Latin induction for the Fletchers Livery Company of which he was Master 1994-95?

He had an encyclopaedic memory, for the important and the trivial: David Gardner recalls perennial reminders of the first time they played, St Dunstan's v. RFA: "I first met Alastair in the 50s, when, as Captain of the St Dunstan's team, I played against him in the match v RFA. I lost that game – a fact he had reminded me of every time that we met ever since!"

He had a wonderful sense of humour: Geoff Sherratt's wife, Betty, remembers his great amusement when – dancing with him after dinner at the Café Royal and being addressed as "Shirley" (Fred Beswick's wife) – she corrected his error, with some sharpness. When he confusedly explained that it was a Freudian slip, Betty rejoined "In that case, I'll give you a Freudian slap!"

..... and a nice line in self-deprecation. John East relates how "...he enjoyed hugely describing his rejection letter for a job, which had described him as being both 'naïve and pompous'".

He was particularly taken with the Clerihew (a sort of upmarket Limerick), and would frequently light up dinners with some well-chosen and pithy compositions.

Always immaculately turned out, both on court and socially, Alastair cut a distinguished figure, rather overwhelming to Frank Akerman, then a schoolboy at Blundell's – "His appearance was certainly impressive: dazzling whites apart from the dark blue stripe at the neck and a head band in place: plenty of loud talk and with Mackenzie and Chris Reichwald in action on the same court not a great deal of room for a rather timid schoolboy to make his presence felt!"

Though never a winner of the National Singles, he played fives to a high level, squash for the Jesters and the Escourts, as well as being a handy cricketer. He was, for many years, and a long-standing and enthusiastic Jester. He also ran a team to play Fives and Squash, based on his flatmates in Gunterstone Road: the "Old Gunterstonians", in which David Hebblethwaite was enrolled after spending one night on the sofa!

As a spectator, Alastair had a deep love of tennis and cricket, and was a devotee of ballet and opera.

Wine was an abiding passion. He took great pleasure in wines of all kinds. He most especially enjoyed introducing others, however resistant, particularly after club matches, to the qualities (and frequently quantities) of good wines.

Geoff Sherratt, one of the Mancunian stalwarts and himself a President of the RFA, recalls Alastair's love of wine, and sage advice to the less knowledgeable, when settling down to supper in one of the less sophisticated eateries: "If you don't know much about wine when in a restaurant, choose the cheapest on the menu." They did – it was the 'house wine' - and all agreed it was undrinkable.

Typical of the man, he felt that his interest should be carried through with rigour. He pursued his love of wine to writing about it, joining the Circle of Wine Writers (consisting mainly of professional journalists), wrote his first article on wine in 1970 and passed the Wine and Spirit Education Trust's Diploma Examination, with honours, in 1974.

He then proceeded to write three well-received books, two with fellow Circle member Jeffrey Benson: *Sauternes: A study of the great sweet wines of Bordeaux* (1984) and *The Wines of Saint-Emilion and Pomerol* (1979). Then, as a major solo project, he wrote *Daumas Gassac: The Birth of a Grand Cru* in 1995.

Food – as well as wine – was a pleasure to be taken seriously: Frank Akerman: "London University had two decent sides and, despite there being only a single court, the Hampstead Fives and Squash Club was a much favoured venue with its integral bar and restaurant.. A memory I will always have is of Alastair, after one of our matches, sitting at a table, napkin tucked into his neck, holding court and demolishing a healthy dinner accompanied of course by a generous supply of red wine, while his opponents rustled their bags of salted crisps perched on the surrounding bar stools!"

FIVES ACHIEVEMENTS

Alastair learnt his fives at Clifton College, 1947-52, where he became the captain and number one player, which involved fierce battles against Bristol Grammar School's John Evans, later his partner at Oxford University.

He won the North of England Singles in 1954 and 1955; Scottish Singles 1961; Scottish Doubles 1961 with D Morton; was National Doubles Runner-Up 1955 with John Evans, losing in the final to Birmingham & Smith.

When he reached 45, he won the Veterans Singles (1979); and the Veterans Doubles 1984 with Roger Freebairn.

When he turned 55, he won the Vintage Singles three times, in 1988, 1989, and 1991.

In 1988, he won the President's Cup partnered by Jeremy Schroeter; having already won the Mate's Plate in 1984 with Neil Butterfield.

During his time as a very popular RFA President 1983-85, he toured around the country playing in every national and regional doubles tournament – offering himself as a partner to anyone who was unpaired.

A founder of the RFA and former RFA President, Bill Pett, wrote to him: "I have heard it said many times that your Presidency was one of the most successful in the history of the Association. As one of the founders of that body, I can go further than that and affirm that

your Presidency was the most successful of all, both from the active part you have played and from the stimulus you have given the game at all levels.”

He was also President of the RFA Club 1983-89.

He organised the first Prep Schools (now Under 13) Championships at St. Paul's School in 1985; and started, with assistance from Denise Hall-Wilton and Paula Smith, the first Ladies Rugby Fives Championships at St. Paul's School in 1985, giving his moral support and the practical help of use of the courts there.

Alastair was a great friend and exact contemporary of Rugby Fives legend, David Hebblethwaite, and together, for 15 years, they held an annual triathlon over a weekend consisting of fives, squash and darts. David never lost at darts, the focus of the Friday night, and Alastair would always triumph in the squash on the Saturday, so the outcome of the match turned on the Sunday morning fives, decided by which participant had been more sparing of 'refreshments' on the previous two days.

ST PAUL'S

He was for a long time the master in charge of Fives at St Paul's. He loved seeing his charges develop their skills, being especially pleased when he imparted the skill of hitting the cross court shot into the nick, with either hand (he was practically ambidextrous himself).

John East testifies to the insight he had as a fives coach: “His one key piece of coaching in my last year at school was to tell me to stand fractionally further away from the ball as I hit it, as a result of which I amazed myself and everyone else by winning the School Fives singles, from a lowly 4th seed position! “

He had a great recall of his pupils and their achievements, as noted by Peter King, his successor as fives beak at SPS:

“At the dinner arranged to mark his retirement from SPS Fives, where he was presented with a figurine representing Nijinsky dancing *L'après-midi d'un faune* (ballet being one of his passions), captains from throughout his time were present, and Alastair was able to place by each table setting copies of (in some cases several) scorecards from significant matches in their school careers. His mental filing system was at least as good as the physical, and his recall of fives and cricket matches (both at Test level and U15B) was phenomenal.”

From Jerry Cooper, Bedford School's Fives Master: “Alastair always talked a good game. On several visits to St. Paul's by Bedford School, even when Bedford won, I left for Hammersmith Station at the end with the distinct initial belief that we had lost!”

His crowning fives achievement, as master in charge of fives at St Paul's School when it moved from Baron's Court to Barnes in 1968, was to persuade the planners to build not two or four, but a row of six fives courts in the new gymnasium complex. On these marvellous courts many of our national tournaments, junior and senior are played in comfort. In his day as master i/c and subsequently, they have nurtured many Pauline champions.

He became the first President of the Old Pauline Rugby Fives Club, formed in 2003.

OXFORD

He played for Oxford University (1955-57, Captain of a winning side in 1957); and was for many years President of Oxford University Rugby Fives Club. The annual fixture, mimicking Cambridge University's 'Past v Present', has played for the Mackenzie Bowl for thirty years.

He thoroughly enjoyed taking a team to Oxford each year, in his playing days, to play the undergraduates, then entertaining them in the pub nearby, followed by hosting the students to a first class meal, with suitably educational wine choices.

What he achieved for SPS, he then repeated for Oxford University in 1989, linking with John East and Ron Swash to establish two fives courts on the Iffley Road Sports Complex, to replace the courts at Worcester and Keble which had been pulled down.

As David Barnes says: "Alastair loved the Varsity Match and was its unofficial (but no less authoritative for that) referee for many years. One year, he sidled up to me and flattered me into taking on the role. No job description – that's the sort of job I like!"

TENNIS

Peter King reminisces:

"I played in Alastair's 2nd XI at Dulwich on the day Rosewall contested the Wimbledon final in 1970. When umpiring at square leg Alastair was tuned in to the commentary, and I suspect a couple of the stumping decisions off my bowling were more influenced by events in SW19 than by the position of the batsman."

CRICKET

He played for the Jesters' cricket team and also for many years for the School staff and the Old Paulines, being particularly fond of his ability to bowl spin both left handed and right handed, which he once performed in the course of one over at Budleigh Salterton on the Strollers tour, so much to the bemusement of the umpire and batsman that he got away with a maiden over.

Richard East tells me that he absolutely loved watching cricket in his later years. The back row at Lord's in front of the pavilion, but behind the (transparent) sight screen is known as Dead Man's Row, and reserved originally for over 70 year old members (now over 75), and Alastair was in his element, observing, discussing, challenging, and making insightful comments from this vantage point.

BALLET and OPERA

In addition to these sporting passions, Alastair was a fervent devotee of opera and ballet. Richard East remembers '*après-fives*' extended to Alastair and himself performing pliés for the regulars in the pub at Catford after playing Old Dunstonians, to the point that we were complimented on our skills by the local clientele before we started falling over.

From Jerry Cooper remembers visiting St. Paul's for the Schools Championships Alastair drove me to his home for a very convivial wine and cheese lunch. At the end, and I quote, "I'm leaving the car here for Pauline so we'll go back on the bus. I've got a resident's bus pass but I'm afraid that you'll have to pay your own fare!"

MANCHESTER

Alastair greatly enjoyed trips to Manchester to play fives – he enjoyed the people there, appreciated the competitive fives, loved the Boddington's served at Cox's Bar, and relished the conviviality and the sense of humour of the YMCA folk.

John East: "I recall the first ever Jesters fives tour to Manchester YMCA. We arrived at the Y and the receptionist looked at us rather dubiously but phoned upstairs internally (I suppose to the Fives court area) and announced "There's some blokes here calling themselves the Jollies".

We were allowed in and thus began the link with Manchester Fives; Fred Beswick, Ernie Livesey and Alec Murray and many others, thrashing us initially on those narrow courts and then entertaining us royally in Cox's Bar afterwards and onwards.

Ian Fuller's abiding memory of his first trip north was "being cajoled into drinking Martini Rosso with him on the 10am train to Manchester before a club match, having only recently left school".

Dave Hebden remembers "one year at the North West championships sharing a room with him, kindly hosted by the Beswicks. After a good night out on the Boddingtons we retired to our room. In the morning at breakfast I was roundly reprimanded by Alastair - "Hebden, you fell asleep last night during one of my anecdotes!" He addressed the Manchester dinner that night, delivering an excellent speech, during which he made a reference to the 'narcoleptic Hebden'. I wasn't quite sure how offended I should be until I had located a dictionary!"

Andy Pringle says: "I remember several post-match chats with him in 'The Pickerel' about wine and beer. Never mentioned Fives, of course!"

He leaves his most supportive wife Pauline, who nursed him devotedly as his health declined in recent times, and two fives-playing sons, Bruce, an Oxford Blue, and Stuart, a former West of England Schools and National Schools champion (with Gideon Bierer) in 1985.