

“I’M NOT BOTHERED ABOUT THE CLUB BEING SUCCESSFUL IN TERMS OF WINNING EVERY CUP...I THINK OUR PRIORITY IS TO MAKE SURE CRICKET CONTINUES”

Profile of Roger Littlewood by Matt Ottey

Roger Littlewood is a total cricket man. I spent two hours in his company one Saturday and was fascinated by his experiences within the game. The topics of conversation varied from Nortonthorpe Cricket Club’s flirtation with extinction in the 90s to his ‘one glorious season’ in the game, via an uncomfortable tale of taking to the crease minus a box.



Roger was always going to be cricket-mad. Brought up in a cricketing family, his father was a good cricketer and so was his uncle, both playing semi-professionally after the war. “I’m certain that had it not been for the war, he would have played at a professional standard,” Roger recalls. “My father and my uncle both played for Yorkshire Colts, and were subsequently made lifetime members of Yorkshire County Cricket Club.”

His father encouraged Roger to play cricket despite only having partial sight in one eye. “I remember my father used to tell me about this Indian called the Nawab of Pataudi who played Test cricket and was a good batsman even though he only had one eye. He used to say: ‘If the Nawab of Pataudi can do it, so can you!’”

And so began a long and successful career in cricket, which saw Roger start off in Clayton West’s junior side before playing for Nortonthorpe, Cumberworth and the national Civil Service team.

Unlike some cricketers, Roger’s choice in who he played for was decided by where he lived, opting for which ever team was local. So, he decided to join Nortonthorpe: “At that time if you lived in a particular area you were encouraged to play for your local team, and Nortonthorpe had a very good first and second team in that period; in fact, one year we won the league-and-cup double.”

Roger adds: “I never had any aspirations of playing cricket at a higher level because I enjoyed it so much. At that time if you lived in a particular area you were encouraged to play for your local team. So I went up to Nortonthorpe and got in the second team, which was a good side; then I progressed into the first team and never looked back really - I was in the first team all my life, more or less.”

After spending a few years at Cumberworth, Roger returned to Nortonthorpe, but just around the corner was his 'one glorious season'. Roger explains: "At the time I was working as a civil servant with the district valuers office for the Inland Revenue, who had their own national team, and if you did well in the trials you went on to play for the Civil Service's national side." After being called up to the side a week before the opening game, Roger went on to play all season, and clearly never looked back.

"I was playing at a semi-professional level against teams like Durham, who were a minor counties team at the time, Lancashire seconds, Warwickshire seconds, Coventry, Oxford and Cambridge universities and my first game was against Scotland."

However, Roger is clearly modest about the achievement: "The only reason a village-green cricketer like myself could play was because they treated you with respect, because they'd never come across you before. I mean all the batsmen were playing their strokes along the floor, there was no hoiking the ball over long-on or getting your head up and walloping it away over cow corner. You were playing against top-quality players who were on the fringe of county sides."

Of course these things don't last, and when Roger left the civil service to try and better his career, he sacrificed his place in the team. So his cricket was to be played from this point on at Nortonthorpe, and in time he formed a loyalty to the club that is rarely seen in local cricket: "I'm committed to Nortonthorpe, it's part of my life. I later became a trustee of the deed of the Norton Estate. The fact that my father worked at the mill, and we lived in Bagden Hall for a short spell when I was little - it all means that I'm inextricably linked with it whether you like it or not, and that's what I love about it - the fact that the club's given me a lot of enjoyment and now I can put something back, to try and keep it going, and long may that continue. And when I'm dead and gone I'm hoping that the club prospers."

Roger is clearly passionate about the survival of the club and the preservation of its local heritage. In the 1990s when the club was experiencing severe problems on and off the field, it was he who appeared in the local paper appealing for players. "We were turning up with seven on a regular basis and getting panned; we only had one team - the second team couldn't fulfil any fixtures and were fined heavily. And we just managed to keep our heads above water."

"I'm not bothered about the club being successful in terms of winning every cup; I don't think that's the most important thing. I think our priority is to make sure cricket continues down there." And Roger is crystal clear on how he would like to see the club go on.

"The success here has come from local lads playing for their local team, not drafting in folks from all over the place. The players in the Drakes League don't form any sort of loyalty. Yes, they're a better standard but they'll just go to which ever team's paying the most. We need a nucleus of loyal players which we have. It's the camaraderie and the enjoyment that comes first."

However, Roger isn't sure whether or not he'll be experiencing the enjoyment of playing in the coming season: "The spirit's willing but the body's not - I suffered a bit last season." And although he's under pressure to say farewell to his playing days, it's likely he'll continue. "My wife's saying it's about time I packed in, and it probably is, but I think like all cricketers if you genuinely like the game you love it."

It's this love for the game that sums up his commitment to Nortonthorpe. From spending only a couple of hours with Roger, it's blindingly obvious that he cares about the game and his club with passion, intensity and a ferocious loyalty that is, and most certainly has been, an example of the extraordinary resolve at this small village cricket club.