

HARRY

I am deeply honoured to have been invited to pay tribute to Harry today. In a way I feel that I have a right to do this as Harry asked me to stand up with him at his wedding, even though I had married his sister, Biffie!

I have a lot to say but I hope you will bear with me. I'm only getting one chance to say what I think about Harry in public, and I would hate to think afterwards, "I should have mentioned that!"

Who was Harry? There is no simple answer to this question.

HARRY WAS A SPORTSMAN

- **Sportsman** in the true sense of the word.
- He was an **all-rounder**, excelling at all sports.
- **Thinking sportsman** No person had more **theories** about sport than Harry. He had theories about how to take guard depending upon the bowler he was facing and the field that had been set. No simple middle or middle-and-leg for Harry. He would take guard well outside the leg stump or well outside the off stump exposing his stumps to the bowler causing consternation to both bowler and captain. Even now he has a theory about how to play Glen McGrath which no one else apparently has. His latest rugby theory, with the current laws, is that one should pick 8 of the tallest biggest forwards and a kicking fly-half. You would then win every lineout and could maul the ball the length of the field to score your tries. "You must win!" said Harry. He had a new theory about his golf swing each time you played with him and changed his swing more often even than Tiger Woods!
- **In cricket**, the sport that epitomised sportsmanship before the money took over, he was so often the leader, **the elected captain**.
e.g. Captain of St Andrews, of EP Nuffield side, of Rhodes University of the S.A. Universities side, of Eastern Province.
- His **achievements were many**. He played not only for Eastern Province but also for Rhodesia in the Currie Cup. Superb batsman, off-spin bowler and brilliant fielder in the covers. "The best cricketing all-rounder I ever played with" (from an ex team-mate)
- He was also an **exciting Rugby player** – an elusive and outstanding centre, who played 1st XV for his school and university and then represented Eastern Province.
- Let us not forget his "**Double Blue**" at Oxford for Cricket and Rugby.
- A great sportsman requires many **qualities** which Harry had:
 - Selflessness, concern for others, And the ability to encourage and motivate the other members of his team.
 - **Fiercely competitive**. He showed this from a very early age. When, at the age of 4½ he was told that he now had a baby sister he went outside and marked out the race track where they would compete when she was brought home from the nursing-home. And being a child with an in-born sense of fair play, he gave her a start "because she was only little."

- **Fiercely loyal.** All his friends in his life were men with whom he had made special bonds on the sports field
- Like any true sportsman he could **bend the rules**, given the chance. E.g. no Staff Relay Team with Birrell running the 1st leg ever lost – the Staff team always beat the gun!
- He was also, like any good sportsman, prepared to give the occasional **side-swipe**, in sport and in life.
- Harry was E.P. Nuffield **Cricket selector**, and also served on the panel of selectors for the South African Nuffield Cricket side for several years.
- He was a **superb coach**. In all my years as a colleague I never met a more **knowledgeable** or better coach of cricket and rugby. This fascination with the intricacies of the game never left him. His son **Adie**, who is now a professional cricket coach, told me that when Harry was so ill earlier this year and Adie flew out to be by his side, Harry was still attempting to coach him even from the hospital bed!

HARRY WAS SCHOOLMASTER

- **Schoolmaster** in the true sense of the word – not a teacher, a “schoolmaster”,
- One of his greatest strengths was the ability to **cross the generation gap** – he was as much at home with his young grandchildren as he was, as coach of the Rhodes University Cricket side on tour with them in Zimbabwe, or playing golf with the geriatrics on PA golf course.
- He taught for the **love of teaching**. It was the boys who were important, not just the subject that he was imparting.
- For many years he fulfilled the important role of **Housemaster**, both at St Alban’s and St Andrew’s and perhaps this is where he was at his best, because this is where the boys’ characters were formed. He also was co-founder in the position of Second Master to Anton Murray of St Alban’s College in Pretoria.
- This was a “Mr Chips” with a difference. No shuffling, absent-minded eccentric in a tweed jacket.- but a man known and loved by thousands of boys grown to be men. Some of these men, **fired by his example**, entered the teaching profession. One of them, Grant Nupen, first Head-boy of St Alban’s, is now Headmaster of Bishops. He said to Sylvia this weekend: “It was Harry who inspired me, and I think of him every day.”
- Another ex-pupil wrote: “He **shared his life** so magnificently with us” This was Andrew laTrobe – one of the men responsible for launching “The Harry Birrell Sports Scholarship” at St Andrews.

HARRY WAS FRIEND

- Harry was essentially a ‘**people person**’
- His friends were of **paramount importance** to him.
- If you were a **friend of Harry’s** you were his friend for life. He went to endless trouble to maintain the links and to support his friends. He frequently communicated with them by telephone calls and hand-written letters around the world.

- He was a strange combination of a **Man's Man** (even a Male Chauvanist) and a **Ladies Man**, with a charm inherited from his father. He was indeed loved by all
- One of his endearing qualities was his **sense of fun**. He was a naughty little boy, all his life! Our daughter Jenny said that when she was at Rhodes and went to visit Harry & Sylvia she never ever went into the garden if Harry was watering the garden with a hose!
- "He **dealt his friends in**" – he liked to show them off in company. If you had the slightest talent he would bring it out to show it off to the rest.
- He liked nothing better than to bring his **friends together in a group**. It was in environments like that that his early up-bringing with exposure to music came to the fore
 - (a) **mouth organ** would appear from the pocket and "talk" – and this with no musical training whatsoever
 - (b) he had a very good **singing voice** and would entertain us with **calypsos** which he had learnt in the pubs while at Oxford Uni, and which really belonged there, but which he felt could be trotted out in any company.
- One of the highlights of his year was his **fishing trip** with a few "mates" to the shack on the coast far away from civilisation where he could enjoy nature and camaraderie and a few beers at the same time!
- There can be no one here present whose **life hasn't been touched** in some way by Harry.
- "**His smile** was his trade-mark" - (Guy Barber)

HARRY WAS A FAMILY MAN

- **Family was vitally important**
- He came from educated, sporting **parents** of strong moral values. He inherited his charm and his "never-say-die" qualities from them. He was the much-loved **only son** with two **adoring sisters**, Nan and Biffie, whom he teased unmercifully.
- He had tremendous **love for his own children**. He had a **son, Adie**, of whom he was **extremely proud**, and a daughter, **Debbie**, who, he told me once, was "**the light of his life**". This love extended across the generation gap to embrace his golfing mate and **son-in-law, Murray**, his bright **daughter-in-law, Susan**, and to his grandchildren, four lovely girls – **Laura Jane, Kate, Nan and Hannah** - and a **Birrell boy, Luke**.
- One of his great qualities was the **gentleness** with which he handled his family - because he was a gentle-man.
- His **larger family** also included the school family i.e. **St Andrew's College** at which he spent 26 years of his life, boy and man, and also **DSG**, his "sister" school while he was at College, the school which his girl-friends attended, his wife and daughter attended, where his wife was on the staff and Vice Principal. (I refuse to use the term "Second Mistress"). That explains how he came to write the **history of DSG**, a Herculean task for him. And those of you who have read "**Evergreen**" will note how the emphasis is on the People rather than the Institution. And now, he is an **Old Boy of St Albans**, an **Old Boy of St Andrews**, and an **Honorary Old Girl of DSG**

CONCLUSION

- He had a strong **faith in God**, rooted in his childhood. Although he was only Confirmed when he was in his fifties, he had worshipped God, in his own way, all his life by adhering to Christian ethics.
- He was a man **admired and loved by many** - the presence of so many here today bears witness to that. Already there have been letters and messages received from people in far distant places. Members of our family and many friends have **travelled great distances**, from Durban, Ladysmith, Pretoria and Johannesburg, Capetown and places in between, to be here at Harry's "send-off". A large number of you belong, not only to the Andrean family, but to "the school across the valley." He was proud of the mounted cricket ball presented to him on his retirement at a dinner in his honour given by Kingswood College in recognition of his services to Cricket.
- One of the **cleverest things** that Harry ever did was to **select the right wife** for himself. Let us here **pay tribute to Sylvia** – she was strong enough and wise enough to give him his head, to let him have the freedom to devote to his sport and friends. Sylvia was his greatest friend and supporter, his pedestal, his 'home base'.
- **How do you measure success in life?**
 - **It isn't wealth.** Basil Read, Harry's wealthy cousin-in-law, said of him: "Harry might never make money, but there won't be a house in the world he wouldn't be welcome in."
 - **It isn't status.** He was never the Headmaster of the College, nor the Prime Minister of S.A, nor the South African National Rugby Coach. And yet he was known and respected by so many.
 - **Surely success must be that the world is a better place for your having been there?** If that is so, let us remember Harry, then, as a man who has had more than his share of success.