

BECOMING A SPORTS HERO

A favourite pastime of the Australian media is to create sports heroes. Why they do this I am not too sure but one might be excused for thinking that they do so to give them something to tear down if a 'hero' fails to maintain the image that has been created for them; the media is quite savage in its dealing with fallen heroes. In my day we had people like Don Bradman and Bill O'Reilly to emulate but there was not as much pressure on young people to be great sportsmen and women as there is today.

The East Adelaide Primary School that I attended had next to nothing with regards to sporting facilities. The yard was fully sealed with bitumen and about the size of a suburban garden apart from a cricket net in one corner of the boy's yard and one netball ring in the girl's yard. There was a strong pecking order in the yard during recess and lunch times; the only people that could use the cricket net were the grade 6 and 7 boys. When I reached that august age, I did bowl a few balls and I think I batted once or twice without distinction. We only had one boy who looked like a real cricketer; his name was Ken Horsnell and he went on to represent South Australia in later years.



East Adelaide Primary School, Third Avenue, St Peters

In the winter months we kicked a football back and forth in the school yard but the groups of students at each end were so large that anyone who had one or two kicks in a lunch time was considered to have contributed a pretty good performance. Once or twice each year an Australian Rules football team was selected to play other schools. East Adelaide had twenty special jumpers stored away for such occasions. The only time I donned one of these sacred items was in an inter-school tunnel ball race – hardly a distinguished appointment.

Major sports being out of the question, the main school yard game was marbles. In mid-April each year, for no apparent reason, one boy or another would bring his marbles to school and in a few days we would all be playing at various sites across the school yard. My father had access to glass marbles so I would start the marble season with quite a large bag of the required weapons; small ones to make it difficult for others to hit and large ones when I wanted to “bomb” someone. The most important thing in marbles strategy was the mysterious word “ebs”. You could do practically anything if you were the first to call “ebs”, including “rounders” (to shoot your marble from a better position, or “covers” (placing your hand over your marble to prevent it being hit), etc.

As I remember it there were two main games at East Adelaide. One game had a ring of about 30cm diameter drawn on the ground with chalk. Several people could play this game at the same time. The game began when each person threw their marble towards the ring from a prescribed distance and the one nearest the ring had the first shot. To win the game you first had to fire your marble into the ring and from there aim at your opponent’s marble. When you hit his marble, you won the game. You could play for fun or ‘keeps’; if you played for ‘keeps’ and lost – you lost your marble.

The other game was “fats”; this could only be played by two people. The “fat” was a drawing 30cm long, about 10cm wide at the middle and

with points at each end. Each player placed a marble on the points of the “fat”. The game started by the participants throwing their marble towards the fat from a distance; the one whose marble was closest had the first shot. You first had to hit your opponent’s hand marble; then you could aim at the marbles on the “fat” - if you hit one of them it was yours.

In our year we had a boy called Colin Reinflusch. He could hit your marble from ten feet with around 98% success. We had another guy called Dean Kuchel who wasn’t bad either. Between the two of them, a few weeks into the marble season all my marbles were in their possession. It soon dawned on me that I was not going to rise to sport’s hero status playing marbles!

High School Days

I planted my first row of beans when I was six years old and my interest in agriculture was reinforced by my visits to the McKenzie family farm, of which I have spoken previously. These experiences led to my choosing to attend an agricultural high school called Urrbrae. It was a small school; in 1950 when I was in Year 11 we had exactly 100



Prefects at Urrbrae Agricultural high School 1950
from left to right: Eastick, Potter, Skewes, Smith, Winn and Gadd

students. Urrbrae had slightly better sporting facilities than East Adelaide Primary; it had one earthen tennis court, a cricket net in the school yard and a rough but serviceable oval.

I tried my hand at tennis at school (when I could get on the single court). Sadly, I found that I could only serve with my left hand and could only play with the racquet in my right hand. While this was a good strategy to confuse new opponents for the first few games, it constituted a handicap to my becoming a tennis hero. I played a bit at Lameroo while working down there on holidays in my latter teen years. To be considered a person of significance at Lameroo it was almost obligatory that you be a tennis hero. My school mate and best friend at the time, Lyn Walker, was certainly good at tennis, as was his Dad and Uncle Jack who alternated with Jack Roberts, the Council CEO, as local champion. Alas, I did not become a tennis hero, which was a pity because my life partner Judy was good at it and we might have enjoyed playing together if I had measured up.

The other main games at Urrbrae were cricket and Australian Rules football. Most of the year, my recess and lunch times were taken up at the cricket net. We used a pick handle for a bat and developed reasonable skills at the game. On Thursdays we played House matches on the school oval. My memory of these games was that I was moderately successful – doing my bit, if you know what I mean. I remember one Thursday afternoon when I ‘threw caution to the wind’ and started swinging wildly at any ball not on the wicket – I held temporary hero status by hitting several sixes and fours and saving our side from defeat against a House with the better team. On Saturday we played against other schools. Flushed with success on the previous Thursday I decided to ‘have a go’ at everything thrown up to me – I swung at the first ball and was clean bowled; hero status suspended.

I remember one other thing about school cricket, which might be called my ‘introduction to sporting psychology’. The opposition wicket keeper

had an interesting strategy. He talked all the time, which was annoying, but his conversation was not derogatory but full of praise. If I say so myself, I had two very good shots: a square cut and a straight drive. After my first square cut for four, the conversation behind me was: “Goodness, what do we have here; another Sid Barnes”. It was not long before I tried to square cut a ball that did not deserve it and was caught in slips.

The last thing I did at Urrbrae was play in a cricket match against Gawler High School. Don Winn made 104 and I made 33. As I walked off the ground after being caught, the Maths teacher, Brian Hopper called out “I didn’t know you had it in you Potter”. So much for being a cricket hero at school!

Urrbrae only fielded one inter-school Australian Rules football team, so there was little chance of playing in that until you reached Year 10 and 11. Jumper numbers were handed out according to ability; I was given No. 18 in Year 10 and No. 8 in Year 11. I gathered from this was that I was needed to make up the number but was not a football hero. One thing that I could do well was kick goals – I always won the straight kick competition on Annual Sports Days at Urrbrae.

My straight kicking served me well when I attended Year 12 at Adelaide High School in 1951. I turned out for the football trials in April but missed the A training squad. It must have been a close call because I was elected captain of the B Team. I chose to play full-forward (goal kicker) and kicked over 100 goals for the season, eleven goals in the last match against Scotch College. This was encouraging but, having been relegated to the B Team, did not give me hero status.

The other thing I did at Adelaide High was train with the athletics team. At Urrbrae we had an Annual Sports Day which nobody trained for, apart from Don Winn. In my final year there I ran close second to Don in the 100m and 200m and second in the high jump behind another

student. This persuaded me that I should train at Adelaide High; if I could nearly beat Don Winn with no training what could I do if I trained? I was selected to run in the inter-School 4 x 100m relay team on the Adelaide Oval. We won the race, thanks to having Wesley Robinson and John Morris in our team; Wesley had been SA Schools sprint champion in 1950 and John went on to become national school's sprint champion in 1951. I did well enough in my leg; probably because I ran against non-hero types – most schools did not have more than one or two sprint champions. I was congratulated by the school coach on my run and this encouraged me to enter for the State School Boy Championships. I trained hard but on the day came in 10 yards behind everybody else in both the 100m and 200m. I was definitely not going to be an athletics hero!

I had one last fling at athletics when I arrived at the Adelaide University. Knowing that I was not a runner I decided to try discus and hammer throwing. The first time I tried the hammer, I was whirling the thing around my head in the prescribed manner, when I realised that I had no idea which way I was facing. The only way out was to slow down gradually until the hammer head hit the ground. I walked away from competitive athletics that day and never looked back!

Rugby Union

In my first year at Adelaide University, I turned out to the first Australian Rules practice in April, only to find that there were over three hundred people running around the oval. It also became clear that students from private Secondary Colleges had contacts with team managers that gave them the inside running on team selection. I concluded that there was no way into the Australian Rules competitive environment at Adelaide University.

I mentioned my experience to a fellow student during a botany practical the next day and he said: “why don't you come out and play rugby”. I

knew next to nothing about Rugby Union, except that it was very rough, so I said: "Don't be mad". He said: "At least you could keep fit". I saw sense in this and turned up to rugby practice on the Graduate Oval the next evening. The first person that I met was fifth year medical student and Rugby Club Captain, Mick Hone. In five minutes, Mick demonstrated to me how to pass the ball and how to tackle the opposition. He also asked me if I could run at all. I said I could run a bit and that was obviously the reason that I found out the next day that I was in the B Team for a Saturday match, playing in the backs on the wing. I scored three tries in my first match, four in the second and for the third match I was selected to play in the A team! It turned out that I was a much better rugby player than Australian Rules player.



Adelaide University Rugby Team in Sydney, 1953 - Potter crouching first left; and Potter trying to look cool in his State blazer

In 1953 and 1954 I participated in two Inter-Varsity Competitions (Sydney in 1953 and Perth in 1954). In 1954 I was selected to play in a South Australian Junior 15 and toured Victoria. I also played in several curtain raisers to International Matches in Adelaide and once in trial match for Senior State selection over the next few years. I missed selection to the State team by a 'short hair', so once again hero status eluded me. Near and yet so far!

I had one moment of pride in rugby. We were playing Melbourne at Sydney University and the referee was Australian Wallabies Captain

John Solomon. I scored a try and Solomon said: "Fair try and a good one". Our captain Bruce Higgins, far left in the photo above, said to me after the match: "You will never score a better try than the one you scored today John". I did not tell anyone that between receiving the ball twenty yards from the touch line and picking myself up after scoring I had no memory whatsoever. Who or what took over me I have no idea to this day. But it was me that scored the try so I was a rugby hero, if only for a day!

I played some cricket while at Adelaide University. Most of my undergraduate time was spent at the Waite Institute and the Waite had a cricket team which I was persuaded to join. The standard was just about right for my level of performance. I lost an eye in my early teen years, so my batting performances were not memorable. I was called upon to bowl a bit and had some success. One day was particularly memorable. Our usual opening bowler was not with us, so I was given the ball. My first ball jumped off a good length; the batsman got a shock and lifted his bat to defend himself with the result that the ball flew high in the air in the direction of leg slip. The fielder at leg slip was Chris Pannabokke, a Sri Lankan graduate student about five feet high and as thin as a post; he held up his hands in a helpless sort of way and the ball came down and hit him on the head. He was concussed and had to be helped from the ground. The second ball jumped off a length, passed over the batsman's shoulder, through the keeper's gloves, hitting the keeper in the mouth and splitting his upper lip up to his nose. Two balls, two men off the ground; we were playing with nine men! At the drinking hole after the match our captain Jack Harris asked me in a whisper: "How do you make the ball jump like that John". I said: "I have no idea, Jack". Thus, I failed the hero test and a great bowling technique remains a secret to this day!

Early Married Years

After we were married in 1958, Judy and I shifted to Jamestown, South

Australia. No rugby was played there - Australian Rules was king – so I abandoned thoughts of playing football. Some of my work colleagues were golfers and the year I arrived in Jamestown the Golf Club was developing a new course in the Bundaleer Hills. I was persuaded to join in this venture; Keith Sinclair my neighbour and I built the bar for the new club house. I bought a basic set of clubs and on Saturday afternoons was found learning about the in-built frustrations of the gentle art of golf.

I don't recall a lot about my golf career at Jamestown. I certainly did not win any prizes in competitions. What I do remember was hitting off on the first tee in a fog one day and wondering how I would ever find the ball again. I also recall my frustration as seeing a crow pick up my ball off the fairway after I had hit a perfect 2-Wood on the tenth hole one afternoon. Golf has occasional moments of joy mixed with a lot of disappointments.

When we moved to Loxton in 1962 I took up golf again in the winter. The course was flat and uninteresting and the clubhouse routine after play was sterile. Everybody sat around with a large bottle of beer in front of them and indulged in aimless conversation for half an hour. Playing golf meant that I was away from my growing family for five hours. I was improving slowly but when Ian McInnes told me that I would have to hit one thousand balls a week to get any better I decided to put golf behind me.

I played cricket at Loxton for two years. Each town team in the Riverland had five or six outstanding players but need a few also-rans to make up the team. I was one of the latter at Loxton. I did not distinguish myself in any way, and one day, batting in 42°C heat, I decided to lift my bat and allow the ball to take my middle stump so that I would join my family who were fishing in relative coolness down at the Murray River. Cricket was behind me.

The last attempt I made to achieve sporting hero status was to take up sailing. This came about because a friend of mine, Ian Bond, had decided to build a 16ft catamaran called a Quick Cat. He persuaded me to join him in the construction phase, which was very enjoyable, and to launch the boat at Lake Bonney near Barmera when the vessel was completed. This proved to be great family stuff – we could sail, and our wives and children could sit on the grass, watch us, and swim when they were inclined to do so. Sailing on Lake Bonney proved to be more difficult than we first thought; there were cunning little winds coming off the shore that could cause a ‘Chinese jibe’ if you were not ready for them. The first year we sailed the Quick Cat saw us overturned quite regularly. That meant that several of my knitted beanies are now at the bottom of the Lake. Thankfully, the Lake was only about eighteen feet deep and the mast was 22ft long; that meant that we never completely turned over and the boat was easy to turn upright. Great times were had by all at Lake Bonney over two seasons. The kids had free ice-creams, courtesy of the Club, and I never had a better sleep than after a day’s sailing. A year or so later I saw Quick Cats sailing in competitions in the Ocean near Adelaide; they were going twice as fast as anything we experienced on the Lake. I realised that, if you want to be a sailing hero you had to take it up at age 5-9; so that you could learn to ‘feel the wind on your neck’. If you could not do this, you would never make a sailor. It was too late for me. But who cares – I enjoyed my sporting days, even though I failed to make hero status!

JSP