



Rugby football

'Healthy body, healthy mind.' so the old saying goes, and rugby was the main sport which kept my young body healthy as I grew up; it's paying dividends now in old age. I'm still enjoying life in my seventies despite the inevitable creakings of age, because I kept my body healthy when young – and I have rugby to thank for that.

When Rudyard Kipling, mocking sportsmen in his poem *The Islanders*, wrote disparagingly of sport: 'the flannelled fool at the wicket; the muddied oaf in the goal', he'd clearly missed out at sport in school, possibly because he was short-sighted, and he missed the whole point of playing sport. Whatever your physical condition, there is some sport available to enjoy. Just look at the physique of some of our top darts players! And the Paralympic Games demonstrated how much athletes with physical and visual disabilities can achieve in sport, mentally as well as physically.

Rugby has always been my sport from the start: playing it as a boy and man, and now watching it live or on television. I can't remember a time when I was not throwing or kicking a rugby ball. I was brought up in Keighley, a small Yorkshire mill-town, and our row of terraced houses was the last one at the end of a long lane running from the middle of town. Some years ago I wrote a prize-winning play, *Garlic Lane*, centred on that lane and the rugby field at the end of it.

It was a rugby league field, just across the road from the end of our street, and as youngsters after school and in the holidays we used to play on it. Mid-week in the evenings the professional adult players trained there and we watched them, sometimes being invited to train with them and shown the skills of passing and kicking. So from an early age I knew how to handle a rugby ball and make those long, snappy passes so characteristic of rugby league. As a 10 year-old I learned much from those veteran rugby league players in the 1940s, and I'm delighted that rugby union clubs all over the country are now coaching primary school children in the game.

Not only does rugby training develop the body, with the discipline of diet and keeping fit, but it also develops the mind, by encouraging social skills, demanding teamwork on the field and forging friendships which last a lifetime.

As a 21 year-old National Serviceman between 1954 and 1956, I found myself at Maresfield Camp training in the Intelligence Corps. Anyone who served as a conscript in those days will know the loneliness of a weekend in barracks when everyone else within striking distance of home has gone on leave. No way could I travel to Yorkshire and spend a reasonable amount of time there at the weekend before returning to camp.

I would have been confined to mooching about camp till Monday, but Crowborough Rugby Club came to my rescue. I was playing rugby mid-week for my Corps against other service teams, but my weekends were clear. I'd played for my university team and was at my peak as a second row forward touching sixteen stones and over six feet tall. Fortunately for me Crowborough Rugby Club had their scouts on the look-out for players in the various army camps around and I was invited to play.

After that, I was picked up at the camp gate every Saturday and driven to the Boar's Head pub to change for the game; and sometimes I stayed at the pub overnight, as after-match jollifications there continued till well into the night. If I remember rightly, the landlord charged half-a-crown for bed and breakfast – and what slap-up breakfasts they were.

There was no club-house in those days and we stripped in an out-house behind the pub, running all the way up to the Steel Cross ground to play. After the game, muddy and sweaty, we ran all the way back to hose ourselves down in the Spartan bath-house. Once washed and changed, we adjourned to the pub and began the serious business of socialising with each other and our opponents like all rugby clubs. We played darts and sang songs and told tales till after midnight, when I adjourned upstairs to bed. Salad days, indeed!

I made many friends playing rugby at Crowborough, friendships which have lasted a lifetime and for which I am very grateful. In the army, I also managed to win a county cap playing for Sussex and that marked the peak of my playing career. I enjoyed every game I played in Sussex, and I was honoured last year at the President's Lunch to be invited to become Chaplain of Crowborough Rugby Club – a position which, I think, is unique in the annals of rugby football.

■ Revd John Waddington-Feather