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Bill Beaumont

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Geoff Green

Bill Beaumont

Bill Beaumont: The Autobiography

Аннотация

First published in 2003 and now available as an ebook.One of the best lock forwards in the history of English and Lions' game, and a successful captain to boot. Bill Beaumont's popularity on the field and his appearances on A Question of Sport made him a household name.This is the light-hearted and amusing life story of a larger-than-life character.A serious head injury forced Bill Beaumont to retire from rugby prematurely at the age of 29, after leading his country 21 times in 34 appearances – including a memorable Grand Slam in 1980 – and captaining the Lions to South Africa in 1980.Since then he has been honoured with an OBE and turned effortlessly to a career in broadcasting as a BBC and Sky Sports summariser and, more famously, as captain on the sports quiz show A Question of Sport.He is also a brilliant after-dinner speaker, and recently became chairman of the RFU's National Playing Committee.Beaumont reflects back on a wonderful career, reliving the dramatic events on the field as well as the off-the-field scrapes and humorous escapades that characterised the game in its amateur era. And now as an elder statesman, he is perfectly positioned to talk knowledgeably about the game he so loves.

Bill Beaumont

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

with Geoff Green

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DEDICATION

To my wife Hilary and our sons Daniel, Sam and Josh.
Thank you for your support and encouragement and
for selflessly providing me with the opportunity to do a lot
of things I wouldn't, otherwise, have been able to do.

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FOREWORD

Clive Woodward

I was delighted to accept Bill's invitation to write the foreword for his autobiography.

Bill had a huge influence on my international career. He was captain when I made my debut for England against Ireland in January 1980, the same year he led England so brilliantly to the Grand Slam, England's first for 23 years.

On the day I replaced Tony Bond, who was very unfortunate to break his leg on what was an otherwise enjoyable afternoon.

To win your first cap, as Tony and Bill would testify, is a great feeling and one of Bill's strengths as captain was to make the new caps feel welcome. I was fortunate to play in the remaining three games of the 1980 Grand Slam and they are memories that will always stay with me.

Bill captained England a further 11 times with me in the side and his influence on the team was huge. He was inspirational and a very good leader. To survive the slaughtering he received from his team-mates, including me, when he was ignored during his half-time team talk against Australia, while we were all distracted by a young lady called Erica Roe running across the sacred turf of Twickenham, showed his true mettle!

In total Bill played 34 times for England, 33 of them consecutively and on seven occasions for the British Lions on two tours to New Zealand and South Africa, the latter as captain. He stayed loyal to his club Fylde and retired prematurely at the age of 29 when surely further honours would have followed.

Once a player retires, it's often difficult to make the move from sport to business but Bill has made the transition effortlessly.

Bill's achievements on the field of play have been matched off it. An OBE in 1982, a successful career in broadcasting, notably *A Question of Sport*, and running a profitable textiles business, endorse his versatility and commerce skills. Bill has also remained dedicated to rugby. He is one of two RFU representatives on the International Rugby Board and earlier

this year he was made Chairman of the British and Irish Lions Committee, underlining the worldwide respect for a man who has given so much to the game.

Enjoy the book, it contains the life of an extraordinary man and one whom I'm proud to call a friend.

Clive WoodwardEngland May 2003

PROLOGUE

A Glasgow pub may seem an unlikely setting for a defining moment in English rugby history but The Drum and Monkey, in the city centre, will always be associated with England negotiating our way back into the Six Nations Championship after being unceremoniously kicked out of the competition four years ago in a dispute that was as stupid as it was damaging. It was a major bust-up over money – television money in this case – that reflected badly on everyone concerned and went a long way towards destroying trust between England and our immediate rugby neighbours.

Over the years I fought many battles in England's cause, having the scars to prove it, so I wasn't prepared to stand by and watch us turfed out of a marvellously compelling tournament, even though there were some at Twickenham who had been doing their best to extricate England from the Six Nations in a deluded belief that our interests would be better served by aligning ourselves with the big three from the southern hemisphere: Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Which is why I took the bull by the horns, jumped into my car and drove

north to thrash out a compromise deal over what the media, in their colourful way, called 'a pie and a pint'.

That last bit wasn't entirely true but I see no reason to spoil a good story and the media made the most of the combatants sealing a new accord over refreshments in The Drum and Monkey. The hard negotiating had actually been concluded in the Glasgow office of Allan Hosie who, as chairman of the Five Nations Committee, had announced our banishment to a startled rugby world 24 hours earlier. With the media pack in attendance, we simply retired to the pub – I was driving so had to settle for shandy – to wind down, the 'early doors' trade considerably boosted by our entourage!

Being banned from the championship wasn't exactly a new experience. It had happened three years earlier after England had broken with the tradition of collective bargaining and negotiated its own television deal with BSkyB without involving Scotland, Ireland and Wales. The difference then was that the ban had taken effect in the summer, leaving plenty of time for common sense to prevail before the competition could have been affected. In 1999 we were on a very different timescale as our banishment came as Clive Woodward was preparing his England side to face Scotland in the Five Nations Championship.

The fixture was scheduled to take place less than three weeks later. England had sold all their tickets for the game. Lucrative hospitality and sponsorship deals with the business world were in place and thousands of ordinary fans had bought tickets

for the game. Yet, when the Rugby Football Union Council held an emergency meeting to discuss the possibility of a ban, days before Allan Hosie's public pronouncement, members were talking about challenging the move in the courts. We were given legal advice that England would be able to resist a ban and the mood seemed to be that it wouldn't happen anyway, that the other nations were bluffing, and that we should leave it to the lawyers to sort out.

I stood up at the meeting to urge my colleagues to forget the legal route and use dialogue to extricate ourselves from a ban that would have had serious financial implications, not just for England but also for the other leading European nations because revenue from international matches is essential for the health of the game at large. I'm not suggesting that England shouldn't have been seeking a bigger slice of the financial cake from any television deal for coverage of international matches and I still argue our case on this issue on the Six Nations Committee, but we had gone about things in the wrong way. We are often, wrongly I believe, accused of arrogance but in this case I suspect there were those in the England camp who felt that we were bigger and better than the other home countries and therefore entitled to take advantage of the financial rewards on offer.

Some might suggest that doing the Drum and Monkey deal, instead of taking the other countries to court, cost England millions of pounds in television revenue. We will never know but I have always taken the view that problems can best be

solved if people are prepared to sit down together and debate contentious issues sensibly. I told the Council that we owed more to the game than simply winning a legal argument – assuming we would have won – especially as bad feeling would have increased rather than diminished. We had to think about all those people, predominantly members of rugby clubs throughout the country, who had been going to Twickenham for the last 20 years or so to support the national team and who would have been perfectly justified in kicking us all out for the mess we had created.

My message to the other countries was not to give up on us. There were some at HQ, in particular personalities like Graeme Cattermole, RFU Chairman Brian Baister and Fran Cotton, who were doing their best to sort out the whole, sorry mess. Even so, it came as a shock when, a few days later, Allan Hosie told the world that England had been kicked out of the championship. I heard the news as I was driving home from work and decided to act very much on my own initiative, especially after Allan had been quoted as saying he thought he could still avoid disruption by sitting down with someone like myself and going over the various contentious issues. I rang Brian Baister and told him, 'I'm going to Glasgow tomorrow so get yourself up there and we'll sort it out together.'

I felt it important to have Brian with me because he was Chairman of the RFU and his views on the issue were very much in line with my own. I drove to Glasgow but Brian flew, Allan Hosie picking him up from the airport. We all met in Allan's

office and, because I had told officials at Twickenham what we were doing, the telephone lines had already been working overtime. In the end we found enough common ground for Allan to reverse a decision that I felt should never have been made. I had known Allan a long time and disagreed with him on that occasion, believing his action to have been a bit over the top. I suppose the powers that be wanted to force the issue by banning us; they certainly succeeded if that had been the intention.

As a result of our deliberations we had to make concessions and didn't end up with as big a slice of the financial cake as I felt we were entitled to as the biggest rugby-playing nation in the competition. In that situation it wasn't equitable to have equality. That may sound double-Dutch but our share of television money has to be spread much farther because we have many more players and clubs to support than the other nations. Also, more television sets are switched on in England than anywhere else when the Six Nations swings into action and I will continue to fight for a better deal in future although I will do so sitting around a table rather than taking to the trenches.

So, a form of peace prevailed, although the whole thing could have been handled rather better by all concerned. Whilst the episode didn't reflect well on England, it didn't reflect too well on our neighbours either at a time when the leading nations in the northern hemisphere should have been pulling together to turn Europe into the dominant force in world rugby rather than continually hanging on to the coat tails of the only three nations to

ever win a World Cup: Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

From a personal perspective I'm delighted that my initiative helped to keep England in the Six Nations without a courtroom battle that would have lined the pockets of the lawyers if nobody else, although I did see a certain irony in finding myself in the role of peacemaker for an organisation that had once kicked me into touch too.

Being banned had become something of a habit because, under the archaic amateur laws that prevailed until recently, my reward for leading England to a first Grand Slam in the Five Nations for 23 years, back in 1980, was to be outlawed for having had the audacity to retain the proceeds of a book written after injury had forced my premature retirement as a player. I joined a long line of well-known players who were denied the opportunity to put something back into the game because they had cashed in on their fame, to lesser and greater degrees, after hanging up their boots. Some, who had sacrificed so much during their playing careers, hardly benefited at all financially but still paid a heavy price by being outlawed. Many, like myself, felt very hurt at being treated in that way. I'm sure I speak for most when I say that we never even thought of being paid to play for our country. It was deemed a great honour to be selected and I would have paid the RFU for the privilege of donning the England shirt and taking the field at Twickenham, walking all the way from my Lancashire home if necessary.

Fortunately, the wind of change finally blew through rugby

union and players like my friend Fran Cotton and I, formerly banished, were welcomed back into the fold. We have since thrown ourselves into administration of the game with the same enthusiasm and dedication we showed as players and were both involved in the creation of Club England, the arm of the RFU that has laid the foundations for what I am sure will be a great future for our country on the international stage.

Perhaps if we had been able to stay in the game after injury brought our playing careers to an end we might have helped to prevent England, the country that gave the game to the world, becoming so distrusted. It is bad enough that everybody wants to beat England; our scalp is more prized than that of any other country, with a passion. But it saddens me that the word of an Englishman is no longer held in the high regard it once was. That was brought home to me very forcefully when, as a member of the Six Nations Committee, I was a candidate to take over the chairmanship when Allan Hosie stood down. It was a role I felt eminently qualified to take on. I had captained my country for several years, led the British Lions in South Africa in 1980 and had fought to preserve the viability of the Six Nations – a tournament that would lose much of its appeal without England's involvement. Competing against me for the position was Jacques Laurans from France. He is a nice man and I have no beef with Jacques (if the French will pardon the expression) but I felt I had better credentials to take on the job. So the show of hands around the table felt like a stab in the back as Scotland and

Ireland, in particular, combined to ensure that I didn't win the vote. I did have the support of the Welsh representatives but I had no illusions about how England was regarded after a display of tactical voting with the sole intention of keeping English hands off the reins.

There is no doubt that the deep wound, opened by the bitter row over television money, had continued to fester, as was made plain to me after the meeting when I talked to the two Irish representatives, Syd Millar and Noel Murphy. When the British Lions toured South Africa in 1980, with me as captain, Syd went as manager and Noel as coach. Although we didn't win the series the three of us had worked very well together as a management team and I regarded them both as good friends. I still do. But they had been mandated by the Irish RFU to support Jacques and, when I asked why they had voted against me, the explanation was simple. 'We trust you Bill but we don't trust England.' So, despite our friendship, I was guilty by association of a crime they clearly felt very strongly about. I was an Englishman.

So, in a few short years, I had been turned away by England after leading my country to overdue success and rejected by friends within the international community for no other reason than my nationality. Both were bitter blows, but I didn't shun England when they invited me back into the fold a few years ago and I won't turn my back on our Celtic neighbours either because I believe very strongly in the Six Nations Championship and have established close friendships over the years with players

and officials from the three other home countries.

There was a certain irony in the vote for chairmanship of the Six Nations Committee being taken in Dublin. I have had three major disappointments in the Irish capital: it was there that I suffered defeat when I was first capped by England, there that I failed to secure chairmanship of the Six Nations, and there that the vote was taken this year to grant the 2007 World Cup to France rather than England.

I was disappointed that the exciting English concept of a 16-team tournament, backed by a Nations Cup for a further 20 countries, wasn't adopted. The formula would have generated a lot more money, with the extra revenue enabling the Nations Cup to take place alongside the main event and enabling developing rugby countries to immerse themselves in the atmosphere of a World Cup. The English format allowed for a Super Eight play-off that would have given another chance to countries that lost a game in a hard pool.

It was not to be and, whilst it will take time to heal the wounds, we will gain nothing from remaining at loggerheads. We should all be working together to develop and improve rugby in the northern hemisphere, both in domestic and international competition, and England has a great deal to offer in that respect, having set the standard in recent seasons. And, by being completely open with our neighbours, we will hopefully regain their respect.

CHAPTER ONE

Childhood, school and family life

If the meeting with Allan Hosie at The Drum and Monkey was fairly critical for the wellbeing of English rugby, the meeting between my parents and doctors at Preston Royal Infirmary shortly after my birth on 9 March 1952 was even more critical for the wellbeing of William Blackledge Beaumont. I had arrived somewhat prematurely by Caesarean section and, within days, had gone down with pneumonia. My chances of surviving beyond a few more days were deemed to be so minimal that I was actually christened in hospital as it was felt that I would never make it to a church. Not much of a vote of confidence for someone who, despite arriving a month earlier than expected, had still weighed in at a pretty healthy-sounding nine pounds.

The will to 'hang on in there' must have been pretty strong, even at that early age, because I confounded medical opinion by coming through the crisis, aided by a new drug so revolutionary that doctors had to obtain permission from the Ministry of Health in order to administer it to me. That wasn't the end of my medical saga, unfortunately. Hospital staff expressed concern that I couldn't keep anything down and was throwing up with messy regularity. If *they* were puzzled by this phenomenon, my mother certainly wasn't. Having seen it all before, she was able to make an instant diagnosis: I was suffering from a hereditary condition – that had also afflicted her brother – known as Pyloric Stenosis, which occurs when a skin forms between the gullet and the stomach, preventing anything from being digested. A fairly

simple operation rectified that little problem – my uncle had been less fortunate, spending his first 12 months being fed minute amounts of food on a tiny salt spoon.

My wife Hilary and I have three sons and, thankfully, none of them inherited the condition. Quite the contrary, they've never had a problem digesting anything and have been eating us out of house and home ever since!

So, after a longer than average sojourn in the hospital's baby unit, I finally made it to the family home in Adlington to join my parents, Ron and Joyce, and sister Alison. She was two years my senior and brother Joe arrived four years after me.

Adlington was a working Lancashire village where everyone seemed to be employed at either the local weaving mills or at Leonard Fairclough's, a large construction company responsible, at that time, for building bridges on the new motorways that were mushrooming all over the place. It was a small community and we were a tight-knit family with our own lives tending to revolve around the family textile business – a cotton and weaving mill founded in nearby Chorley by my great grandfather, Joseph Blackledge, in 1888.

My mother's family, the Blackledges, had always made their way in the commercial world but the Beaumonts were academics. A succession of teachers, who had the unenviable task of trying to impart knowledge to a largely unresponsive pupil, would suggest that I leaned more towards my mother's side of the family, despite the fact that my paternal grandparents were

themselves both teachers. My grandfather, Harry Beaumont, had started teaching at Blackpool Grammar School – the Alma Mater of my old adversary and friend Roger Uttley – after the First World War and started a rugby team called the Bantams. He had been badly wounded fighting in Mesopotamia, now Iraq, and was awarded the Military Cross. My father carried on the academic tradition by winning a place at Cambridge University after serving in the Royal Navy during the Second World War. He had been put in charge of a motor torpedo boat so maybe it was from him that I acquired my own interest in boats. It all started when the family owned a house on Lake Windermere, and I've been messing about in them ever since. When they sold the property some time later we rented cottages in the area for summer holidays, and Hilary and I still keep a caravan on the waterfront in the Lake District because the boys took up my interest in water-skiing, although I spend most of my time in the boat these days. I even ventured back into the world of learning that I spent so much of my youth trying desperately to escape from, in order to study navigation. Lakes are pretty straightforward but I fancy myself as something of a seafarer these days and I reckon it helps if you know what you're doing!

My grandparents fully expected my father to follow them into teaching once he had graduated from Cambridge but he had other ideas. He chose to go down the commercial route and took a job as a sales representative with a company called Bradford Dyers' Association, which was a great move from my point of

view because he ended up endeavouring to sell his wares at the Blackledge mill in Chorley. He walked in one day hoping to secure a little business but secured a wife instead. My mother had joined the armed forces after leaving school and had experienced an 'interesting' war, working as part of the back-up team for our 'foreign agents', who would regularly be sent into occupied France and other theatres of the war. Once peace had been restored she had joined the family business and, as luck would have it, was there the day my father popped in.

By that time my father had started playing rugby at Fylde, having also played at Cambridge as an undergraduate. I don't think he had any great pretensions in the game but, like the majority of players, he was a great enthusiast for the sport and made it as far as the second team. The club played a lot of games in the Manchester area in those days and he used to call in to see my mother on his way back to Blackpool. She wasn't over keen on rugby at that time and, after they married, he never played again. In any case he was busy because, when he asked my grandfather for my mother's hand in marriage, he was asked, in turn, when he could start work in the family business. He really threw himself into the job and did a great deal of work on developing the sales side of the business whilst my grandfather and uncle concentrated on manufacturing. The job involved a good deal of travelling and I can recall times when he would go off to Australia on business trips that lasted as long as two months.

Apart from those trips we were always together as a family and, until the age of eight, childhood was an uncomplicated affair that revolved around playing football and cricket in the garden or on the rec with the local lads. We didn't have a care in the world in those days and the only person who would get upset at times was my father, when our games of football and cricket made a mess of his pride and joy, his garden. He was a budding Alan Titchmarsh, and would spend hours pruning the roses, weeding and continually mowing the lawn – an activity I deemed a complete waste of time although, whilst not inheriting his green fingers, I have been known to tell off my own boys for doing a pretty good job of wrecking our garden.

It is a case of going full circle because the lads have always turned our garden into a rugby, soccer or cricket pitch, according to the season or inclination at the time, and you often can't move for cricket bats, rugby and soccer balls and golf clubs. Our boys are of the fairly boisterous variety, now rapidly growing into men, and, as they are all into one sport or another, we are now the proud owners of two washing machines and two tumble driers because just one of each simply wouldn't be enough to cope with the mountains of muddy, sweaty playing kit they manage to accumulate in just 24 hours.

The Blackledges were always heavily into cricket and the game dominates the summer months at the Beaumont homestead, whilst rugby league is a favoured activity in the winter when uncle Jack Partington, who used to play in either

halfback position for Broughton Park, Fylde and Lancashire, happily joins in. He hasn't any children of his own to wear him out so he turns up with boundless energy and goes through a sort of second childhood, which the boys take full advantage of. That takes the pressure off me, allowing me, unless I get roped in, to sneak off and read my newspaper.

The boys, Daniel (20), Sam (17) and Josh (11), have always been crazy about sport. I've never been a pushy father, preferring to let them pursue the sports that interest them and to find their own level. But I have always been there with support and advice when needed. Interest in, and an aptitude for, sport must be in the genes and they certainly take after me when it comes to size. At birth, Danny weighed in at 8lb 13oz, Sam at 9lb 7oz and Josh tipped the scales at 10lb 5oz. Like any father, I was just delighted that they were born healthy and that Hilary was fine. We were living in Longton, near Preston, when Daniel was born and I had a bad habit of driving around with nothing other than fresh air in my petrol tank. Hilary was convinced I would run out of fuel if I had to take her to hospital in a hurry, but fortunately we made it to Preston Royal Infirmary when Hilary went into labour, without running dry. It wasn't the easiest of deliveries and, like many fathers before me, I sat around for hours anxiously awaiting his arrival and feeling like the proverbial spare part.

When Sam was born he looked just as he does now; his features haven't changed at all. Both he and Danny had little hair at birth but Josh had a mass of black hair when he arrived

on the scene, his brothers christening him 'Bear' – a pet name they still use. Despite being born the size of a three-month-old baby, however, he has still, unlike his older brothers, to graduate to the pack on a rugby field. All three boys took to the game immediately, Daniel developing as a front-row forward and Sam as a second row while Josh, who looks like being the tallest of the three eventually, is currently playing junior rugby at fly-half – a position his father once graced! They also play a lot of cricket, soccer, tennis and golf. It is a case of indulging in whatever is in vogue at the time. During Wimbledon fortnight, for instance, it is tennis, whereas when the World Darts Championships appears on television, I notice that the dartboard suddenly reappears.

It hasn't been easy for the boys, because having a high-profile sportsman for a father can work against you and I feel that Daniel, in particular, has had a raw deal. He's a bright lad but very sensitive and he has had to cope with the expectation that comes from the Beaumont name. He played at Fylde from an early age, turned out at tight-head prop for Lancashire Clubs' Under-15s, and is now hooking at Manchester University where he is studying for a business degree, but he was largely ignored by school selectors and when he dropped the ball or did something wrong, even at the age of seven playing mini-rugby, he would have to put up with stupid comments such as, 'You of all people should know better than that.'

Sam is the quiet one and, at the moment, the tallest of the three boys. He played for the Lancashire Under-18s A-team a

year early and has a good knowledge of the game. That may come from the fact that the boys have accompanied me to World Cups, been taken on British Lions tours and used to join me in the commentary box when I was working for television. They have watched a lot of top-class rugby and had the advantage of being in the company of people who have played the game at the highest levels, so they have a better than average understanding of what is happening on the field.

I have always found having to stay on the sidelines and not get involved in the boys' sporting activities at school frustrating, but I could see it being difficult for a schoolteacher being scrutinised by a former British Lions captain. So I stand back and try to help the school in other ways, such as fundraising so that the school team can undertake tours overseas.

At present young Josh seems to be least affected by the famous father syndrome. When his brothers were born, there was quite a bit of media interest and their pictures appeared in newspapers and magazines, to be followed later by happy family features. By contrast there was no fuss whatsoever when Josh arrived and he may well escape the goldfish bowl. In any case he is one of those annoying little characters who confidently take everything in their stride – in his case probably because of having to compete with older and bigger brothers – and he is naturally good at every sport he attempts. He captains rugby and cricket teams, and competes in the school swimming team as well, even though he hasn't bothered joining the swimming

club. He also regularly embarrasses both Hilary and me on the golf course! I remembering partnering him in a fathers-and-sons tournament at the Royal Lytham course in which we had to play alternate shots. Josh decided very early on in the round that *I* was the weakest link! At another time I had been due to play in a tournament during the festive season and we were sitting around at home with nothing particular to do so I said to Josh, 'Come on, let's go and hit a few balls down at the golf range.' When we got there we bumped into Paul Eales, a PGA European tournament professional, who told me he had just been reading a new coaching manual but added that there was no point in lending it to me because I was beyond help. When I suggested that Josh might benefit he said, 'I can't do anything with him because he already has a swing to die for.' Josh's temperament is such that I suspect he will ride out any family references and cope with the inevitable question, 'Do you play rugby and are you as good as your dad?'

The great thing is that, whilst they are all very different in character, each of the boys has inherited our love of sport. And, as parents facing the difficulties of modern society, Hilary and I take great comfort from the fact that they enjoy the ethos of rugby and cricket and socialise within that environment, just as we always did. It is an environment in which I have always felt comfortable because it attracts people from all walks of life and is very family-orientated. Family life is very important for Hilary and I and, whether playing football and cricket on an Algarve

beach, skiing in France or water-skiing in the Lake District or at our home in Spain, the important thing is all being together. Our impromptu games of cricket and football on foreign beaches have often attracted other holidaymakers who ask to join in. They were always most welcome but we had to take care where we elected to play after inadvertently finding ourselves playing cricket on a nudist beach on one occasion. We were blithely unaware until a bather suddenly appeared between batsman and bowler. Sam's eyes were like organ stops!

The boys have accompanied me on Lions tours and to World Cups. They also go to Twickenham with Hilary and I and join in the traditional get-together in the car park with Fran Cotton, Steve Smith, Roger Uttley and their families. (I remember how, during the last Lions tour to Australia, Josh had his face painted – they'd never seen anything like that before in the committee box!) Importantly, they aren't blasé about this, always making a point of thanking us for taking them.

I didn't have the same opportunities for travel that my boys have enjoyed throughout their lives but I had a very happy childhood nonetheless – the carefree routine only being broken when I started attending the Council School in Adlington and adopted a stance that was to stay with me throughout my scholastic career. I took very little notice of the bookwork and thought only about getting into the playground with a ball. Lessons were merely an unwelcome distraction but I was about to be doused in ice-cold water – metaphorically speaking. When

I was eight I was packed into the car and driven to Kirkby Lonsdale, on the edge of the Lake District, to be introduced to Cressbrook Preparatory School, which was to become my home for the next few years. To say the experience was a shock to the system would be putting it mildly. It took me a long time to settle in and I was very homesick. Years later I can recall asking my mother how she could have sent me away from home like that but it wasn't easy for her either. She said it had been the worst week of her life because Alison, who was ten at the time, went off to boarding school in Harrogate on the Thursday, I went to Cressbrook on the Friday and my father flew to Australia on business the following day. From having a house full of people she was suddenly left with just four-year-old Joe to look after.

I don't think our three boys would have appreciated a boarding-school regime, and anyway Hilary and I always enjoyed them being at home with us so that we could sit down together to chat and find out what they had been up to. Of course, things were different when I was young and, by sending my siblings and me to boarding school, my parents were only doing what was the norm for people in their social circle. As I say, I wasn't happy at first but you get used to it and there was the saving grace of sport being available to me almost on tap. Another good thing from my point of view was the headmaster, David Donald – a great guy.

Interestingly, the head boy at the school was someone I would come to know very well through rugby in later life: former England centre John Spencer. He subsequently had no

recollection of me because he was in his final year at Cressbrook before going on to Sedbergh, but those of us in the first year knew who he was because of the position he held in the school's pecking order. Since then, of course, we have become good friends and have worked together for many years in rugby administration.

Arriving at Cressbrook was certainly traumatic. We slept in dormitories and it was lights out at 6.30 p.m., followed by the cruel wake-up exercise of a swim in the freezing pool at 7.15 the following morning. Little wonder, then, that I hated the countdown to returning there after our very occasional holidays. I was so determined not to go back one term that I hid in a tree!

Unlike the local schools my pals attended back in Adlington, we had few holidays and our parents were only allowed to make three visits each term, although they were permitted to turn up to watch us play for the school at soccer, rugby or cricket. Being a boarding school, the routine was very different from most schools. A typical day, for example, might comprise lessons in the morning, sport in the afternoon and then more lessons at four before supper and bed. The sporting routine in my first year was soccer in the winter and cricket during the summer months. Fortunately, I enjoyed both games.

Cricket was probably my greatest love and I still like nothing better than sitting down to watch a game, whether it is a Test Match at Old Trafford or just a knockabout on the village green. The game was in the blood; my maternal grandfather was such

an enthusiast that he was one of the founders of the Northern League. My uncle, Joe Blackledge, was not just a good cricketer but also Lancashire's last amateur captain, taking on that role for the last time in 1962, by which time he was probably past his prime and his timing was not as good as it had been. I remember Dad picking me up from school and taking me to watch him play at Old Trafford but Uncle Joe ducked into a ball from Butch White of Hampshire and was knocked out. To add insult to injury the ball fell on to his wicket, so he was out in more ways than one!

Uncle Joe played at our local club, Chorley, and that's where you would find me during the school holidays. I was a wicketkeeper and opening batsman, and played quite a lot of my league cricket in the same team as both the father and the uncle of former England fly-half Paul Grayson, who also had a spell playing cricket at Chorley. Another cricketing pal was Paul Mariner, who went on to play soccer for the Chorley Town team before moving on to Plymouth Argyle, Ipswich Town, Arsenal and England. As the youngest players in the team, we tended to knock around together. Paul ended up coaching in America and we have rather lost contact, but I still bump into his parents when I am out and about in Chorley.

I have never tired of watching cricket and, fortunately, our boys developed the same avid interest in the game although Hilary thinks it is akin to watching paint dry. I had to explain that cricket is a wonderfully social game, just as rugby was when I was a young player. It is also a very unforgiving game, cruel almost.

More than any other team game, the spotlight is on the individual, and luck can play an important part in success or failure. Some guy might be dropped five times and go on to score a century whereas the next guy could be out first ball to a brilliant catch.

When I first started playing rugby at Fylde I continued opening the batting at Chorley in the summer months, usually in the second team, but all that stopped when I got into the pattern of touring every year, either with England or the British Lions. I did make my 'cricketing comeback' a number of years ago, however, when we went to live in Wrea Green, a pretty village not far from Blackpool. It is the archetypal English village, complete with church, pub and houses surrounding the village green and duckpond. The captain of the village cricket team was my neighbour, Richard Wilson, and he persuaded me to turn out for them even though I protested that I hadn't swung a bat in earnest for years. When I dug out my old bat it seemed about half the size of everyone else's and the same could be said for the kit, which was so tight it almost gave me a squeaky voice, although I did just about manage to squeeze into the flannels! (There was, however, one memorable occasion when I split my trousers and had to nip home for running repairs, holding up play for about 15 minutes. Then it started to rain so the lads claimed they would have won the game if I hadn't forced the fabric!) It may have been beginner's luck but I took a catch in the gully off the third delivery of my 'trial' game and took another later when fielding at deep midwicket. We lost the game but I made 51 not out and they

thought they had discovered another Ian Botham! The Grapes pub served as the clubhouse and, in the euphoria of getting a few runs – and a bravado fuelled by a few pints – I signed up to play for the team on a regular basis. Unfortunately, I never played quite so well again but at least I could walk to the ground from home … and the clubhouse was always a considerable attraction!

My playing days, apart from in the garden and on the beach, are definitely over now but I enjoy watching our youngest, Josh, playing for the Under-lls side. Golf is more my game these days although I don't profess to be very good. I got into the game because that's how rugby players traditionally pass the time when they're away on tour and aren't involved in training. Even now, it's a good excuse to get away with my pals for a few days, although when it comes to competitions I leave Josh to represent the family. As I said earlier, he is something of a natural with a golf club in his hands and won the Royal Lytham Under-17s Championship when he was only ten.

Daniel and Sam are also good golfers, so I never have any shortage of partners, though that proved costly when I played in a competition with Daniel last year. He wanted a car and I had been planning to buy him a very basic model. Young men have their own ideas, however, and he was keen to have one of the new breed of Mini. As I was pretty confident that my pocket wouldn't be at risk, I wagered him that he could have the Mini if he beat me in a club competition. My pre-round confidence evaporated on the sixth hole when it took me 12 shots to get out of a bunker.

Unsurprisingly, Daniel ended up with the Mini. To my pals at the golf club that sand trap is now known as Mini Bunker!

My interest in soccer developed through being taken by a neighbour to watch Blackburn Rovers, and my first major sporting outing was to Wembley to watch England beat Scotland in the days when the two nations met on an annual basis. It is a pity that the old cross-border rivalry isn't given an airing on the field of play these days, as it is in rugby union, but I suppose the opportunity for rival fans to cause mayhem is a good enough reason to have called a halt.

Even though my father had played for Fylde, my main interest in rugby as a boy, living in Lancashire, was limited to rugby league. Wigan was just a few minutes away so I was more interested in the feats of Billy Boston than in what was going on at Twickenham, although we did watch the internationals on television and I also have a vague recollection of being taken to watch Fylde. While in my final year at Cressbrook, in 1964 I was also taken to Edinburgh to watch England play Scotland at Murrayfield, though I little thought at the time that I would one day lead England to a Grand Slam at the same venue. For all of us it was just a great weekend away from the confines of the school. Sport provided me with many opportunities to escape the academic life. I was a typical lad in many respects, and lazy when it came to school-work. Deep down, I expected to end up working in the family business, so there was no academic incentive, despite the efforts of my grandparents when Alison

and I went to stay in their bungalow in Blackpool for the summer holidays. They had turned the front room into a small classroom, complete with three desks, and they gave private lessons. I remember being there one summer when Sir Stanley Matthews' son, who developed into a good tennis player, was having lessons.

For some reason the family also had the habit of staying at Blackpool's Norbreck Hydro for three days every year; a massive treat, because it had an indoor swimming pool. My father would travel with his garden spade in the boot of the car and we would take it on to the beach and spend all day building dams. Those breaks were always over far too quickly, and then it would be back to Kirkby Lonsdale and the school routine.

Initially, soccer was the winter sport at Cressbrook, and I played in goal. I suppose it linked very well with my wicketkeeper role when playing cricket. I don't think we won many matches but I was just happy to be involved, preferring the sports field to the classroom. We weren't allowed to neglect our studies but I had little thought of cap and gown at that stage in my development. So it was perhaps a little ironic that I ended up, much later in life, with two honorary degrees – one from Manchester University and the other from the University of Central Lancashire. I couldn't help wondering as I received those what my father would have thought could he have seen me standing, resplendent in gown and mortarboard, before 500 students and their parents, while someone delivered a eulogy outlining why Bill Beaumont was being honoured with a degree!

After initially concentrating on soccer we switched to rugby at Cressbrook and, although I started out at prop, I quickly made a dramatic move to fly-half. They didn't have anyone else and I fancied my chances because I had quite a good boot on me. I wasn't that big in those days, only starting to grow rapidly from my mid-teens, but I can't claim to have been the quickest fly-half in the business. I did have my moment of glory, however, shortly before leaving Cressbrook, when I dropped a goal against a school side that hadn't conceded a point for two years. I was quite proud of that!

Most of my contemporaries when they left Cressbrook went to Sedbergh, Will Carling's old school, but my father had other ideas. The plan had been for me to go to Repton, but that was a soccer school so father opted instead for Ellesmere College in Shropshire, where the headmaster was Ian Beer, who had been at Cambridge University with him. Ian, of course, had a distinguished rugby career and represented Cambridge on the RFU committee for many years, being honoured with the Presidency in the 1993–94 season. From Ellesmere he went eventually to Harrow, where Roger Uttley was the rugby master. I spoke at a dinner in Ledbury for Ian many years later, and when he introduced me he dwelt more on my lack of academic achievement than on my sporting triumphs. In response, I observed that this didn't say a lot for the teachers. Touché.

By the time I moved to Ellesmere College I was used to life as a boarder but it still came as something of a shock because

I switched from being a big fish in a little pool of 90 pupils to a small fish in a sea of nearly 400 boys. Most of them were older and bigger than I was. Ian Beer's later comments on the study front were fully justified because I found academic life a real drag and simply couldn't be bothered with learning unless it was a subject in which I had a particular interest – which usually meant one involving a ball! I enjoyed my rugby at Ellesmere although I had no thought initially of pursuing it seriously. If I indulged in boyhood dreams, they involved opening the batting for Lancashire at Old Trafford. Indeed, I took so little interest in rugby that the only name that meant anything to me was Richard Sharp, the England fly-half. Yet I knew all I needed to know about our leading cricketers and also vividly remember watching England win the soccer World Cup in 1966. Apart from Fylde I wasn't aware of other rugby union teams but was always keen to discover how Blackburn Rovers and Blackpool had fared in the Football League.

The sporting facilities at Ellesmere were excellent and that helped me through my school years. If you are into sport then, wherever you are – at school, college or just generally in the community – you will always have mates, and in my time at the college we were a pretty mixed bag. Because we were very close to the border there, quite a few of my rugby mates came from Wales and one of those was Mark Keyworth, who played his club rugby with Swansea and got into the same England team as I did in 1976. We suffered a whitewash in what was

then the Five Nations Championship and that was the end of Mark, unfortunately. Those were the bad old days of English rugby when players came and went, often without trace, with frightening regularity. A lot of my fellow pupils also came from abroad – the sons of servicemen, diplomats and businessmen who were based overseas – and I recall one boy staying with my family in Adlington for a month in the school holidays because he wasn't able to join up with his parents. I suppose I did a lot of growing up at Ellesmere as well as involving myself in the usual pranks that healthy, energetic teenage boys get up to. We used to sneak out of school, I remember, to visit the local pub. Fortunately, it had three entrances, so we had our lookout and our escape route all worked out in case a master walked in and caught us supping ale. There was also a girls school not far away, which now and again joined ours for the occasional concert, but we tended to regard girls as though they had arrived from another planet. The problem with boarding schools in my time was that they were almost monastic in some respects. The interaction of a mixed-sex school is, I think, far healthier.

I continued to concentrate rather more on my cricket than anything else but also played for the school team at rugby, usually at fly-half or full-back. There were no invitations to take part in county or international trials but I somehow don't think I would have made the grade in the back division, so I've no grumbles on that score. But, since I have started to take note of what goes on, I can't say that I have ever been greatly impressed by

schoolboy selections. Some youngsters are pushed all the time by their masters, and if the latter also happen to be selectors you know who will get into the teams. I was interested to read in *The Daily Telegraph* how Ben Cohen, who has developed into a tremendous wing, played in England schoolboy trials but never got a look-in because he didn't go to the right school.

Some schools, invariably those in the independent sector, have a tradition of producing rugby talent and, over the years, some senior schools have offered scholarships to promising youngsters based on their sporting, rather than academic, ability. With regional and national selectors being drawn from leading schools, there was always a feeling that their own pupils had an unfair advantage in the pecking order. Today, fortunately, boys from schools that are not as well established in a rugby sense can still progress through the club structure now that we also have regional and national age-group sides drawn from clubs as well as schools.

Selectors also seem to ignore the fact that some players are late developers, this being an aspect that worries me about the current academies, valuable though they are. Not everyone plays top-class schoolboy rugby and, despite what we achieved later, neither Fran Cotton nor I ever played for Lancashire Schools. Fran did make it to a trial in his final year at school but that's as far as it went, although, knowing Fran as I do, I'm pretty sure this provided him with a goal to aim at. I have also found that some players peak early. They achieve a great deal at schoolboy level

but can't cope with not being top dog when they progress to the senior game, so they simply drift away. The door has always got to be open for players who don't make it into the academies.

At club level things have changed. When I played the game the county side was the avenue in the North towards national recognition, whereas in the Midlands clubs like Coventry, Moseley, Leicester and Northampton provided the route to international status. Now, however, international players are likely to be drawn from any of the 12 professional clubs in the Zurich Premiership, and, whereas clubs like Bath and Leicester dominated almost unchallenged for long periods, enabling them to attract the best young talent, there is now a far better spread of talent throughout the entire Premiership. Any player performing well in that competition is going to attract the attention of the national coaches and, with England selection being down to head coach Clive Woodward, there is none of the horse-trading that I suspect went on between selectors from different parts of the country in the old days.

Since I was a youngster, much more has been done through the clubs in terms of developing players, largely through the introduction of mini- and junior rugby. That was essential because of the way team sport was discouraged at many schools simply because someone had the daft idea that life shouldn't be about winners and losers. They didn't want youngsters to feel either the elation of victory or the pain of defeat but, whatever they say, life is competitive and I feel sorry for those kids who

will grow up with no real knowledge of the concept of team sports. I have a real passion for such sports because I believe they mould you for life generally. You learn how to work together, how to show humility in success and how to cope with setbacks. Regardless of what some of the politically correct brigade might desire, we are not all equal and never will be. And, wherever you go in life, there will always be someone in charge.

I left Ellesmere when I was 17, with no inkling of what the future held for me. At that time I assumed I would work in the family business, play cricket for Chorley and perhaps play rugby at my father's old club, Fylde. Occasionally I have to pinch myself when I think back to how I was suddenly pitched on to a rollercoaster ride that brought its share of joy and heartache but one that, despite the dips and the empty feeling in the stomach these brought, I wouldn't have changed anything.

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