

Born to Bat

Extracts

Having potty-trained Bruce early and taught him to walk by 12 months, I thought it was time to move away from the merely mundane. It was now vital to introduce him to the crucial things in life - cricket and footy. We gave him a toy cricket bat and a football for his first birthday. Initially, he had a few problems standing up and swinging the bat, ending up on his bum too many times to remember. Sometimes, once on the ground with a thud, the momentum would have him rolling backwards until he ended up on his back with his fat little arms and legs waving around like a turtle's four legs, when suddenly caught on its back. But there was never a tear. He'd simply roll onto his tummy, struggle to his feet, sometimes giggling, pick up the bat, position himself, and have another go. He was a natural. He loved every minute of it, bruises notwithstanding, and soon got the hang of it.

There was one major obstacle to his agility, however ...



In those days most boys played both cricket and rugby league, so the Alexanders frequently found their front and side yard filled with many of the other neighbouring kids as well as Bruce. The ones I remember particularly are John Peard, ...

Although he lived at Bondi, Richard Butler also joined the games in the Alexander's front yard from time to time. Richard became a diplomat, reaching the lofty heights of Australian Ambassador to the UN and rising to international fame with his appointment in 1997 as chairman of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM), the UN weapons inspection agency in Iraq. In 2003, he was appointed as Governor of Tasmania. Apart from the cricket, Richard joined the Alexander boys on a regular basis in jam sessions in the lounge-room. Dougie played the violin and trumpet and Peter was a gifted pianist. Richard played the trumpet and their number was usually complete with Brian Collins on the banjo ...

Many of the neighbourhood boys who played in the Alexander's front yard became outstanding sportsmen ...



Audette and I can still remember the day the news came through that Bruce was selected for the Sheffield Shield team. We were visiting good friends, Rose and George Borwick in Asquith. George's father was also George Borwick, one of Australia's pre-eminent umpires. So the company was fitting. We were ecstatic. The news spread along The Avenue like wildfire. Everyone knew and cared about their neighbours in those days, and each one of ours appeared with his or her congratulations at some time over the next few days. The house was inundated with well-wishers. This was an enormous occasion for Waverley, and for both young men, with both Bruce and Gordon selected to open the batting against South Australia in legend Brian Booth's last game for New South Wales ...



Though Bruce was reticent, even with us, to talk about his accomplishments on the field, he'd fill our dinner table with details of the moments of brilliance of his team-mates and of his opponents. He also enjoyed telling us a 'censored' version of the funny off-field incidences, which were aplenty. He seemed to get a particular pleasure when it was just the two of us chatting about his experiences and it reminds me still of the times that Dad and I would sit nattering by the fireside. Bruce's story-telling was so evocative, that in a strange way he made me feel that I was there alongside him and, perhaps also because of my own love of cricket, his experiences became part of my life.

Although Bruce doesn't drink alcohol, and never has, it was part and parcel of life for most travelling sporting teams at the time, even at the elite level. These days the elite cricketers are paid so handsomely that the cricketing authorities and the public have a right to demand a high level of self-discipline both on and off the field. There wasn't much money in it in Bruce's time, so it's hard to imagine what kind of moral or financial leverage the authorities could have had over the scallywags of his day. Many of his off-field stories involve alcohol, very late nights, and often aeroplane trips. And one of those stories started with his twenty-first birthday ...