



## PETER MAY BY ALAN HILL

Peter May, the Charterhouse School boy prodigy, was always destined for greatness. The commitment of the boyish, courteous champion gained him the accolade of the finest batsman to be produced by England since the Second World War. Sir Colin Cowdrey, an inseparable cricket companion, markedly recalls Peter as a man with a “gracious, gentle streak”, but easily the toughest cricketer with whom he was associated during his own distinguished career. “His physical strength was immense and it was backed up by an astonishing determination.”

Yet how he did such a modest, self-deprecating, and diffident man arouse the hurrahs of affection and acclaim? In the delightful phrase of one of his daughters, Peter was never one to “throw whoopee”. John Warr, a close family friend and Cambridge contemporary, has remarked, “He was so shy, we almost had to drag him to parties”.

### School Days

John Perry is a former Carthusian and a lifelong friend. He shared a bench form with Peter in five years at the Godalming school. Perry vividly recalls Peter's first appearance as a 13-year-old in the nets. He walked out with other pupils from his house to await their inspections as candidates at the beginning of the cricket quarter. “Suddenly, in a blur of action, we saw this boy come back off his right foot and hammer the ball into the offside net.” The procession of boys stopped as if called to attention on the drill square. “It was clearly obvious from that moment that Peter was a tremendous prospect,” adds Perry.

Peter May strode into the spotlight as Charterhouse captain in his last school year in 1947. The school suffered only one defeat, by Winchester, in a triumphant season. In that year, recalled the novelist Frederic Raphael, a fellow pupil, it was difficult to imagine what could be missing from May's game; he turned cricket into a kind of one-man show. “When he played in the house matches, scoring as many runs as were needed to bowl out the opposition, it was as if an Olympian had deigned to play skittles with mortals.’

In four years in the Charterhouse eleven, May scored 1,794 runs and averaged 54.36. That he was unquestionably the best schoolboy batsman in the country was evidenced by his aggregate of 651 runs in 13 innings at an average of 81.38 in 1947.

The stature of Peter is expressively noted in one story by Lord Prior, another former Carthusian. He describes the humbling experience of examining Peter's bat. “The bats you usually pick up in the club pavilion or at school have lots of red marks all down the edges, with very few in the middle. Peter's bat was not at all like that. His just had a sort of dent in the middle where every ball had struck and it was only when you looked at the bat that you realised what a great cricketer he was.

George Geary, the old Leicestershire and England all-rounder, was an influential mentor as Peter's coach at Charterhouse. He could not have been presented with a more observant and single-minded pupil. "George was an adviser and guide rather than a coach," remembered Peter. "He picked out natural ability, and encouraged it. He did not stifle and smother it with a maze of technicalities to baffle the impressionable young mind. He never said too much, but whatever he did say demanded an attentive ear." Philip Snow, a long-standing friend, recalls that Geary's "sparkling, rich brown eyes" did not dim in watchfulness with the passing years. Geary once told Snow, "May is the best young 'un I ever saw in the nets, or out in the middle before and beyond his time. And I've seen a good many lads all over the world in my time since the First World War." Geary always modestly disclaimed the slightest influence in May's cricket apprenticeship at Charterhouse. "Peter was so full of natural gifts as a batsman that he would have discovered himself in any case."

After National Service in the Navy, Peter went on to unfurl his talents at Cambridge to amaze all who watched him. The news that he was batting at Fanner's emptied the lecture theatres. "They all ran down to watch him play." says Dennis Silk. Peter joined Hubert Doggart, John Dewes, and David Sheppard in an extraordinary batting quartet at Cambridge. May scored the first of his 85 Test centuries, while still an undergraduate, on his debut against South Africa at Leeds in 1951.

### **For Surrey**

The Oval class in which Peter registered in the early 1950s was on the brink of unparalleled distinction. Its audacious headmaster was the champion optimist, Stuart Surridge, who was to bully and cajole Surrey to five of their seven successive championships. Surridge bequeathed a legacy of glorious adventure to May, his successor as captain. Peter, in these triumphant years, exuded authority as the exemplar of batting authority.

Alf Gover, one of his early mentors, presents a picture of exceptional physical command. He enthuses about a "mighty hitter", spellbindingly assured off the back foot and comparable, in his view, with Wally Hammond. Another wise observer, Herbert Strudwick, shared a memory with Gover of one stupendous strike by May against Nottinghamshire at The Oval. Arthur Jepson, armed with the new ball, was the plainly disbelieving bowler. May's six-hit was struck unerringly off the back foot and over the bowler's head into the Vauxhall Stand. The next ball was also driven for four to compound the audacity. "Jeppy couldn't believe it," says Gover. "It shattered him for the rest of the day." The verdict of Strudwick was that only a class player - "standing up straight and ready to hit the first ball if it wanted hitting" - could have produced such a magnificent assault.

### **Captain of England**

Peter May followed another influential mentor, Leonard Hutton, as England captain. He led his country in a record 41 Tests and was the victor in 20 Tests, another record. On and off the field, he earned respect as a player who successfully bridged the amateur-professional divide. Trevor Bailey, in his assessment of May's leadership says, "Peter, at his best combined some of the drive of Surridge with the tactical tightness of Hutton. His considerable personal charm tended to camouflage his toughness on the field."

John Perry endorses the picture of a resolute captain. "Peter was so gentle, courteous, and polite, but he was never a soft touch. He was stern when necessary and better with difficult men, who could win him the game." Micky Stewart intriguingly make a comparison in the captaincy styles of Surridge and May at The Oval. He disputes the image of Surridge as the implacably hard captain. "Stewie was really just a big, cuddly teddy bear. It was the quiet, traditional English gentleman, as represented by May, who had the iron-clad personality. Peter, straight and sincere, was the harder man."

The steel of Peter's batting intriguingly contrasted with his demeanour off the field. His courtly charm snared him as a pin-up and the subject of respectful adoration. Yet he stumbled uneasily in the spotlight. The accumulated praise was as resistible-as an agony column. He was though the epitome of resolution out at the wicket, as the Australians discovered when they came to The Oval in 1953. Peter emerged from a daunting baptism - and an "incredible" over bowled by Ray Lindwall. "Each one of six balls beat Peter," recalled Lindwall. "They were just a fraction over the stumps, some cut back, others cut in. He could have been out - six out of six - but he didn't get out."

Alan Davidson, another of his rivals, spells out the enormity of Lindwall's mentally-sapping thrust at The Oval. "For anyone less than Peter, it would have finished him; others would have been totally demoralised. If you can survive such an experience, as Peter did, then you've got to be made of special stuff."

The grim joust of the Australians was a lesson in resilience. Before long Peter would establish his own rule in thrilling conquests against them. Lindwall, the tormenting examiner in England in 1953, was treated with disdain when the battle was resumed in Australia two years later. May's fearless assault at Melbourne exacted ample revenge for the duck presented to him by the Australian in England's first innings, inopportune on his 25th birthday on New Year's Eve. "By all the established usages of post-war batsmanship this was not novelty, it was treason," declared the Sydney Morning Herald.

Lindwall was not only compelled to strengthen his offside field; he withdrew them even deeper in an attempt to stem the flow of runs. "When an Englishman does that to the greatest fast bowler of his time," wrote Alan Ross, "it registered, if nothing else, an exchange of dominations." Richie Benaud, another in the combative mould, unreservedly awards the palm to his old rival as the greatest cricketer to be produced by England since the war. "Peter was not only a great orthodox player, but a wonderful improviser. He would have been brilliant in the one-day game.

Peter was at his most valiant during the trauma of the brain tumour, which sadly ended his life. He was brave and cheerful through the final days before his death on 27 December 1994, four days before his 65th birthday. His determination was shown when he accepted an invitation to speak at a luncheon in London a few weeks earlier. There was a packed assembly to greet him. Peter once again rose to the occasion, conscientiously intent on upholding his standards in this last innings.