

Obituary: Bobby Stevens – a great player and mentor

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Posted On: April 27, 2015



Bobby Stevens

I first came into contact with Bobby Stevens in 1957, when, as an impressionable 10-year-old, I was taken to watch a county table tennis match between Essex and Middlesex. Little did I know at that time, the impact that this man would have on the future direction of table tennis in Essex, serving as a catalyst for the development of juniors into players of international standard.

Bobby took up the sport of table tennis at the age of 16 as a hard bat player. Having already established himself as a footballer and cricketer of the highest quality, it came as little surprise that he was able to apply his skills to a new sport. His commitment to table tennis, together with the introduction of modern day sponge bat technology, enabled him to become a real force within the sport.

Bobby was quick to acquire an exemplary technique, making him one of the finest players to watch. His poise, balance and footwork were the envy of teammates and opponents alike. Bobby's exemplary standards were not limited to his considerable playing abilities. He was fastidious with regard to his personal appearance and was, without doubt, the smartest player ever to have walked on to a table.

Bobby's many successes in table tennis are too numerous to list although the two that define the pinnacles of his achievement in the sport came in the English Closed Championships of 1962 and the Middlesex Open Men's Singles event of 1965.

In winning the English Closed Men's Singles, Bobby became the first unseeded player to win the title. This achievement included a semi-final win against then England No 1 Ian Harrison, a game that was televised by the BBC and which depicted table tennis at its finest.

I was not present to see Bobby win his national title in 1962 although it was my privilege to be present to share in his success at the 1965 Middlesex Open Championships. The Swedish national team were touring at the time of the event and fielded a strong contingent, including European No 1 Kjell Johansson and Swedish No 3 Karl Bernhardt. Johansson's defeat in an earlier round took nothing away from Bobby's performance as he defeated Bernhardt in the final to take the title.

During his lifetime, Bobby epitomised everything that was good about the sport of table tennis. He remained passionate about the development of junior players, giving freely of his time and effort to challenge and inspire them. Bobby's individual contribution to the promotion and development of table tennis in the county of Essex was without equal. His commitment to the sport, together with his tactical and technical knowledge, enabled him to lead the county to their first national title in 1965, playing alongside three junior players whom he nurtured from an early age.

In closing and by way of personal tribute to Bobby, there are perhaps many things that I could and should have said about this great man but from the time he signed my autograph book at the age of 10 until the sad day when he passed away, I know that I could never have had a better mentor.

Bobby guided me through my playing career and more importantly, he taught me how to conduct and present myself both on and off the table. I shall always remember with gratitude, the words of advice that he offered to me as a young and developing player: "Be polite to those who you pass on the way to the top as you will pass them again on the way down." How true these words were.

Rest in peace Bobby. You will never be forgotten.

* The funeral service is at 10.30am on Friday 1st May at the Forest Park Cemetery & Crematorium, Forest Road, Hainault, Essex, IG6 3HP (Tel: 020 8501 2236).

After the service, there will be refreshments at The Moby Dick Public House, Whalebone Lane North, Chadwell Heath, Romford, RM6 6QU (Tel: 0208 590 9524).

Stuart Gibbs (President, Essex County Table Tennis Association)
April 27, 2015

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