

Carl Smith, 1961 – 2010
R.I.P.

Eulogy given at Carl's funeral, 15th January 2010, by Hugh Matheson.

Each of us here has his or her own memory of what was happening when they first met Carl. He was one of those singular people for whom the first encounter is never merged with other events. You know what he was doing and what you were doing.

My first meeting contained all the ingredients which later defined his character and his life. Picture the scene: Holme Pierrepont, mid morning, early spring 1981. Two lippy teenagers are paddling towards the start in a double scull. Coincidentally, Britain's single scull in the previous year's Olympics is cruising in the same direction. Lippy teenagers look round — fragments of what they say can be heard in the single-words like “old man” drift across the calm water. Old man thinks he still pretty quick and squeezes on a bit of pressure to show them who's boss-distance between single and double remains constant — old man squeezes on a bit more — no change. Old man moves up another gear and at last they have stopped chattering and the puddles are looking tighter, but the gap gets no bigger. A couple more burns and both boats are going flat out and the old man is looking for the red buoys which tell him there is no more room on the course and that this torture is over.

He winds down and with his last breath starts telling them what they might do to scull faster on the principle of: “If you can't beat them, coach them”. What he got back was two huge smiles and the beginning of a wonderful relationship.

In that short episode Carl revealed all his adult personality. Cocky, but never conceited, possessed of one of those faces which really can grin from ear to ear; huge self belief and an absolute refusal to be put down by those who thought they should be his betters.

Born in Lagos, Nigeria where his father Peter was working with the harbour authority and brought up by Peter and Betty in Mowbray Gardens West

Bridgford. There was nothing in his nurture, growing up as younger brother to Gail and attending West Bridgford Comprehensive school, that gave any clue or cause for his having a supersize heart and the drive to win, whatever the effort.

That rowing was the medium for Carl's achievement was his great fortune and that Carl found rowing as a medium for his self expression was the sport's great fortune.

Small enough to be asked to cox at Nottingham & Union Boat Club, there he was, aged 14, spiky, pale, blond hair, learning his way round the Trent peering out either side of the bigger men pulling him along. He quickly discovered they were less anxious than him about winning and he found the solution pushing himself to win in a single sculling boat. Another newcomer to the sport was Stuart Forbes and the pair of them with Chris Bates from Newark Boat Club first raced together aged 15 as 'East Midlands' in the 250 metre relay at the National Championships.

Once Mark Lees had been appointed as the founder coach of the Nottinghamshire County Rowing Association his first recruits were Carl, Stuart and Chris. It is not possible, even with the clearest of hind sight, to say whether they made him into a great coach or he made them into such consummate achievers in the sport. The record shows ten years of glorious success, first with Mark and later with Sean Bowden. Carl was a coach's dream. He wanted the result more than anybody. He was prepared to work for it and he had the athletic talent to absorb the lessons. Above all he was stubborn. When it came to the crunch you knew he would never wonder why he was there or whether it was all worth it.

His breakthrough came in 1986 when he and Alan Whitwell won the World Championships in the lightweight double scull. Carl was one of the few who won lightweight gold as sculler in that double and later as an oarsman in fours and eights.

He won so much as a lightweight, not just because he was naturally, perfectly built and equipped for it, but because he had the right psychological tools. When Carl lost a race he thought he should have won

and, remember here, that every piece of training turned into a race, every warm up jog into a sprint, he found the fault in himself and thought out the best way to overcome the difficulty. Usually that meant putting in an extra morning run, while pretending to the competition that he had been laid in bed. He was what the psychologists call a good 'internal attributer'. When it went wrong he blamed himself and corrected the mistake. When it all went right he took the credit and enjoyed the glory. The generations of oarsmen who followed Carl into the NCRA, over its twenty-five year history, will almost all of them testify that it was Carl and his record which attracted them. I'm quoting Justin Hooker, but it could be anyone who said "I'd like to say Carl was an inspiration and it was his performances in the double with Alan Whitwell which made me want to come to Nottingham to row with the squad."

This driven will to win would have been nightmare to be with if it had not been relieved with that cheeky smile and ready chuckle. Some rip roaring rows about who in the crew had to lose the extra kilo, or whether to enter both Henley and Lucerne, were punctured and made ridiculous, by a sudden change of mood and that smile. It came into play during one training camp in Banyoles in Catalunya, when Carl and Chris Bates, who usually roomed together, played their usual trick on some novice NCRA oarsman of emptying his room of all its furniture while he was out discovering his first few *cervezas* with the squad. Carl and Chris, their room now stuffed with extra beds and wardrobes, retired to sleep and were only slightly miffed when the pub party returned and there was no explosion of outrage when the new boy found he had nowhere to sleep. However an hour later the corridors were filled with shouting and commotion with a female voice at full pitch. Carl, suddenly anxious, hopped out of bed and, looking in the purloined chest of drawers, found it filled to the brim, not with rowing kit, but with Janet Reger underwear. Oops, wrong room, actually room of honeymoon couple. Carl's charm pushed into overdrive, full admission of facts, full grin, full apology and by the end of all this honeymoon couple see the funny side and are his greatest fans. That was it, driven intensity leavened with such cheeky good humour that it was difficult to deny.

I know that one winter early on, when Terry Dillon senior was head master of the Becket and coaching at Newark Rugby Club, he fixed for a scratch NCRA team to play an experienced Newark team. Only a handful of us had

played the game more than a couple of times and, as a club filled to the brim with lightweights, we had a dearth of heavyweight ball winners up front. But, with the odd scraps of possession we fed them, the backs, with Carl at inside centre, made the most ferocious progress up field. I thought I knew these boys, but will never forget Carl's refusal to accept that he had been tackled and it was normal to release the ball. He kicked and wriggled, fought and scrapped until his tackler gave up and released him and on he drove. I can't say the rest of them were any more civil to the opposition and while they learned the rules on the job and as their infinitely superior fitness and aggression began to tell, Newark Rugby Club was as relieved to hear the final whistle as I had been to reach the end on the Holme Pierrepont course. It was the same with tennis. It was the same with Scrabble. It was the same with anything.

Then there was then that extraordinary day, twenty years ago, which is lodged in the memory of everyone who was at Henley. Notts County, with Carl at six, won the Ladies Plate beating Harvard in the prime slot on Sunday afternoon. Harvard appealed, claiming that a piece of wood had stuck in the rudder, somewhere on the course. NCRA, triumphant, had landed, put the boat away and was well into the champagne when the Stewards, never that friendly to any crews from north of Watford, cancelled their victory and scheduled a repeat final after the normal prize giving. Several of the crew made speeches with more expletives than there are strokes in a Henley mile and there was a general mutiny against the Royal Regatta and all its machinations. One voice said "Right we'll just go and do it again" and such was the respect that he attracted that, when Carl had spoken, the crew burped away the booze, massaged their quadriceps and worked out a new race plan.

I don't suppose the re-row is written into the Harvard official history. Level with NCRA until the Mile with a weight advantage of two stone a man, they were subjected to a burn that must have seared their souls for life and the NCRA burst clear and appeared to be cruising as they won by 2/3 length. That the normal gentlemanly commiserations and three cheers of Henley tradition were replaced with a certain amount of critical wisdom about the status as human beings of Harvard and more particularly the Stewards, was also pure Carl. But it was his attitude and leadership by example, which had

galvanised an admittedly brilliantly talented crew into such ferocious revenge for spoiling their one serious drink of the summer.

Years before that, in 1985 Carl had married Ros and moved first to Arnold and then to Calverton, Ben was born in 1987 and Lydia in 1989. It was a very strong relationship and their wedding was a great day, but Carl did have an intensity of ambition which was difficult to live with and within a few years he was working ambitiously, full time, doing a degree and training hard enough to win gold medals. Ros was devoted to him but could not persuade him to give up any portion of the 24 hour schedule. In 2005 they split and divorced but neither had any lasting interest for anyone else and they remained in very close touch. Last year they made a plan to get back together, formally, and were waiting for Lydia's 21st and their own 25th anniversary in this coming summer, to remarry. There seemed no hurry.

Away from the river, Carl was a genuine family man, as Chris Bates puts it, "his idea of a Friday night out was a half of shandy". In the last few years the progress of his son Ben as a rugby player either on the wing or at full back and currently playing for both Leeds University and Nottingham Paviors, gave Carl a huge pleasure which might have been harder to come by if Ben had followed him into rowing. In recent years he went to all Ben's games, home and away, generally accompanied by Amber — a definitely not lightweight, French version of the bull mastiff. Last year father and son went together to South Africa to follow the Lions tour and Carl was still full of it on the last time we spoke.

Lydia, with the family strength of character expressed in her case more vocally than with Ben, is a student of fashion at New College, Nottingham and will, all being well, move on to the British Retail Academy this autumn. As he did, gradually and possibly too late, wind down from rowing, Carl's pride in his children's emergence as adults had moderated some of his own ambition and given him a sense that he didn't have to do it all himself.

In 1998 he joined Goodmarriot and Hursthouse as a quantity surveyor and five years ago they were merged into Imtech NV, a technical provider across Europe and registered on the Dutch Stock exchange. The business was re-branded in 1998 and Carl was an important member of the senior

management team because of his absolute reliability. If he said it would be done... it would be done.

His role was to review contractual information and prepare contracts for the many sub-contractors and once the jobs were running to monitor the cash collections. The bare description of the role is not important, what we need to remember is that he was very good at it and in an industry more prone than any other to disagreement and litigation his 'professional and gentlemanly manner' — and I am quoting his boss — meant his contracts never came unstuck.

Darron Littlehales, the MD of ImtechG&H, cannot be more clear about how much he will be missed, not just because Carl was the most tenacious character he has ever met, but because he was a listened to as the voice of experience at the board meetings and looked up to with respect by the team reporting to him. That is as rare as winning repeated golds as a sculler and oarsman, to be someone who can take the qualities that made him perform on the water and adapt them to make himself indispensable in the boardroom.

This tribute must observe that the desire to remember Carl has moved at least 450 people to come to St Mary's the civic church of Nottingham. We are here because those closest to him who took on the grim task of arranging this farewell knew that, while not regularly observant, Carl had a serious religious core. It fulfilled him in several ways. He would visit the churches in the cities where competition and training took him abroad and he laid flowers on his mother's grave nearly every week. He felt comfortable and sometimes inspired in churches.

We have come to honour his memory and to record our dismay that, at 48, a life of inspired energy should be cut short in such an arbitrary way.

We will leave here, following this service, certain that it was a life worth remembering.

H.M.