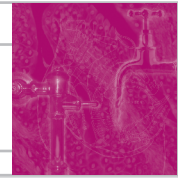


# My sporting life



## James Drife

As I write, England have just got through to the Rugby World Cup Final, to face either Argentina or South Africa. Suddenly everyone here is a rugby enthusiast. Only a few weeks ago the team was being written off as a bunch of has-beens and no-hopers. When it comes to sporting loyalty, English fans are as changeable as English weather. Our newspapers are worse. The semi-final against France gave them an excuse for re-running stories of European military campaigns going back to the eleventh century AD.

With excitement mounting, I feel I should pretend to have a deep knowledge of the game but the sad truth is that I was never much good at sport. In Scotland, fortunately for me, entry to medical school was not linked to prowess on the field. Things may have been different elsewhere back in the fifties and sixties. I've heard stories of interview committees in London teaching hospitals with lists of fifteen positions to be filled, but that was a long time ago.

It wasn't that I lacked motivation or team spirit. It's just that when it comes to flying objects, whether round or oval, I'm no good. The reasons are genetic. I come from a long line of cack-handed incompetents on my father's side. There ought to be a medical name, similar to 'dyslexia', for such familial disability. At school I should have been labelled as suffering from *anophthalmia spherio* ('no eye for a ball') or *hysterical oculomanual dyskinesia* ('Catch it, you idiot!'). What I needed was counselling, not verbal abuse.

Heaven knows I tried to develop sporting skills. I spent hours studying *Alf Gover's Cricket Tutor* and bowling at a wicket in the back garden. Never having seen a real cricket match, I didn't realise that it helps to cut the grass first. No wonder my googly didn't work. I persisted, though, and had a brief career as scorer for the first eleven. And an even briefer career as a batsman one day when only ten boys turned up.

In our part of Scotland, the main game was football, known to some as soccer. Our small village gave the world some soccer greats and – listen to this – one of our schoolteachers was the sister-in-law of Bill Shankly, legendary manager of Liverpool. I drop this fact into conversation whenever I go there and it once got me a round of awestruck applause at the start of a lecture at Liverpool Medical Institution.

For us, rugby was the gentleman's game. In the UK it has strange social connotations and an uneven geographical distribution. In both Scotland and Wales its heartland is in the south of the country, in small towns that have shrunk now that industry has moved away. The grim landscape of the Welsh valleys has been transformed. No more slag heaps and not many people. Where do the players come from now, I wonder?

My mother, a Welsh girl, used to go to Cardiff Arms Park in the days when the grandstand was made of corrugated iron. It must have had great acoustics. When she told me about it I was unsure whether the attraction was the game itself or the singing of the crowd. All those tenors, James! The Arms Park has now been rebuilt and rotated through ninety degrees, and looks like a cruise liner beached in the middle of Cardiff.

But my closest family connection with the game is that my daughter Jenny, before entering medicine, was in the sixth form at Rugby School. (Did you know, by the way, that 'Rugby' is a Viking word? The Norsemen invaded England in 865AD and many of their settlements had names ending in '-by'. The town of Rugby was about as far south as they got. I like the idea that a game with a Scandinavian name has spread all over the southern hemisphere.)

Anyway, Jenny spent two years living near the playing field where it all began, now marked with the famous plaque commemorating William Webb Ellis and his 'fine disregard for the rules of football' in 1823. Although the story is widely regarded as apocryphal the place remains a site of pilgrimage and very pretty it is too, especially at sunset.

I've delayed writing the last paragraph until the end of the second semi-final. Of course I knew our opponents would be the Springboks, but I had to be sure. Thank goodness we'll be spared the English papers re-running pictures of the Falklands war. It should be a good game, and by the time you read this, the result will be history. What can I say? The best team won, and there's always next time.

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