



THE PRIDE OF A DIFFIDENT HERO: JIM LAKER BY ALAN HILL

The remoteness affected by Jim Laker was the shield of a highly emotional man. It was a deception practised by a great cricketer, who, as friends have said, was almost embarrassed by success. The shadows which clouded his personality were in part due to an unconventional childhood. Laker was thrust into the world armed as a rebel; the vigilant guard was the legacy of the teachings of his mother, Ellen, the indomitable Yorkshire matriarch.

It did not make him the easiest of travelling companions. Richie Benaud, his former Australian rival and fellow television commentator, recalls that Jim had a good memory for snobs. "I doubt that people would have got far with him had they tried to pull rank or title in a high-handed manner."

Behind the austere facade, which did alienate the less discerning, was the most caring of men. This was significantly shown in the encouragement he gave to young cricketers at The Oval during his later years as Surrey's cricket chairman.

His many conquests were always noted with a delightful touch of becoming modesty. The laconic humour came surging forth in the hours of triumph. He would have been bemused by the clapping 'high fives' of the moderns which greet the most trifling of dismissals. Trevor Bailey recalled Jim's response to congratulations after he had taken eight wickets for two runs in the one-sided Test trial at Bradford in 1950. Amid the praise, Jim produced the perfect deadpan reply. "Well, it would have been less expensive if I hadn't given Eric (Bedser) one to get off the mark."

A Sense of Fair Play

Fuelling Laker's abhorrence of injustice was his exclusion from many of the England teams of the early 1950s. The novice off-spinner, assailed by the might of Bradman and Morris at Headingley in 1948, had to shoulder the burden of guilt of Australia's astonishing victory. He was later to extract fearsome revenge, but he was not quickly forgiven. His critics, sadly, including the selectors, preferred to overlook the faults of others which demeaned his reputation.

Laker had the pride and sensitivity of an artist. His bowling, for it to achieve complete fulfilment, demanded fielding of the highest quality. "Jim knew he was a good bowler," say Godfrey Evans, a key witness behind the wicket. "But there were times aplenty when he wasn't allowed to be a good bowler because either the fielding was bad or it was wrongly placed."

Endangering Laker's prospects were his jousts with authority. The course of crusading radicals was strewn with traps at a time when cricket's administrators rules supreme. Laker pursued what he considered was an honest quest for truth. He never deviated in his opposition to the existing amateur-professional divide. It was an affront to the dignity of his trade. His deeply held convictions were expressed in a book on his retirement. They had

led to the withdrawal of coveted MOO and Surrey privileges.

A Rare Talent

John Arlott, a close friend, reinforced the image of an intelligent cricketer in one revealing profile. "There have been off-spinners - though few - who spun the ball as much as Laker; some of them had comparable control," wrote Arlott. "But no one ever matched him in those departments and had, also, such a quality of intelligence. From this stemmed other assets: it produced observations, judgement and flexibility which enabled him to assess changing circumstances and adapt his method to suit them."

Trevor Bailey, another fervent admirer, recalled the perfect balance and rhythm of Laker's action. "He was so grooved that he could have run in to bowl blindfolded." Micky Stewart, an observant fielding ally with Surrey, referred to the single application of his colleague. "One of Jim's major assets was that he controlled a cricket ball in all conditions."

Laker's famous deeds against Australia in 1956 did bring about a belated recognition of his gifts. They destroyed the ridiculous canard that he was just an 'Oval bowler'. He was then aged 34 and had represented England in only 24 Tests, less than half those played in this period. His astute stratagems rang the alarm bells for the demoralised Australians. They also confirmed Bailey's contention that Laker had been a magnificent bowler for many of the previous years.

Fabulous Figures

Laker obtained 63 wickets against the tourists, including 46 in the Tests at a cost of 9.60 runs each. He twice took ten wickets against his rivals, for Surrey and England. At Old Trafford, in the Fourth Test, he wove a spinning plot as cunning as any devised by Agatha Christie. England won the match by an innings and 170 runs to retain the Ashes. Laker's figures will surely never be eclipsed. He took ten wickets for 53 runs and achieved a match analysis of 19 for 90 in 68 overs.

The historic, record-breaking figures still produce a surge of pride and a sense of wonderment that Laker's spinning partner, Tony Lock, took only one wicket amid the rout. The riposte of Sydney Barnes, another legendary bowling maestro, rather accentuated Lock's dismay. Barnes said: "No one ever got all ten when I was at t'other end."

Among the many congratulatory telegrams received by Laker was one from Wembley which conveyed wit and delight. It read: "Thanks for making us feel 19 and the Australians 90." The exploit also inspired another cricket devotee and folk singer, Cohn Wilkes, to express his admiration in verse. The song has been newly recorded and the following extract does catch the essence of a superb bowling performance.

"The ball just like a hovering hawk
Tossed from a falconer's hand
Swooped in hunger for the kill
When the hunter did command."

Peter Walker, the former Glamorgan and England all-rounder, has paid tribute to the pairing of Laker and Lock in Surrey's seven championship years in the 1950s. "They were both formidable competitors and induced a kind of fear," said Walker. "There was always the dread of receiving the unplayable

ball."

The menace of Laker, as the senior Surrey player, undoubtedly goaded Lock on to his path of violent conquests. Theirs was a curious and embattled relationship. Micky Stewart remembers Laker as a "shrewd man who could walk into any social environment and be at home." Lock, "the country boy" from Limpsfield, was always strongly aware that he had to make his impact boisterously on the field.

Lock was the stoutheart who typified Surrey's aggressive approach in their great years. The big man, with his bald pate glinting in the sunshine and his sleeves buttoned down as he bowled, was endowed with a boundless fury. Laker once watched him bowl a spell of 30 overs with his knees and ankles sheathed in bandages. "There was not a word of complaint," said Jim. "How I wish some of our modern players could have seen him take the field. Many of them would not even have attempted to walk down the pavilion steps."

With The Passing of Time

The mellowness of age brings understanding. The gulf in the personalities of two great bowlers was bridged in their twilight years. Laker, in one of his last books, reflected in other outstanding left-arm bowlers of the time. "I would take a lot of convincing," said Jim, "that, as a spinning combination, we ever had any serious rivals." Together Laker and Lock captured 4,788 wickets in first-class cricket, 367 of them in 95 Test matches.

The reconciliation with Surrey and MCC in the 1960s carried a neat irony in that thereafter Laker was regarded as a genuine supporter of the cricketing establishment. "He became a respected man, friendly and knowledgeable," observes Donald Carr, one of the peacemakers in a happy release. Lilly Laker, an immensely loyal and devoted wife, remembers the dark hours following Jim's first and only tour of Australia in 1958/59. She was profoundly relieved that the demons were exorcised in Jim's renaissance as a television commentator.

The rewards of a new career happily coincided with the restoration of Laker's honorary life membership of the MCC. All was forgiven at The Oval, too, when at Alf Gover's instigation he was invited to become an ex-officio member of Surrey's public relations' committee. He later succeeded Raman Subba Row as chairman of the cricket committee and enjoyed a fruitful relationship with Micky Stewart, the cricket manager.

In his new medium as a television commentator, Laker, as he had done as a player, took his cricket very seriously. One of his producers was Nick Hunter. Hunter had been captivated as a boy in the 1950s by Jim's exploits with Surrey and England. His hero-worship had not receded. "There was an aura about him although he never played the VIP," he recalls. "Anyone who has taken 19 wickets against Australia can walk on water. I was certainly keen to make sure we got things right for him. We treated Jim, as was his due, with considerable respect."

A Natural

Richie Benaud comments on Laker's expertise as a commentator. "Jim was outstanding in the actual commentaries where the economy of words and the ability to fit the story into a space are so important." Benaud remembers Laker as a level-headed cricketer who carried this attribute into television. "Jim had a wonderful knowledge of the game which he was able to impart in an interesting way, whether in conversation, or on the box."

The disarming raconteur was, considered another broadcasting colleague Peter West, under-used. West remembers a "remarkably detailed memory" of the games in which Laker had played. "Jim, with his mentally wry and nimble humour, could produce an anecdote at the drop of a hat." Laker's friendship with John Arlott blossomed in their twin commentary duties on BBC 1 and 2, covering Test and one-day cricket. Arlott was coolly exact in his

observations on Laker as a fellow broadcaster. "Jim has a deceptively fast reaction to any movement or action on the field," wrote Arlott. "Among long-distance observers of a rapid incident, he is more likely than anyone to read it accurately."

Nick Hunter remembers the occasions, all too infrequent because of pressures of time, when Laker described the spin bowling in talks on television. "Jim received many letters on all aspects of cricket. But after these informative sessions there was a deluge of mail from viewers." Laker's television world, says Richie Benaud, was based in part on talks with viewers. "The other aspect, and a very important one, is that I never once heard him talk down to viewers when on television."

Tony Lewis presents a study of Laker as a broadcaster with the highest standards. "These did not just apply to himself but also to everybody else, otherwise it would have been difficult to work with him." Lewis says that Jim was a brilliant reader of the game. "There was always the right emphasis. He never gave anything more than it was worth. He did not hold back from praise but he would explain exactly how that lay in the firmament."

It was difficult, as Peter Walker made plain when I started on the project, to reconcile the ambiguities of Laker's character. Walker said that each and everyone who came into Jim's orbit would provide differing interpretations of a fascinating man. My task, a tortuous one, has been to present a composite portrait. As an intelligent man, Laker did not suffer fools gladly, but equally those who gained his trust found him faithful in friendship.

A Good Friend

So many people in cricket circles now unfailingly speak of Jim as a gentleman. There was a steadfast loyalty, extending over 50 years, to fellow pupils at Salts High School in Yorkshire. Conviviality was the keynote of their relations. Fame never disrupted the harmony of these friendships. One school friend, Bill Burgess, staunchly expresses the tone of his regard: "He was, with the passing of the years, still a nice man. There was never any question that he wanted something from you."

Jim Laker survived a life-threatening aortic aneurism in 1981 to make an excellent recovery and return to the television commentary box. It was, as events sadly dictated, only a temporary reprieve. Illness struck him down again and he was hospitalised for three weeks in January 1986. The problem was diagnosed as pancreatitis and the decision was taken to remove his gall bladder. The medical consultations all pointed to a successful outcome. What was, in truth, a minor and possibly unnecessary operation had an agonising sequel. Jim grew increasingly ill and contracted septicaemia. He died at Parkside Clinic, Wimbledon on the evening of 23 April. He was 64.

The grief in cricket quarters was compounded within 24 hours by the death of another gallant champion, Bill Edrich, of Middlesex and England. As one writer said, two mighty trees had fallen in cricket's memory lane.

A portrait of pride was drawn by Richie Benaud at the memorial service at Southwark Cathedral in July 1986. The blessings of their comradeship were recalled by Benaud in a calm and laconic manner which Laker would have appreciated. As Benaud put it, Jim would have wondered what was going on "with the gates closed, the sun out, and no one going out."

The thanksgiving at Southwark was free of affectation. It did not linger in mournful tidings, or swoop into a sea of sentiment. Jim, as an undemonstrative man, would have scorned high-flown eulogies. But, as one writer said, there would have been a twinkle in Laker's eyes and a tremble of his lips when he realised it was all for him.