

Tribute to Percy Rowe

Good morning to you all. I have a feeling that the large majority of the assembled throng here today are present because of their association with the great sport of lawn bowls, an association that Percy had for most of his life, as a player and administrator.

It's ironic that it takes occasions such as this to recount great memories and pour out abundant tributes, recalling great memories of Percy and acknowledging his vast input to the sport, his service to county and to his family whom he adored.

I had the pleasure of knowing Percy all my life and first watched him playing bowls against my father in EBA county competitions. I was only seven or eight years old and not of sufficient years to be allowed to enter as in those days you had to be fourteen years of age. Percy was a stylish player, at the top of his game in those days; he was great to watch: a great competitor and one of the best players in the county. In my first year of entering, having attained the ripe old age of fourteen, I was drawn against Percy. It was the first of many encounters, some at the Rookery and the others at the wonderful Debenham Cherry Tree pub green which in those days was one of the fastest greens in the county. Percy's partners in those days were the likes of John List, Bill Dolby, Jeff Mutimer, Keith Bloomfield, Stan Dodson and a really good quality nucleus of club members who often reached the latter stages of competitions.

Percy had first stepped onto the green of the Red Lion and his grounding as a youngster in an old men's game was thorough. He was told to lead for five years, under the direction of the elder statesman of the village, who paid his subs. "There was no choice in the matter," Percy told me for a feature in the Evening Star newspaper I had written, "they wanted to skip and that was that. They said they wouldn't pay my subscription if I didn't lead."

Percy entered County competitions for the first time in 1965 and debuted in the Middleton Cup in 1972, a year in which he won his first Suffolk title, in pairs, partnered by Stan Dodson. In the top flight of county bowls, he played number three to Ken Blackman and it was not long before Percy was a regular Middleton skip.

This is where my link with Percy was established.....

At the age of seventeen, I played my first Middleton Cup games and my aspiration was to lead for no other than Percy Rowe. This came true over the next few seasons. He was the ideal skip: encouraging, vocal and a great role model for encouraging youngsters, a trait he never lost. We enjoyed playing together and such was our mutual keenness and love of representing Suffolk, we frequently phoned each other during the week to talk about the previous match, the memorable shots, the conversions, near misses and lucky wicks, and to anticipate who we might be drawn against in the next one. Our rink of me lead, Fred Finch, Graham Diggins and Percy was balanced and proficient and such was his enthusiasm, you could never bowl a bad wood. He would run up after his running bowls and we laughed about his body swerve antics. If he had a favourite fixture it was always the local derby between Suffolk and Norfolk, particularly as he played at Diss indoors and had great banter with them. Indeed Percy almost won indoor national titles from Diss, being a singles semi-finalist, fours semi-finalist and mixed fours runner-up. In 1979, he had the honour of playing against perhaps the greatest ever bowler, David Bryant, in national singles, losing 21-11 in the semi-final.

After his Middleton Cup career as a player was concerned, Percy became team manager and steered us to runners up to the mighty Cumbria. Little old Suffolk beat Kent in the semi-final and we felt anything was possible.

For most people in the modern era, Percy will be remembered as Mr Suffolk. He was a stalwart as secretary and did much to accommodate those who played both codes. Whilst being a pioneer of the sport, he also loved the traditions and fought hard as many of us did to keep the national finals at Worthing. He even had a shirt printed to that effect, with the inscription, emblazoned upon the back "Say no to Leamington." Ironically, Percy and Pat Gilbert qualified in the Senior Pairs in the first year the finals were played at Leamington but he was very proud to play there.

Percival George Rowe was born in Clyde Villa, High Street, Debenham on 22nd April, 1944, the second child of Violet and Samuel Rowe. At school, he loved all sports and volunteered to help the sports master, marking out pitches and getting equipment out ready for lessons, particularly if this helped him to skive lessons he didn't like. His greatest love at the time was darts and the mathematics involved made him quite the human calculator. This love of calculating was particularly useful in his employment at Henry Abbott's where he worked his way up from delivery boy to manager of four stores. According,

to Joanne, he was very fond of purveying cheese. At Christmas time, he would disguise himself in full Santa Claus regalia in the shop, have a chat with young children on his knee, ask them what they would like for Christmas. He did this for several years until one young child couldn't contain his excitement and left Father Christmas with a very wet knee as a festive thankyou.

When his employment at Henry Abbott's came to an end, Percy managed a newsagents in Ipswich and finished his working life at Aspals Cider, another job he very much enjoyed.

Football was another love; he played three times at weekends. Allegedly, in the days of the leather football, Percy wore a hairnet to control his flowing locks. On one occasion, he powerfully headed the ball and the laces of the leather football entangled themselves in the hairnet and away they both went. It was never located. Cricket, badminton and snooker were also competitive hobbies. He obviously had a good eye and good co-ordination: qualities that helped him become a great bowler. He qualified for indoor and outdoor national finals, not just at the beloved Worthing but also at Mortlake and Leamington.

Percy was over the moon to meet Joanne in 1993 and married three years later. To their delight they had two wonderful daughters, Amy (November 98) and Kirsty (August 2001) who have followed in their parents' footsteps to enjoy bowling. Percy was thrilled by their progress and prowess, watched them proudly and celebrated gleefully when they qualified together for the Junior Pairs national play offs. Another highlight was watching Joanne reach the final of the Women's National Pairs in 2022, partnered by Tracey Johnson.

The family enjoyed traditional Christmases shared with Joanne's parents, Janet and Fred, and Percy would make the living room into his Santa's Grotto. He would also bake lots of goodies such as meringues, quiches, mince pies, sausage rolls, Christmas cake, Christmas pudding and he made a very good tart.

Family holidays were always a highlight and usually spent at Worthing, a place that still holds precious memories.

Much to the dismay of Kirsty and Amy, Percy had never felt inclined to have a dog, but he relented and chose a two week old puppy to join the family unit in January 2022. Sonny as he was called became this man's best friend and did not leave his side.

When Amy and Mark got together, just after acquiring Sonny, Percy fully welcomed Mark and his family into 'Famille Rowe'. He watched Mark and his boys playing bowls, indoors and out whenever possible.

In conclusion, it is fitting that so many friends and fellow bowlers have attended this thanksgiving of Percy's life today because Percy was well known and respected at club, county, Eastern counties and national levels. He was honoured with the Bowls England Order of Merit, a truly well deserved accolade. We shall remember him for being kind, loving, of generous spirit and someone whom it's been a pleasure to know.

When I was a schoolteacher, our school aim was to positively affect the lives of all who attended. Percy very much did that, in family life and in his beloved sport.

On behalf of Joanne, Kirsty and Amy, family and friends, may I thank you for being here and celebrating a very special life.