

Obituary: John Cornwell

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I was very sorry to learn of the death, aged 80, of John Cornwell, who more than anyone was responsible for me leading a life of table tennis since early 1963. I think I first went along to an evening session run at the old Cambridge YMCA by John & Margaret Cornwell (herself a decent player), with Les Constable and possibly John Loker helping, and I soon transferred to the packed Saturday session, which started in the afternoon and carried on, with open practice, late into the evening. Hooked on TT, with John's expert help I progressed to playing in the 1st Division of the Cambridge League and for the county within less than 2 years of taking up the game.

As a coach John had a quiet, wise authority and charisma, and taught for then very advanced (reversed sandwich) technique, with a square-stance & early through-the-ball counter-hitting style/timing on both wings, and a whipped forehand loop. As the still relatively young former top Cambridgeshire champion (and highly England ranked player) who had to retire early owing to injury (bad back I think), he was locally held in awe, and I can still remember with amazement how one evening, with no practice but with excellent ball control and placement, he was still able to overcome the pimpled bat defence of the other legendary Cambs player, John Thurston, something like 21-16. Certainly when he was 'controlling' to pupils, he constantly gave you the near perfect ball and never looked like making a mistake. He was so patient, enthusiastic and encouraging.

John not only coached locally at the YM on Saturdays, and a bit mid-week, but he was administratively/organisationally active in Cambridgeshire and in the wider region – I can remember him running regional sessions with Ken Marchant, and working alongside Jack & Elsie Carrington and Harry Venner on ETTA 'roadshows'. He knew personally the big names in TT.

He and Margaret were also heavily involved in running Cambridge and county teams, and the Cambridge and Cambridgeshire Closed, and SE Midlands League tournaments and the Cambs Open at the Cambridge Corn Exchange. And John wasn't just at the control desk: he would get stuck into setting up lights, putting up tables etc. Before the days when we got too concerned by health & safety, I remember being terrified watching him perched upright on the top of a very high 4 legged ladder/stool, stretching up to fix lights to the ceiling of the YMCA hall (no doubt with John Loker helping), ready for some big match! The Cornwells also organised trips to outside open tournaments and international matches.

Unfortunately John and Margaret had other interests besides TT (I think he had also played football for Cambridge City and been very good at other sports), and were to move on to take a big administrative involvement in golf and bowls. This move away from table tennis began while I was still a junior, but probably influenced by John's example I also began making a transition from player to coach without consciously deciding to, so that by around 1970 I took over from John as Cambs County Coaching Secretary, and around 1973/74 as Cambs National Councillor.

I probably last saw John in the 70's, but a few years ago I am pleased that I did phone to thank him for all he done for me, and countless others, as a great coach. He seemed pleased. So many other former pupils are still involved in table tennis, such as (I was reminded just this weekend) Debbie Evans (nee Clarke), now living near Hertford. Since that call I have 'phoned and e-mailed him several times, the last being soon after Christmas to tell John about the sudden death of Alan Burgess. Always he remained calm, clear-headed, polite and interested (he enquired after Johnny Leach last time), each time promising to invite me to a reunion meal of past Cambridge TT enthusiasts, though this never happened! John's passing, though inevitable, is bit of a shock, but we have very fond memories and so much to be grateful to him for.

Ken Muhr (ex. Cambridge YMCA player and coach)

I have very similar memories of John and Margaret Cornwell, they were both great people.

I started off down the same route as Ken, going along to the YMCA with loads of kids aged from 11-18 at 2.30pm on Saturdays. Once we had been sorted out into those who could play or wanted to play, we then went at 4pm when John Loker, Les Constable and Keith Chapman were there to lend a hand. From this group, Paul Chisnall, Alan Ponder, Dennis Collinson?, Carole Chapman and myself emerged as the first Junior County team the following autumn and spent our first year being beaten 10-0 or 9-1, by the likes of Chester Barnes and Lesley Bell of Essex. John and Margaret used to take us to away matches and I think my husband Keith did as well. Happy days!

John was a marvellous coach. I can remember the push defence shot and we all learned that before going onto the forehand drive. John used to demonstrate by swinging his bat in a J shape, then he would get us to serve onto a hankie placed strategically on the table. When the Carringtons came to Cambridge they used to say they could pick out Cambridge people because we did not move our feet very much!

I met up with John in The Spire Hospital in Cambridge about eight years ago when we had both had hip replacements. We used to practice walking together up and down the corridors.

I think he had ankylosing spondylitis in his 30s and that caused him much pain in the neck and spine. His sporting career and general good physical condition probably helped him to cope with the problem better than most people.

The world has lost a lovely man, but his memory will live on for many years to come.

With best wishes,

Ruth Puddick (Buttle)

More tributes for John Cornwell:

John also coached at Bottisham Youth club or Village College as he coached me during the late 60's.

Tony Whiting

I remember John and Margaret so very well. Slim, athletic, cool, calm, insightful, and enormously helpful are words that come immediately to mind. I remember when I wanted to learn how to play TT my father drove me to the YMCA one Saturday morning, from Kneesworth, and Mr Cornwell came over to greet us, smiled such a friendly smile, and convinced my Dad that I would be in good hands, I could learn to play at the YMCA, and I would be fine until later in the afternoon if left in his care.

I distinctly remember being taught, by John, the "backhand push" on that first day. Both John and Margaret were instrumental in the direct and indirect enjoyment of many, many people.

Carl Dellar

Very sorry to hear this although I had seen John occasionally in Cambridge and could see he was struggling a bit health wise. The time has flown past since all those years ago when I first came into contact with John. Ken gave such a lovely tribute to John and many of us will accord with all he said.

Tony Littlechild

Ken Muhr's tribute was very moving, as John (and Margaret) were responsible for sharing their passion for table tennis with so many juniors at that time. And I would guess that even those who do not still play or coach the game would have attended the table tennis at London 2012, having been inspired in the 60s and 70s at the YMCA.

Debbie Evans (née Clarke)

I also went thru' the Sat coaching sessions with John and Margaret and my first League team was YMCA 5 with Margaret and Maurice Beckford. I then graduated to assisting with the sessions with the likes of Steve Andrews and Alan Ponder and the Puddicks-Keith and John. The sessions were always packed as I think all were enthused by John's patience and enthusiasm for the game.

Sid Dunster

I had heard from Steve Andrews of the sad news last Saturday. Everything Ken Muhr said about John was absolutely spot on. He was always so calm, I don't think I ever saw him get angry, and he always had so much time for everybody whatever their ability. He truly was an inspiration as a person and a coach to everybody, a wonderful man. I moved to Norfolk in 1980 to teach at Gresham's school and only saw him a couple of times since moving, the last about 5 years ago when I went back to meet up with him and others such as Paul Chisnall, Ron Nunn, Keith Chapman. We had a great evening talking about old times, the YMCA had a lot to answer for!!

Alan Ponder

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