

# Mike's epic survey is not just cricket

They said he was mad, but when it comes to sporting stats and historical detective work you can count on Mike Davage to confound expectations, as **Steve Snelling** discovered when he met the man behind a Norfolk sporting tour de force.

**M**ike Davage's brain is working overtime. Straying from the boundaries of his latest grand sporting obsession he indulges in a spot of mind games as a cricketing odyssey takes a googly-like detour into party trick territory.

"Give me a number," he prompts, in the manner of a conjurer about to perform a piece of magic. Momentarily stumped by this unexpected request, I spit out "25". "No, too easy," he groans. So, I try again, my befuddled brain clunking to keep pace. "How about 37?" And suddenly he's off. Multiplying and dividing quicker than you can say pocket calculator and with an unerring accuracy that would do credit to the smartest computer.

His awesome display of mental arithmetic over, he barely draws breath before explaining: "It's what I do. I don't even have to think. I'm not as sharp as I used to be. But I can just do it. Figures aren't a strain on the brain."

Even when he's not trying the numbers keep coming, like a mathematical tick that refuses to go away. "My wife knows all about it," he says. "We'll be sitting there watching the Trooping of the Colour and she'll suddenly say how many horses are there? She knows that without thinking I've been mentally counting along the line, counting how many rows and multiplying them."

"Or if we're watching a western on TV she'll say, 'how many Indians have died?' and I can tell her straight away. It's not a case of having to concentrate. My brain just registers that way."

Welcome to the weird and wonderful world of Mike Davage, historian and statistician par excellence and a walking, talking encyclopaedia of sporting anecdote and analytical trivia.

"It's a kind of madness, I suppose," he says, "what I call an insatiable madness for facts and figures." Mad or not, it's certainly symptomatic of an incurable fixation on the minutiae of sporting history that has been successfully channelled

into a relentless quest that now spans more than 35 years and shows no sign of letting up.

In that time the 65-year-old retired assistant vice-president of an American insurance company from Old Catton has produced, in the award-winning Canary Citizens and Glorious Canaries, two of the most important and influential sporting reference works ever published as well as providing numberless 'assists' to myriad football club historians the length and breadth of the country.

Now, some 16 years after his last monumental study, he has followed up with another ground-breaking work that completes a rare and possibly unique hat-trick of sporting histories and sees him switching from football to cricket to deliver what promises to be the definitive 'Who's Who' of Norfolk County Cricket Club over the past 135 years.

Why the change of direction? Well, in part it reflects a growing disenchantment with modern football but, as I soon discover, cricket has always been an abiding passion for Norwich City's greatest historian.

"Cricket's my first love," says Mike. "Baseball comes second with rugby third and Norwich City fourth. Football just isn't the same these days."

As a boy growing up on the south coast, he supported Hampshire and, when work took him to London, he progressed to playing for Southend in the Essex Senior League. "That was the highest level I reached," he says. "Wasn't good enough for county. But I was lucky enough to come up against your Doug Insoles and your Trevor Baileys at the end of their careers. They were then in their 50s and 60s and were still brilliant. I remember Trevor Bailey playing for Westcliff and if he didn't want to get out, he didn't get out. You couldn't budge him from the crease."

Research, coupled with a rare fascination for sporting stats, proved a seamless progression when his playing days ended. But why the focus on Norfolk?

"Well, I moved up here in 1972 and have lived here ever since. It's a fabulous place and loving cricket



“I wanted the book to be far more than the facts and figures.”

as I do I thought why not produce a deluxe book covering the history of the county club in as much detail as possible and get it out there."

He makes no bones about wanting to write a biographical history that would "outclass" anything that had gone before and was likely to come in the future. It was a characteristically ambitious objective which has been triumphantly fulfilled.

The magnificent result of 2½ years of hard slog, of 10-hour days spent surfing internet sites, trawling through dusty archives, yellowing newspapers and well-thumbed scorebooks, *Knights in Whites, Major Men and Preachers and Teachers* is a cricketing chronicle that defies convention in style and content.

Almost as much a social history as it is a sporting record, the book is, in many ways, a reflection of its idiosyncratic compiler and his fascination for the eccentric and the extraordinary, the whimsical and the downright wacky.

"I didn't want to go down the traditional route," explains Mike. "I wanted to present the statistics differently, to take account of such things as the number of balls bowled - Norfolk were involved in four, five, six and eight-ball over games - and to add more details. Normally, averages list highest score and best bowling without telling you who they were achieved against. I wanted to put that right. And then, there's the problem that in olden times there wasn't proper analysis. Maiden overs didn't count, so I needed to differentiate between those figures where I had been able to find out the full stats and those where I hadn't."

"But more than anything, and I know this will sound strange coming from me, I wanted the book to be about far more than facts and figures. Scorecards bore me and

compiling cricket records as opposed to football records is an absolute nightmare of checking and cross-checking. What I like to do is put flesh on to the bare bones of a player's name and statistics. That is always the challenge and the most exciting part of something like this."

The book's quirky title - a typical Davage-style reference to the distinguished and distinguishing character of so many of the county's players down the years - underscores a determinedly personal focus on the men behind the stats based, as ever, on painstaking research.

It was a gargantuan task made harder by his choice of historical starting point. "Everyone thought I was mad," says Mike, with the kind of deadpan expression that suggests such comments are not uncommon. "I could have taken 1895 as the beginning which was when Norfolk began playing Minor Counties cricket, but I felt the correct place to start was 1876 because since that date the club has enjoyed a continuous history even if all the matches played in the first 19 years were friendlies."

Aided and abetted by a few like-minded souls, a ledger which had been compiled by the late Bryan Stevens, a former EDP cricket correspondent and county player, and the wonder of the worldwide web, he duly embarked on his epic quest.

Of the 784 players who have appeared for Norfolk since 1876, Mike succeeded in tracking down the families of around 750, sometimes in the strangest of locations.

Mark Walton was a case in point. The former Norwich City goalkeeper features among a wonderfully eclectic mix of substitute fielders who make entertaining appearances in a 'Curio Corner'.

"He came on for Carl Amos in 1993 during a match against Buckinghamshire





and held a superb boundary catch,” says Mike. “But I wanted to check one or two things, so I eventually got hold of him by phoning the Mexican restaurant he runs in Aberdare!”

The Welshman was merely one among a long list of players who have enjoyed parallel careers as Norwich City footballers and Norfolk County cricketers. Notable among them were two of the Canaries’ memorable 1959 FA Cup giant killing side - Terry Allcock, whose three cricketing spells spanned 16 years, and South African-born Sandy Kennon, who played three matches in 1970.

Yet, remarkable though their records were, their achievements were surpassed by two other footballing cricketers: Thomas Allsopp, the only man to play for both Leicester City FC and Leicestershire CCC as well as Norwich City FC and Norfolk CCC, and the peerless Bob Collinson, who captained the pre-Canaries’ Norwich and achieved career-best bowling figures of 8 for 77 against the MCC in his first county season in 1901.

“Bob was a remarkable figure,” says Mike. “He was a chemist working at Colman’s and when Norwich City went professional he refused and football’s loss was cricket’s gain.”

Most famous of all the club’s sporting all-rounders, however, was the late, great Bill Edrich, who made his Norfolk debut in 1932 and went on to clock up 39 Test match appearances as a Middlesex player alongside the incomparable Denis Compton while also turning out for a number of Football League clubs including Tottenham Hotspur.

Charismatic and courageous, in almost equal measure, Edrich epitomised what one sportswriter has called “the particularly British breed of incurable scallywag”.

Five times married, he was a decorated bomber pilot with a reputation for hell-raising that was entirely justified.

“Anyone playing their first game would be invited to the bar after a day’s play,” says Mike. “It’d be drinks all round and at two or three in the morning when they’d stagger to their beds. The difference being that whereas most would wake up nursing a sore head and a desire to stay in bed, Bill would go out and get a ton. He had that special quality which meant that even as a pro-cricketer he always played for fun.”

More than that, he was also a member of Norfolk’s most celebrated cricketing dynasty. In all, no fewer than six members of the Edrich clan have represented the county since Bill’s brother Edwin borrowed some kit to make his debut in a friendly match at Lakenham shortly after the first world war.

Yet for all their fame the Edrich boys were by no means alone in turning Norfolk cricket into a family affair. Among the many names that have become synonymous with the game at county level are the Birkbecks, with Old Etonian Henry leading the way in 1876, the Buxtons, the Colmans, the Cozens-Hardys, the Fellowes, the Hoares, the Pilchs, the Rought-Roughts and, in more recent times, the Thomas’.

And if early teams sometimes read like a roll-call of the region’s landed gentry, more recent teams have, as the title of Mike’s book suggests, been dominated by the presence of clergymen, soldiers and teachers. So much for the great and the good, but some of the most compelling characters have been bit-part players whose greatest claims to fame, or notoriety, came away from the game.

Men like Colonel Francis William Rhodes, CB, DSO, brother of diamond-

**Tour de force: Sporting all-rounder: Mike Davage, the number-crunching historian who has charted the story of Norwich City and now turned his hand to Norfolk County Cricket Club. Far left: Bill Edrich, a colourful character on and off the cricket pitch.**



**Norfolk CCC 1912: a pre-first world war line-up features some familiar county names – Gervase Birkbeck (sixth from left, back row), Robert Pilch (far right, front row) and future MP and county cricketing legend Michael Falcon (centre, front row). Birkbeck and another member of the team, Ralph Thurgar (fourth from left, back row) were killed in action on the same day while serving with the Norfolk Regiment at Gaza five years later.**



**Cricketing Canaries: Sandy Kennon (above left) and Terry Allcock are among a number of footballers who swapped shorts for whites in the summer season. Below: The former Norfolk cricket headquarters at Lakenham.**



craving, empire-building Cecil, who made his Norfolk debut in 1876. Twenty years later, his participation in the ill-fated Jameson Raid aimed at overthrowing Boer control of the Transvaal resulted in him being sentenced to death – in the end he served only six months in jail before being released.

Then there was the hapless Owen Leggett, a general’s son whose short life included an 1878 appearance for Norfolk before his life was brought to a wretched end eight years later outside a Californian barber’s shop. The 34-year-old artist was gunned down by a deranged man who had just been released from an asylum where he had been sent for stabbing him some months earlier in a jealous rage.

In a book crowded with colourful characters and rich in amusing anecdote any selection is, inevitably, subjective, but I found myself drawn to the entries of two men – John Wood and John Fielding – who I knew and another who I had never met but rather wish I had.

Basil Rought-Rought was one of three cricketing brothers to represent Norfolk before the second world war. He also had the dubious distinction – one he shared with John Wood – of playing in a stalag match as a prisoner of war. But the thing that caught my eye in his entry had nothing to do with cricket. Towards the end of the war, Basil was said to have escaped into the arms of a “French farming woman” who took a fancy to him. So much so that when the war ended she

neglected to tell of this fact, preferring to keep him as a ‘toy boy’. It makes for a great aside that seems entirely in keeping with the author’s sense of humour.

Asked for his own favourites among the nearly 800 entries and he plumps for a suitably intriguing mix that includes one memorable “undesirable” whose off-the-field behaviour made Bill Edrich seem like a choirboy.

Maurice Cockburn was, by any standards, a “wrong’un”. His only Norfolk appearance was in 1895, but his court appearances were numerous. Having been court-martialled and cashiered from the army, he was imprisoned for bigamy, theft and obtaining (and subsequently pawning) jewellery under false pretences. “Basically,” says Mike, “he lied about his name, his age, rank and marital status!”

Cockburn’s eventual fate remains unknown and, together with the identities of some 17 substitute fielders, is among the few biographical details to elude his net. As it is, this latest labour of sporting love has already grown out of all recognition from its original concept. “I ended up writing 50 per cent more than I budgeted for,” says Mike. But there are no regrets. “You only get one chance,” he says, “so you’ve got to go all out and do the best you can.”

**Knights in Whites, Major Men and Preachers and Teachers: The Definitive Who’s Who of Norfolk CCC 1876-2011, by Mike Davage, is £15.99.**