

# MONICA PICKERSGILL



**M**onica Pickersgill will occupy a unique place in the history of British hockey. She will be recorded as the first president of a fledgling, all-embracing English Hockey Association, having chaired its pre-nuptial year in 1997-8

It was an organisation born the day she took office, bringing together the divergent activities of three long-established governing institutions: the Hockey

Association (men), the All England Women's Hockey Association and the England Mixed Hockey Association.

The final acts of this inaugural, three-year term were to oversee the legislative passage of a revised EHA constitution and welcome her successor, Mike Corby. A re-moulded management and

committee structure was designed to replace an unwieldy, transitional model, build on the successes of the amalgamation and take the game forward into the twenty-first century.

Monica and hockey have been synonymous. No-one has been more devoted to it. No-one has given more, and her contribution will not end merely because her presidential term is over. Already she has been offered new avenues of service joining the unsung ranks of the NHL match delegates. Only the passage of time will place a true perspective on her achievements. This magazine wishes to offer a present and timely tribute as we say:

## Monica Pickersgill – This Is Your Hockey Life

So where did it all begin? Well, not quite at the beginning, for she was born in pre-war Barbados. Hockey began at Sutton Coldfield Girls High School at the tender age of 10. She didn't tell us this, but she must have been a bright girl. In those days you had two goes at your eleven plus, the first when you were in today's equivalent of Year 5. Grammar school at ten meant a first time pass. Quite uncommon and reserved for the sharpest few.

Young players are often inspired by their teachers and coaches. For Monica, the catalyst, perhaps, was a trip to awe-inspiring atmosphere of the magnificent Wembley international, where her own PE teacher was taking the field for England.

From the school teams, she graduated to

Warwickshire U-15s and U-18s. As post-war Britain returned to some sense of normality, school and county sport were to play a significant part in the revival of the nation. Everyone wanted to be involved. Places in selected teams were keenly sought. Again, to get your slot, you had to be smarter than the average. Monica Pickersgill wielded a cultured, slope-curved stick of English ash, backed by a text-book technique.

In those days, there were only two kinds of English professional sportsmen and no women. To make a living from sport you were either a male soccer or cricket player (earning good, but capped wages) or a teacher of PE. With her academic background, Monica was ideally suited to the latter. Development officers had still to reach the embryo of pipe dreams.

So, when she left school in 1951, she headed for Worcester teacher training college. There, between the intensity of lectures, she formed a premier division partnership with Peter, her husband and life-long partner-to-be. Peter, himself no mean sportsman, was privileged to complete professional studies at the then world-acknowledged centre of physical education excellence, Loughborough CPE. He has always been a pillar of support.

Whilst she turned out for the Worcester College team, more a duty than an avenue to preferment, her hockey career was put effectively on ice. Indeed, it remained so during her first teaching appointment, where more time was spent in developing netball.

But Monica could not resist the pull of hockey and, instituted a club career with the relatively (still) unknown Dewsbury & Savile LHC. From there she went to Leeds LHC and eventually to the Wakefield club after a career move to Wakefield Girls High. Her students were to benefit enormously as she pursued Level 1 qualifications both in umpiring and coaching.

Only at that point did Yorkshire begin to appreciate her talents. She was selected to play for the county in 1960 and elected honorary secretary a year later. A twelve year stint as county captain began in 1962.

Selection has always been a mysterious process. Converted by now from a centre-half to a most accomplished full-back, it took the Yorkshire skipper a full seven years, to attain territorial recognition. Monica's international chance came when others would have been pinning their boots to the wall.

Prior to 1971, national selection had been directly from the territorial tournament. Then, an England trial system was introduced. At this inaugural trial,

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John Herbert



she will confess that she didn't do herself justice and suffered the greatest disappointment of her playing career. She became a member of an England reserve list whose services were never required.

It would have been understandable, after such a deflating experience, to sever connections or curtail commitment. Not Monica, who merely relinquished Territorial captaincy to guide the next generation in the North B team. As one job ended, so she found another (or should we say 'founder nuther?'). First ever chairman of a fledgling North Schools HA, she led them diligently for 13 years, acting as team manager, and becoming vice-president of North women in the process.

During her term of office, she masterminded an administrative re-shuffle. It was a vital move that ensured the continuing flow of local authority finances into hockey.

From then on, the progression is towards the pinnacle: President Northern Counties (1989), then president AEHWA (1992). When the EHA started life in 1997, she was appointed unanimously as its first chairman, becoming president a year later. Her task was to cement the merger between the three strands of English hockey and draw them co-operatively together. Her finest achievement?

"Not so", says Monica. The hardest part, she reckoned was to bring the AEHWA united to the negotiating table. She had to build upon the explorations of women's Bar Holland and her men's counterpart, Phil Appleyard.

"In the light of events, this was hard to deliver. Phil Appleyard was brilliant, but he could be a bit of a bully, and some of the women didn't like him. To some extent we were all being driven by the threat of a Sports Council funding freeze, but the amalgamation package came with strings attached: Milton Keynes and a national stadium."

"We had our own fully functioning organisation based elsewhere. It was probably more cost-effective than the HA. We also had a team of respected officials, including Maggie Souyave as national coach. In some aspects, we were ahead of our time."

"Whilst both the HA and AEHWA were set to dismantle their administrative bases, the HA were established in Buckinghamshire. Knowing that existing AEHWA officials didn't want to apply for jobs at Milton Keynes made the decision all that much harder. Though I got on well with Stephen Baines on a personal level, the majority of women did not want him as chief executive. Phil Appleyard had brought Stephen into hockey, believed fully in his talents and was determined that he would get the top job.

"The women came very close to an untimely exit from negotiations and if I have a crowning achievement, it was to see those discussions pull back from the brink of collapse. Then, when we did get together, we discovered that we knew virtually nothing about each other. Something I had always thought silly, and was determined to redress."

Suddenly what she was saying became crystal clear. It was a few years ago that a Yorkshire women's

club 2nd X1 were threatened with a fine. Why? Because the men's county championship umpire they had persuaded to help out "was not qualified to umpire women's division 5 league matches". The enormity of Monica's contribution hit home.

Dammit, in Huddersfield, where she lives, a hardened local knows the difference in accent between Honley and Slaithwaite. It's known as the culture of the valleys. At least they speak a version of the same language.

A century of single sex hockey had left us not only with a gender barrier, but a language one as well. Monica Pickersgill, passionate for togetherness, regarded our historical divergence as unfortunate, our future unity inevitable. Her judgement, on every count, has been proved correct.

So what does she think will be her legacy? Her face adopted the wry smile of modesty. "I hope I've left behind an organisation that is better equipped for the challenges ahead. We've put in place the constitutional changes that were inevitable and now have a truly unified sport. I can look with some nostalgia to the great Wembley experience of the past, and perhaps a job only partially complete is to regenerate interest and support for the great occasion. There were harsh lessons from holding the women's Olympic qualifier, but I'm sure we've learned from our mistakes. Hockey has an exciting future if we have courage to be positive and grasp the opportunities."

Unquestionably, these were the dynamic, up-beat qualities that led hockey to choose Monica Pickersgill as its *First Lady*. She has been a president with the common touch, at home whether watching a major international event or the club juniors. The high profile may have come to an end. The real story is far from over.



**President Monica with vice-president Mike Corby. Mike has now taken over as president.**

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**Monica seated to the right of the then FIH president, Etienne Glichitch, at the AEHWA's centenary dinner in Sheffield.**

