John Jones In Memoriam (1941-2024)

“De Mortuis nil nisi bonum” is the advice given to obituarists but how can anyone observe this dictum when writing about John Jones? John was a maverick. Possessed of a stentorian voice and a pachyderm’s attitude to criticism he was rarely diffident and even more rarely quiet. He was a one-off who was never dull. It must be warts and all.

John was an alumnus of St Luke’s College Exeter, an institution he represented at Soccer – presumably as a thoroughly uncompromising defender, at Table Tennis, Chess and occasionally at Rugby Union in an emergency and a lowly XV.

Unsurprisingly he moved on to teach mathematics at Price’s in Fareham. He managed the under 16 soccer eleven and was proud of their achievements. He is also said to have given bridge lessons in his free time, displaying a care for the development of the young, which is further attested to in the Hampshire County Chess website. He left Price’s, perhaps owing to their merging with other educational institutions and worked as a computer programmer for Unipart. He remained however a teacher to the last. If John was not didactic, who ever was?

At this stage John rode a motorbike. One day in the mid-80s, when he was going fast, a careless driver emerged from a sideroad and knocked him off. The legacy of this was a constant recurrence of pains in his back and legs and a disruption of his career. One can only speculate on whether the damages he received were adequate.

Fortunately, although John was interested in certain sports, his interests were primarily cerebral and his brain was not damaged. He liked crosswords, he set quizzes, he represented Hampshire at Chess 74 times occasionally playing on Board 1 or 2. And then there was bridge which he came to after chess. I have been told that his approach to both games was similar. In chess he had a penchant for daring sacrifices; in bridge there was the odd over optimistic double when in “mad Axeman” mode.

John reached the level of Grand Master and was almost a very good bridge player. He was a competent declarer, better than his partners usually and much better than me, and he loved defending. Bidding was another matter; John decided to construct his own bidding system. Aided by Mike Gwilliam, who played Sancho Panza to John’s Don Quixote, John produced a system which would have been quite familiar but for the many modifications. When I started to play with him in 2010, just after my wife had died, I was told what we were playing. I eventually suggested a couple of additions. John agreed, subject to modification. When modified the first, Crowhurst, was recognisable; the proposed defence to the Multi was not. He then told me he was planning to write a book about his system. Corruption was my suggested title.

As a partnership we had occasional successes. Playing with Mac Nurmohamed and Phil Downham we won the Nicko plate representing Titchfield, but our best achievement

was to win the pairs in Porthcawl in a strong field. John played impeccably that day. Internationals and Camrose trialists came and went, but John coped with them all. I just kept my head down, concentrating on following instructions, and was astonished when the result was announced. John just grinned – Mind you he had been entering the scores.

John starred in my all-time favourite hand. It occurred in the Swiss Teams at Brighton in the summer meeting, featuring in Andrew Robson's column the following day. I held:

Axxx, - ,xxxx, KQxxx. John passed. RHO bid 1H which I doubled. LHO splintered with 4C. John doubled this and when I bid 5C over their 4H, John raised me to 6 !!

A major suit was led and I was looking at --- xxxxx x AJxxxxx

My Holding Axxx --- xxxx KQxxx

Even I could bring that home. Teammates made 650 at the other table and were over the moon as they had never expected to win.

There were two other highly memorable hands with John. There was the time in a Hubert Philips match that he calculated that his 4 count fit for my suit and singleton justified a raise from 4 to 6. This won the match and astounded the opposition player sitting in the same seat. Then in an autumn congress we defended 2C doubled redoubled with qualification for the next round depending on the result. A rara avis this as declarer was in a 2-2 fit but with all the high honour cards, bar one, in the outside suits.

Along with his cheerful disposition, John had some amusing/exasperating idiosyncrasies. On occasions he made errors at the table. These would be acknowledged, were he declarer; but if partner were involved never in under 24 hours. When we stayed away for a weekend congress John was always first into the bathroom where he would shower for an eon only emerging when the hot water ran out, and no matter what the make- up of the team he always had to sit in the front seat of the car; the better navigators would be in the back. Irritating though these foibles may have been they did not mask the essential John and he was ridiculously easy to forgive.

What was most admirable in him was his resilience and determination to enjoy himself despite his exiguous circumstances. He had no independent transport, he went to the local library "the office" for his email and If he had a television I suspect it did not work very well as I always had to get Match of the Day. Under the bludgeonings of chance his head was very definitely unbowed.

This view of him may well have been shared because John was well liked as was most evident this year when he played with Bo Deyal in the Pottage - an event he had won previously with Mac Nurmohamed in 1999 and 2007. When it was announced that he had won a murmur of approval and genuine delight seemed to emanate from the majority present as if to say "If we cannot win then let it be John."

In conclusion, Dear Reader, I hope you find enough “bonum” in this appraisal for it to be considered fair. If, however you were expecting an unqualified panegyric and if some of my comments appear unsuitable or irreverent, I make no apology. This was the John I saw knew and liked. He was a man who brightened many lives. My memories of him, cold showers apart, are entirely fond. I trust yours are too.

A V F