

A personal Tribute to Val Robinson by Alison Baker, former England B and England Assistant Coach



I was 13 years old when Val Robinson arrived as Head of Girls Physical Education (PE) at our school, Stratton School, Biggleswade in 1965. We had heard that Val had played for England at Wembley before she arrived and we were so excited. I cannot find the words to describe the feeling I got when we all went to Wembley that year along with 56,000 other screaming schoolgirls girls ... up and out of their seats every time my PE teacher got the ball and ran with it. I can see her now with the ball at

her stick but her head up looking for the next move or pass. She was an incredible player and I was immensely proud of her. Our school, under Val's teaching, provided 10 out of 11 Bedfordshire Juniors at U16 and U18 levels for my last four years at school. The school teams were very successful and it was great to be a part of that.

In case younger generations reading this don't understand how the international selection system worked in the 1960s and '70s here is a brief overview. Every year you started back at scratch no matter who you were. County trials were the first hurdle and if selected for your County you played all the other counties in your territory. Val played for Hertfordshire which was in the East territory and post-Christmas, after the Counties tournament, the Territorial team would be selected. In January/February each Territory would play every other and after that the England teams were selected for the international matches in March and April. It is quite mind-blowing that Val did that every year for 19 years. Despite this level of commitment to work and play, Val and her husband Gwyn also built their own house in Guilden Morden. There wasn't Google or the internet at those days so lots of self-help books were obtained and apart from plumbing and electrics they did everything else. They worked after school, weekends and holidays and by the end of the 1960s they had a three-bedroomed detached house of which they were understandably and rightly proud.

When I was 16 Val talked to me about her time at Chelsea PE College and its reputation for hockey coaches with Bar West and Biddy Burgum. I didn't want to go to Bedford PE College ... too close to home ... therefore, Chelsea, in Eastbourne, was my college of choice. In my first year most of the 1st XI were either territorial players or full internationals like Shirley Ellis and Helen Jones of Wales. It was a tough group to get into, but I did so by the end of the year. That decision pretty much shaped my hockey career ... getting selected for Sussex, The South and England B. Each year selected and playing against Val in our territorial clashes ...

most of which the East won! The highlight of that time was to be selected as part of the training squad for the International Federation of Women's Hockey Associations (IFWHA) World Cup in 1975 and spending most of the summer break, training against her. Years of playing with her at school paid off because she always tried to beat people and then lay the ball off to someone else to score. I had the best time intercepting her passes to her strikers, knowing her pleasure was always laying a goal on for someone else. That was a real joy for me because I knew her game inside out!

Val won the first ever female BBC *Superstars* in 1979, winning 5 out of 6 events. She was invited back in 1981 and won again. She was forty years old by then – a phenomenal achievement. In 1980, she and Gwyn moved back up north where she then played for Lancashire Central League, the North, England and Great Britain (GB) until 1984. Sadly, Val missed out on the Olympic Games in 1980 due to the boycott, but thanks to The Hockey Museum she was presented with her GB Honours Cap last year which I know she cherished.

In moving north, Val and Gwyn opened the Foxhill Bank Hockey Centre in Accrington. At the Centre, Val did the coaching sessions and Gwyn cooked for the many school, club and county teams that attended over the years. I remember Katie Dodd booking the Berkshire County teams there for one pre-season weekend and we had a great time. It was a very successful business which they developed for their retirement.

During Val's long career my mother did a brilliant job of helping me keep scrapbooks of the many newspaper reports of Val's matches. We carefully dated and labelled each one to document an accurate reflection of her amazing career. When I decided to move to New Zealand (NZ) a few years ago, I was able to donate these scrap books to The Hockey Museum. The books begin with Val's career and finish with mine as Assistant Coach with England. Unfortunately, Val was unable to visit the museum to see them, but she knew they were there. The last time we met

up was at the reunion of former England players held during the Women's World Cup at Lee Valley in 2018. She was a very private person and didn't like a fuss, but I know she really enjoyed meeting up with everyone again.

Two months later we moved to NZ and I began writing blogs to friends about our travels. Val often responded to these by e-mail. After one of them featuring Mount Maunganui, she replied that she and Gwyn had taken a lengthy campervan trip in 2010 for a big family celebration, travelling along the East Cape. This was her reply:

"Before sending this we have looked through some of the photos of our trip and they are so similar to many of those in your blogs. We absolutely loved our stay in Mt. Maunganui, one of our favourite places. Clever clogs that I was, my day always started with 2 laps of the base of the Mt. and alternated swims in the ocean and the harbour. We watched a fly past from the top ... very spectacular. We stayed at camp sites on Ohope beach, Whangamata, Hot Water beach and Hayei. You are so lucky to have these places on your doorstep and we can certainly recommend NZ campsites."

The base of the mount is a 45-minute walk once around! Val would have been in her late 60s in 2010.

I often imagine her running around the mountain whenever we walk there. I will always remember her as an honest, humble, generous person with a hint of mischief lurking at appropriate times. She will be remembered as an outstanding hockey player, a kind thoughtful person and a fantastic role model for aspiring young female athletes. On a personal level, she has been a major influence on my life choices, and I am so glad I was able to tell her recently how I felt, which she later acknowledged had brought her a sense of pride and humility.

Alison Baker 16.02.2022