

TRIBUTE TO A SECRETARY: CLIVE ORPEN

It is a cause of much sadness that the enjoyment of others is so often ruined by the thoughtless acts of individuals. It is a much rarer thing for the enjoyment of the many to be secured by the thoughtful and untiring efforts of a single individual. That rarity has happily blessed UCS Old Boys.

In 1963, UCS OBs were amid something of a rocky patch, having had three secretaries in five years. In that season, a young man only two years out of school assumed the post. At barely twenty years of age, one might have wondered if he was up to the task. We need have had no fear. He must have been quite useful; for, after forty-one years, he has only now decided to take a step back.

That young man was called Clive Orpen. And he has been more than just 'useful'.

He steadied the ship through some fairly tortuous times when there were few regular players about, acting as 'anchor man' on our Wednesday evening practice sessions when he knew few people were likely to come. Some of our older members will tell you that there were several occasions during the last forty years when the Club would have folded without him keeping interest up. It is due to Clive that the new secretary inherits a fixture list of over twenty matches per annum and a vibrancy of membership.

Clive was instrumental in the negotiation of the financing and construction of the new 'Cyriax' courts at UCS in 1970, which were built to replace the narrow 'corridor courts' that older readers may recall. It was no mean feat to achieve the building of new courts at a time when they were being demolished in so many other places. The courts continue to give us a good home and have produced many fine days' entertainment for schoolboys and adults alike.

In so many ways, Clive was a rock over the years, negotiating for access to the courts when the School regime of the time was not necessarily minded to be too constructive. Whether dealing with the tedium of managing the fag butt population on the floor of the courts on practice nights (placed there by recalcitrant schoolboys during the day, rather than unhealthy fives players or even Clive himself!) to the apparent fun of pressing the flesh at assorted School old boys' functions and Committee meetings, Clive did everything necessary to keep the Club in rude health.

And it wasn't always only effective management: during the sixties, seventies and early eighties, Clive was a regular in Club matches; he was also the winner of the inaugural Tom Wood Stirrup Cup – the trophy for our annual doubles tournament – with Charles Hollander in the 1978-9 season. Before then, Clive was almost invincible on our old 'corridor courts', the narrowness of which made his serve virtually unplayable – one could only hold out one's hand and hope...

Alas, this invincibility at home was not cast-iron on the road; back in the early seventies, UCS OBs had its first ever fixture against the Manchester YMCA. Having arrived in good time before the game (how rare!), legend has it that Clive and Co were met by Fred Beswick, who informed them that the Y's fitness-mad number one was already on site and doing some training work in the gym prior to the start of the match. UCS OBs valiant number one – CR Orpen, Esq. – is reported to have visibly blanched. Of course nowadays we understand quite why, when we see his opponent was a then-little-known GW Enstone, Esq...

That story may not have made it into the match report, but anyone who has read an article of any length penned by Clive will know that the man has the most extraordinary vocabulary. This is the man who once wrote in the Club's (always beautifully crafted) annual report of Nick Austin's 'lissom fluency'. In the last year alone, words like 'shibboleth', 'oriflamme' and 'supererogatory' have been used in correspondence to this author. Words for

which one so often needs a dictionary to hand. It is that delight you feel though when you receive a letter from Clive; you know you are about to learn a new word. It all comes of course from Clive's incredible attention to detail, the desire to use exactly the right word to convey the required meaning.

And it is this attention to detail that is demonstrated by Clive's input to the game as a whole, which cannot be underestimated either. His painstaking work on plaster specifications in the seventies formed the basis on which the RFA was able to devise the ideal composition of plaster for the walls. It was a shame that the School did not see fit to use Clive's expertise in the Cyriax courts, but not content with that, he spent many hours studying the best lighting arrangement for courts, designing padding inserts for gloves and trying to find the best tincture to deal with assorted Fives-related ailments (of which arnica is apparently but one!)

When Clive took over as secretary, man was yet to land on the moon, a female Prime Minister was a pipe dream. How times change. But what is undeniable over time is Clive's contribution to Fives at UCS Old Boys. And to the likes of Nick Austin, Robin Nagy, Chris Heron and the author – we all agree – this contribution can be summed up by one fact: we were made to feel welcome when we first began to play. Chris feels it most likely that he would not have persisted with the game had Clive not been there to provide support, advice and competition (at least in Chris's early days!), in his formative years of play.

The author remembers well turning up to those first few Wednesday evening practices when he was sixteen years old and somewhat awe-struck at the likes of Clive, Jason Nyilas, David Neal and Ciaran Morton thumping the ball round faster than the eye could follow. Both on- and off-court, Clive made the author and his fellow schoolies completely welcome when, as boys amongst men (physically and mentally rather than metaphorically), we could have felt very out of place. Moreover he helped us learn many of the skills that we still use today.

It is because of this intense appreciation we felt for Clive's efforts that – at our annual singles tournament in May – we presented him with a gold-engraved Parker pen, marking his extraordinary tenure in the job. To those who know Clive, it will come as no surprise that after the tournament a few halves of lager and a hearty curry were enjoyed by all. They will also know that he will be horrified and delighted at this tribute appearing in print.

A measure of the man indeed.

Mark Bliss



Clive Orpen (right) and Chris Heron at the presentation in May.

Picture: Mark Bliss