

NORMAN FRANCIS BORRETT.

Address at Framlingham College Chapel

Wednesday 25th May

By Norman Porter, General Secretary SOF.

Almost every single one of us here today has his or her own special memories of Norman Borrett. We variously remember him as his pupils, as his colleagues, as some-time governors, as fellow sportsmen, as friends, indeed as father and husband too. It is both a privilege and a challenge to be invited to give a unified focus to this mosaic of memories. Those of you who were at Norman's funeral in Frinton in December will have heard an eloquent tribute there, rich in facts, achievements and anecdote. We celebrate the life of the same man here today, so perhaps it is good that this tribute should come from a slightly different perspective, and from one who perhaps, more than most, has cause to be grateful to Norman for the indelible influence he has had on my life. My own 55 years worth of enjoying hockey, both playing and coaching, is just one tiny part of Norman's legacy.

In trying to do justice to all that Norman was, we cannot overlook what Gwen Randall endearingly described to me as his wicked side. I shall do my best not to be over-respectful. If Norman is looking down on us today he would be desperately looking for a hint of irreverence.

How does one even begin to do irreverent justice to a man described in a Times obituary as "probably Britain's most talented postwar all-round amateur sportsman?" and "the incomparable Borrett" –plus all the rest of that extraordinary, sometimes outrageous character which we schoolboys came to know and respect and ultimately love.

The material is complex. I have broken it down into a number of parts: a brief biographical chronology, NFB - as schoolboy and Framlinghamian, NFB at University, NFB as Sportsman, NFB as coach, NFB as schoolmaster, finally Norman Francis Borrett the man, many of these strands often richly overlapping. Having dissected our memory of him, I'll then reconstitute him, as it were, to leave you with a rounded image with which, hopefully you can each, in your different ways identify.

Let me start with a brief chronological biography.

He was born on October 1st 1917, in Wanstead, Essex, the second of two sons of Walter and Alice, an Essex farming family. Both brothers were at Framlingham in the 30's. Norman went on to Pembroke College, Cambridge and came down just 2 months before the war started in 1939. He had little chance to play sport in the army, but was one of those "PT fellows", and also did some gunnery. Otherwise, soldiers weren't allowed to talk about what they were doing. In 1940 Norman married the beautiful 20 year old Mullie, a marriage that was to last 64 years and produce two sons, Antony and Tim in

whom one can see much of their father, but luckily for them and for us, much of their marvellous mother too.

In late 1945, the war over, Norman was at last able to embark on his chosen career as a schoolmaster at Allhallows School in Lyme Regis. He cut his professional teeth there before moving back to Framlingham in 1950. And there he was to remain for the rest of his teaching life, geography teacher, peerless sports coach, housemaster, and Second Master. He retired in 1980 and continued to live in The Readery in Castle Street –a house, perhaps fittingly, originally owned by Pembroke College, and intended to house Readers in St Michaels church. In a retirement blighted by increasing immobility Norman remained a grandee of the British amateur sporting scene, his achievements recognised and consolidated in various presidencies. Eventually he and Mullie had to leave their beloved Readery, defeated by the difficult stairs and increasing immobility. Norman's final months were spent in Frinton in what had, until then, been their holiday home. The memorabilia of a life-time had to be culled. In those latter years, until his passing 1st December 2004, Norman remained a figure of real affection, and enjoyed frequent visits from Old Framlinghamians.

Let me now turn back the pages and look at NFB the Schoolboy and Framlinghamian. He was hardly a later developer. The prodigious ability of this outstanding all-round sportsman is evident throughout his school career. He ended up as captain of hockey, cricket, squash, fives, athletics and swimming, secretary of the Debating Society and School Captain. Hands up anyone who was in a school side with him! More surprisingly, he earned critical acclaim on the stage. During the holidays of his final year he played for Eastern Counties Schools at Rugby, played cricket for Essex Young Amateurs, won the Evans Public Schools Squash handicap, and scored 63 at Lords in the Young Amateurs v Young Professionals. Norman never turned his back on the school that had nurtured his talents, returning there to influence generations of Framlinghamians as teacher and coach. He was one of our own. He not only helped to produce Framlinghamians, but remained a loyal member of the Society of Old Framlinghamians, and was honoured with the Presidency. Despite the problems of mobility he would doggedly make it to our dinners. He was a Framlinghamian through and through.

Let me now move on to NFB at university. In the 30s, academic ability apart, his sporting ability was more than adequate qualification for the country's top universities. Norman's university career was as distinguished as his school career. While at Pembroke he represented the College at all games, won three squash and two hockey blues, captaining the university at both games. He was a member of the Hawks Club. By his own admission he devoted most of his energies to sport, and achieved a moderate degree. His career in schoolteaching had to be postponed because of the outbreak of war.

NFB the Sportsman

At this I simply buckle under the weight of fact and accomplishment. Norman's accomplishments fill an entire booklet currently being prepared by Richard Sayer, and hopefully to be published shortly, so I will limit myself to the bare bones. We need to remember that what he achieved was diminished by the intervention of the war years. Despite that, he played hockey 30 times for England and 7 for GB, in an unbroken run of 15 years, captaining both. He led GB to the Silver medal in the 48 Olympics. Being Norman, he was disappointed at finishing second, but personally managed to score a very high proportion of the GB goals. In the view of one opponent he was "the most naturally gifted and skilful British player I have ever seen". He became President of the Hockey Association.

He played cricket twice for Essex while at university, but strangely not for Cambridge University itself. He played for Devon in the minor counties championship most summer holidays from 1947 to 1958, playing 50 matches, scoring 2408 runs at an average of over 36. He still holds the record for the 4th wicket –an unbroken 262 in 1949 of which his share was 134 not out.

His squash achievements are quite unique. He won the English amateur championship in five consecutive years, winning each final in straight sets. This was all the more remarkable in that he had to use the first couple of rounds to get his eye in, as there were no squash facilities down in Devon. Norman captained both the GB and England squash teams. Until 1952 he had lost only once to any amateur in the world since the war. Unsurprisingly he became President of the Squash racquets Association too.

More tangential to his sporting life, he played golf to a handicap of 4, accumulated enough tournament ranking points to qualify for the Wimbledon tennis championships but was too busy to enter, and was also asked by a friend to be co-driver for the Le Mans 24 hour race –an invitation which he declined.

On a neuro-physiological note, Norman was ambidextrous. In these more analytical times perhaps it was the perfect balance between the left and right side of the brain which explains that extraordinary talent –the ability to bowl left or right handed, the ability to play squash with either hand. We mere unidexterous mortals could but gape and admire. Whatever the physiological reasons, those Herculean achievements are unlikely ever to be repeated by any modern sportsmen. There are too many sports academies and county associations desperately trying to identify talent at an obscenely early age so that they can make that talent their own. All of this to the detriment of the individual, even if it is nowadays the only route to national distinction. Norman was a man for his Corinthian age, the age of the amateur, and flourished prodigiously within it. He probably never received a penny for what he did.

NFB the coach

Good coaches try to put as much into a sport as they have taken out of it. They try to replicate their skills and their enjoyment in younger generations.

By that criterion too, NFB was prolific. Generations of Framlingham hockey players moved into club hockey, gained representative honours, and helped to give this college a reputation for hockey which is being proudly upheld today. Well done Ben Konig. Of course it was not only hockey. Cricket and squash too thrived under his tutelage. Norman's ability to take on two opponents at a time on the squash court –and thrash them -is legendary. Generations of Framlinghamians took away with them as love of sport, and the expertise to move on to a wider stage.

Of course we never knew how lucky we were at the time. We just did what we were told. Comparisons with other schools can only be made afterwards. We spent hours in the old gym pushing a hockey ball backwards and forwards. We used to have real snowy winters the, and the pitches were out of action for weeks on end. We just did what we were told. The fixture list did seem challenging –Cambridge University Wanderers, Suffolk, Oxford University Occasionals, Permbroke College, –a bit daunting for young lads. But we played them all. Did OK. And every so often from the olympian heights we would hear the cry “Come on you fellows” challenging us to dare to give less than our best. Praise was not readily given, but when it was, you treasured it. It was only when we offered our Framlingham hockey skills to the outside world that we realised just how far we had been pushed. Yes, we were amongst the first to have these new fangled Indian-headed sticks, but Norman did teach us how to use them –hopefully he managed to get a small commission on sales too. Self-evidently NFB was not just a sporting practitioner to be emulated –he also had the knack and the will to pass it all on. And many of us here are enduringly grateful to him for that.

NFB the schoolmaster

Our prime minister once had a recruitment campaign for teachers proclaiming that everyone remembers a good teacher. Quite right, but in an age which over-regulation and political correctness is doing its best to make teachers clones of one another, let us celebrate an age when teachers could be individuals, when they could be outrageous without being sued, when they weren't constantly constrained by the risk assessments, health and safety considerations and procedural requirements demanded by a litigious society and over-inspected schools. We do remember NFB as a good teacher but we also remember him because he was a unique individual. An Allhallows correspondent told me the story of how Norman had a 22 rifle in his classroom. One day, in the middle of a lesson he espied a rabbit on the grass outside. He went over to the window took brief aim and fired. If he was as good a shot as he was at everything else, poor bunny. He then turned back to the class: “Now where were we?”

Norman exemplified the concept of the schoolmaster rather than the mere schoolteacher –a mere classroom operative. Yes, he taught geography, but much serious work started outside the classroom. The classroom he took in his stride, the lurking presence of his old hockey stick, “willie”, together with an arsenal of chalk and hard-backed board dusters ensured that there were

never any disciplinary problems. Total attention was guaranteed. Learning took place, even though French wine-producing regions seemed to have a disproportionate part in the geography syllabus. Many a reluctant pupil was challenged to perform beyond his natural academic talents. And, of course, Norman was also Housemaster and Second Master –demonstrating his full involvement well beyond the classroom.

He was clearly a fine and natural leader. Virtually every single sports photograph shows him in the middle, captain supreme. Why then was he not a Headmaster? Perhaps he didn't need to be. He was supreme in his chosen field and had no need to formalise this with the title of Head, and with all the additional administrative tasks which would take him away from what he was best at. He had the charisma of a man who knew instinctively that he had few equals, and that his young charges were in awe of him. Playing Head to a theoretically subordinate NFB cannot have been easy. It would have been instructive to have rearranged history with Norman as Gwen's Second Master.

Suffice it to say that generations of Framlinghamians, will indeed remember a good teacher – and we do that with both gratitude and affection.

NFB the character and the man.

It may seem bizarre, but I'm going to mention modesty first of all. You know, I don't think that any of us had any idea of just how much Norman had achieved and was still achieving in the 50's. Yes, he was self-assured, confident, dominant, even, but he was never self-promoting. If he knew what is going on here today I can imagine him saying: "What on earth are you making all this fuss about?" Don't fuss –he hated fuss.

He was very straightforward: his verbal bravado could sometimes be intimidating –until you were aware of the twinkle in the eye, and that there was nothing he liked better than a response in kind. He hated pomposity, but had great charm and was great company. He had simple old fashioned values, and instilled in his pupils the virtues of discipline and courtesy.

Just as he underplayed his achievements, so too did he understate pain, and he suffered a lot of that. He had four hip replacements, one on the right, three on the left. Apparently he used to say that the right one must have come from a woman as he had to walk funny on that side. But he claimed not to feel the pain, partly because he hated hospitals, partly because he hated fuss. Mullie tells the story of one of his falls, how he hit his head, leaving a massive cut, with blood everywhere. Norman's response: –mop it up woman. Eventually a doctor came with the cut obviously needing stitches. There was talk of hospital. Norman's response to the hapless doctor: "You're a doctor aren't you –get on with it. And he did. Hospital avoided.

Norman was a wreck for many years. His exertions had taken their toll. He didn't complain. That was not him, but he was lucky to have Mullie and he valued all she did for him. He knew he was a ruddy nuisance to her, but he

loved her and his boys, and the wider family. Only just over a year ago Mullie was made an Honorary Old Framlinghamian, in recognition of all that she had done to ease those difficult final years of Framlingham's finest-ever sportsman.

Let me now reconstitute Norman Francis Borrett, the schoolboy, the sportsman, the coach, the schoolmaster, the character, the man and finally the human being.

He was prodigiously talented. Nature endowed him with extraordinary gifts. He developed them to the full. He helped others to develop theirs. But nature was also cruel. He whom the gods endowed so richly they ultimately mocked. A quotation from King Lear provides a final reflection: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods. To see that paragon of sporting talent reduced to a wheelchair, to virtual immobility was to see the human condition mocking us all. It was painful to us, even though Norman denied the pain that was in him. But the fullness of that life, both its achievement and its unspoken suffering showed the man's essential fighting spirit. In his final months an ambulance came to take Norman to hospital. It had not proceeded very far when Norman said in a Norman sort of way: I demand to be taken home. And back home he went.

In an age when the word "legend" has become debased, NFB reminds us of the real meaning of that word – "a person having a special place in public esteem because of striking qualities or deeds". Norman was a legend in his life-time, and that legend will live on, with no need for fictitious embroidering by the passage of time.

I revert finally to the fine words spoken by Richard Sayer at Norman's funeral: God broke the mould when he made this man. We shall not see his like again."

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