

## **Blundell's Speech Day – 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2009**

Headmaster, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is great to be back at a school where I have so many fond memories and a place that has shaped my career. In fact when I arrived at Blundell's in 1976 I dreamed of either playing rugby for Wales against England at Cardiff Arms Park (now the Millennium Stadium) or to play cricket for England at Lord's.

Sadly the rugby dream never happened, but the hours and hours spent practicing and playing against the likes of Clifton College, Sherborne, King's Taunton and MCC on this field, and the help and support I received from the teaching staff including Mr Fursdon, Terry Barwell, the cricket professional Ernie Steele and the late Ted Crowe helped develop my cricket career.

I remember my Sixth Form years much more from playing in an unbeaten cricket team than my academic results. In fact one of teachers thought the only thing I passed during my time at Blundell's was a rugby ball! I have to say that is not strictly true, but my focus was always sport.

On leaving Blundell's I signed professional terms for Glamorgan and in 1991 I was fortunate to realise my ambition of being selected as an opening batsman for England in the Fourth Test of the Series. Unfortunately the tourists that summer were the West Indians who had four of the most fearsome fast bowlers of all time, which was always likely to be a slightly different proposition to experiences I had here, on 'Big Field.'

The West Indies had beaten England in every Series for the past 20 years, and had 'whitewashed' England in the previous three, but in 1991 England managed to beat the great West Indian Team in the first match at Headingley, and had an outstanding draw at Lord's when it rained for 5 days, before being beaten at Trent Bridge.

I was drafted into the Team for the next Test at Edgbaston due to an injury to Michael Atherton and proudly walked out to bat wearing the '3 lions' for the first time in my career. Unfortunately I scored 3 in the first innings and did not do as well as that in

the second! We also lost the Test match and I honestly felt that my first appearance in England colours would also be my last!

However, the selectors kept faith with me and chose me for the Fifth and final Test match of the Series which stood at two one to the West Indies.

In those days England reported for duty on Tuesday morning at the ground to begin preparations for the Thursday start. All of the players would have nets, fielding practice and teams meetings over the next 48 hours before the game began. It was also a chance to look at the pitch we would be playing on. Our Manager Micky Stewart had wanted a slow pitch which would spin to negate the West Indian attack and help 'King of the Jungle' Phil Tufnell. However, the groundsman had not taken a blind bit of notice and prepared a rock hard surface for the West Indians!

At 10:30 on a bright Thursday morning at 'The Oval' our Captain Graham Gooch won the toss and decided to bat. We had 30 minutes to prepare to play against the fearsome foursome of Curtly Ambrose, Courtney Walsh, Patrick Patterson and the great Malcolm Marshall.

So I began to put on my pads, chest protector, arms guards, thigh pads and helmet by which time I heard the bell ring outside the changing room informing us it was 10:55am and the umpires were on their way. We then heard a huge roar from a capacity crowd as Sir Vivian Richards in his 121<sup>st</sup> and final game for the West Indies led his team onto the field.

Graham Gooch looked at me and said in his commanding voice; "Come on Hughie – let's go and get 'em!" By this time adrenaline was pumping around my body and felt sick with nerves, but when I got out into the sunshine and onto the pitch and heard the roar of the crowd I felt a good deal better. That was until I reached the non strikers end and saw Curtly Ambrose marking his run.

For those of you who remember, Curtly was about 6' 8" tall and bowled the ball at around 90 miles per hour, and was the most feared fast bowler in the early 1990's. I had played quite a bit against him in County cricket, and before he delivered the ball

he tended to shake his wrist. At Glamorgan we reckoned that one shake of the wrist before he bowled meant he had probably had a late night the night before and was not particularly interested. Two shakes of the wrist meant it was a slow track and he would go through the motions, three shakes and he was interested and four you knew he meant business.

At 11:00 Curtly got to the end of his run and charged into 'Goochie' and as he jumped up to deliver the ball I decided to find out what sort of mood he was in, and counted his shakes: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5! He released his 'loosener' at over 90 miles per hour which hit the rock hard surface and went past Gooch's chin like an exocet missile on its way to wicketkeeper, Jeffrey Dujon, who was standing half way back to the boundary. Suddenly my nerves returned!

Curtly is a man of few words, but on that occasion he turned around and looked at me with a grin from ear-to-ear and said: "Have a nice day man!"

It was a painful, but memorable experience, which was born of the opportunities I had at Blundell's to spend hours and hours practicing and playing a sport I was passionate about, and laid the foundations for me to achieve my ambition.

Blundell's not only provided me with this opportunity, but also taught me the values of resilience and excellence, and the importance of teamwork and enjoyment.

I well remember arriving at Blundell's as an anxious 12 year old boy from Wales who knew no one, had rarely been away from home, and wondered how on earth I could survive until the Upper Sixth! It was tough to begin with, and called for a certain amount of resilience to grit the teeth, get through some challenging times, and thereafter thrive in this environment. I was of course helped by the fact that Wales had a great rugby team at the time and I won a significant amount of money from my fellow pupils from beating England which I duly spent in the tuck shop and golf balls, from my housemaster Mr Swarbrick, which I very quickly lost at Tiverton Golf Club!

It was this resilience which I had to draw upon 6 years ago when I was diagnosed with throat Cancer. As you can imagine it was a devastating blow for me personally

and my family, but again it was grit the teeth time, and face the challenges head on. I have been very fortunate, but the resilience I developed at Blundell's helped me through the ordeal.

The school also provides the foundation for its pupils to strive for excellence. I remember being appointed a School Monitor and being terrified at the prospect of reading Latin Prayer on a Saturday morning. I was so worried that I would mess it up that I spent weeks rehearsing the words which are still burnt into my brain – Pater noster etc...!

In striving to be the best you can be I can think of no one that I have ever worked with inside or outside cricket that prepares, practices, and trains harder or more professionally than Kevin Pietersen. Now KP and I may not have agreed with everything over the past 6 months or so, but his appetite to be the best cricketer in the world is insatiable and his commitment to preparing himself for cricket matches is extraordinary and an example to any aspiring international sportsman or woman.

The importance of teamwork should not be underestimated in the values you take away from Blundell's. Whether you are part of the choir, represent your house or play sport for school, the bond you have with your friends is very special. I mentioned earlier that under Mr Fursdon we had a very good cricket team at Blundell's in the early 1980s, and every time I meet members of that team we recall very special times.

Earlier this week Michael Vaughan announced his retirement from cricket after 16 years as a professional cricketer. He is the most successful England Captain of all time winning 26 Test matches whilst in charge, and it is interesting to note the remarkable bond between him and the Players he led to victory in the 2005 'Ashes' Series against Australia. They experienced success against one of the greatest sports Teams of all time, and have memories of the matches and celebrations which followed the victory which stay with them for the rest of their lives.

As you can imagine preparations are in full swing for the 2009 'npower Ashes Series' which begins in Cardiff next week, and provides an opportunity for the current generation of England cricketers to become national heroes.

As part of those preparations the England Team went to 'Flanders Fields' last week to learn about the sacrifices many people have made for their country and the leadership and bravery shown by remarkable men. Although the press focus earlier this week were not on these issues, I can assure you every member of the team was moved by the ceremonies they attended, the stories they heard and were filled with a sense of pride in our nation, and determination to work as a Team to face the challenge of Australia. It promises to be a great summer of cricket from two highly competitive Teams. If the quality of cricket and excitement matches the 2005 Series I am sure we are in for a treat.

Similarly, you will have a special bond with those you have shared your lives with at Blundell's. It is a great environment, a wonderful school, and you have been given a terrific start in life by your teachers and parents.

Before I finish, and join the Andy Murray 'fan club', I would like to wish all pupils leaving today all the very best for the next stages of your lives. There are some difficulties in the 'big wide world' at the moment, but also some great opportunities. Set yourselves some challenges which are achievable but will stretch you, and chase them down with enthusiasm and vigour using the lessons you have learned from your time at Blundell's.

Good luck and thank you.