

Brian Anthonie Sparks, MBE, 1931-2013

My father was a professional sportsman and a life-long educator.

He always described himself as a Llanharan Boy, but spent most of his life in Bridgend. After education at Cowbridge Grammar School, he worked briefly on the railways. National Service in the RAF followed. Glamorgan Constabulary for four years was the next stop.

But this list doesn't do justice to what my father was about at that time. A talented sportsman in many sports, he began to focus on rugby. First at Pontypool, then Bridgend and finally Neath, where he played over 100 games as a member of the renowned Welsh All Blacks pack of the 1950s. Three British Lions in the pack, yet my father was routinely described as aggressive, ebullient, rampaging and robust.

Cliff Morgan in his autobiography wrote that he never had a good game against my father. When I asked dad about that, he smilingly said that Cliff was easy compared to Carwyn James, on whom he could never lay a finger.

Denied a first Welsh cap against the 1953 New Zealand All Blacks by selectorial shenanigans, he eventually won 7 caps for Wales and also played for the Barbarians. He played for Wales in an uncapped match (imagine that these days) against the 1955 Lions – the answer to a favourite quiz question of his; when did Wales first play rugby in white?

At this point he decided to move from the police to teaching and he and my mother relocated to Devon while he attended St Luke's College, and led them to a Middlesex Sevens triumph. Overlooked by the Welsh selectors again, he opted to get paid for doing what he loved and "went North" in 1957 to Halifax Rugby League.

Four years later, after captaining Halifax and being capped at rugby league for Wales, he returned home. In rugby terms my father has written he was at this time treated as a "leper" in Wales – banned from all rugby contact, all clubhouses, all grounds. It was explained to him by the WRU that as it was his

choice to “forsake the amateur ethos” he had to pay the price, including the denial of his ex-rugby international ticket for Wales home games.

So, thirty, active, fit and sporty, teaching maths and PE, but banned from the sport he loved, what should he do? Being a qualified athletics, tennis and swimming coach filled some of the void, but it was not until he saw an unused basketball court in Llwynderw that his second sporting career opened.

Basketball became the sporting love of his life. For decades post 1963 he drove forward the establishment of basketball in Wales, local and national, senior, schools and mini, male and female. And it was for this second lifetime of, for him, pleasure that he was awarded the MBE in 2012.

In the mid 1960s he decided to retrain in order to teach higher level maths and moved north for a year, alone, to Alsager College. Wanting to keep fit he asked to train with Salford Rugby League Club; shortly after he was captaining the first team. For a season after returning from college he would commute from Wales to Salford each weekend to play.

He took great delight when in the late 1990s the WRU not only reinstated international tickets for ex-players but actively embraced what such players had to offer to the game in Wales. He much appreciated the Union bringing in professional players from the cold through events at the Vale and the Millennium Stadium.

The WRU did provide an ending to a favourite story of his. My father’s first cap was against Ireland. In those days there was no at-the-time presentation of a cap – it arrived in the post some months later. When my father’s cap arrived it had F for France on the front, not I for Ireland. When he queried this he was told the WRU had little money, had bought a job lot and had run out of Ireland lettered caps. There was nothing they could do. And so things stayed for half a century!

So in the 2000s when the WRU marketers wrote and suggested he buy a presentation box for his cap – with of course I for Ireland on the front – he politely pointed out the absurdity of parting with his money when the box and the cap would not match. His powers of persuasion being what they were, the WRU promptly provided a new properly lettered cap.