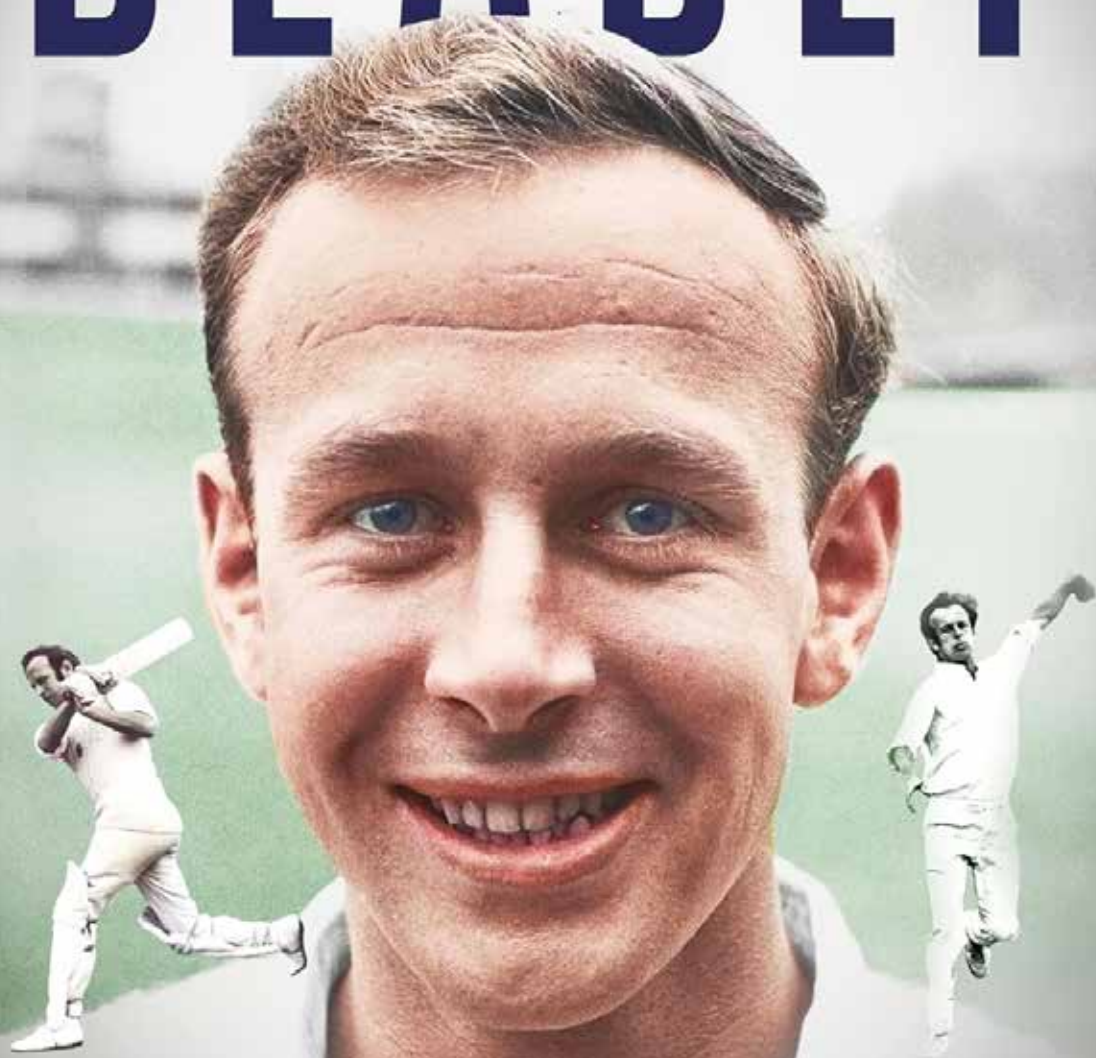


MARK PEEL

DEADLY



DEREK UNDERWOOD

THE LIFE OF AN ENGLISH INTERNATIONAL CRICKETER

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Chapter 1

Beckenham Boy

DEREK LESLIE Underwood was born in Bromley Maternity Hospital on 8 June 1945, the younger son of Leslie Frank Underwood and Evelyn Annie Wells. The Underwoods hailed from the picturesque village of Yardley Hastings in southern Northamptonshire. Leslie's father, Frank Underwood, a constable in the Metropolitan Police, moved to Hampstead on his marriage to Annie Smith in 1907 and it was there that Leslie, born in 1914, was raised.

Derek's mother, Evelyn, was the only child of Arthur Wells and Annie Beddell, both from humble stock in Hertfordshire. A domestic gardener by trade, Arthur worked for the Bishop of Salisbury, and it was in the Wiltshire town of Devizes that Evelyn was born in 1913. Soon afterwards the family moved to the west London suburb of Hayes on Arthur's promotion to head gardener, and it was at Whitestone Pond on Hampstead Heath that Evelyn met Leslie. They married at Christ Church, Hampstead in 1937 and moved soon after to a semi-detached house in Daerwood Close, Bromley Common, then a village in Kent, to be closer to Leslie's place of work, Lane's Ltd of Bermondsey in south-east London. The company supplied air gun pellets, and as company secretary he was influential enough

to be given a company car, a rarity in those days. Later, in 1955, by which time Leslie was managing director, the family moved again to the neighbouring village of Keston, and a new purpose-built home designed by an architect friend of Evelyn's, which they called Whitestone after the place where they had first met.

In what proved to be a very happy marriage – Derek's elder brother Keith was born on 5 July 1942 – Evelyn was the dominant force. While Leslie was gentle and charming, she was feistier and more opinionated, berating anyone who stepped out of line. Yet when not working hard to supplement the family income – she typed out legal documents at home for a company in London owned by Ray Cox, a task with which Derek, an accomplished typist, helped her – she devoted all her time to the family, catering for all their needs. Her preference for Derek contrasted with her mother Annie, who lived in the same road, for whenever he went to see her, she invariably greeted him with, 'Hello Derek, how's Keith?'

None of this favouritism disturbed the very close bond between the brothers from the time they shared a small bedroom together. In addition to collecting stamps, playing table tennis in the garage and fishing on Keston Ponds, both boys learned the piano and ballroom dancing at the school in Penge founded by Peggy Spencer, the doyenne of British ballroom dancing who taught Rudolf Nureyev, the greatest male ballet dancer of his generation, to tango. Yet all this activity paled into insignificance compared with cricket, their deep love of the game fostered by both parents. Leslie was a useful medium-paced bowler who played for his local village Farnborough every Saturday and Sunday. At an early age Keith and Derek used to watch him and play whenever they could, either in the road outside their house

or on the beach close to their caravan at Whitstable. 'I remember that Derek could always get some turn with a tennis ball on the sand,' Leslie recalled. 'I used to make him bowl overarm from the start and he chose his left arm. He was very interested in the game, and I remember he used to pinch my big bat and go in the street to play.'

Hoping that his sons would represent Kent, Leslie laid down two concrete strips covered by matting in their large garden at Keston and put up some nets, so they didn't cause the neighbours any nuisance. There the two boys would practise for hours, Keith batting and Derek bowling. Being the only fielder and wanting to avoid endless sorties to retrieve the ball, he quickly learned the cardinal attributes of line and length which became such a feature of his career.

After both boys attended Princes Plain Primary School, Bromley, Leslie and Evelyn, appreciating that Derek lacked Keith's intellect, sent him to the elite Dulwich Preparatory School in 1954 to prepare him for 11 plus, the standard entry exam to grammar school. He remained academically limited but, ultimately, it didn't matter because Keith's progress at Beckenham and Penge Grammar School and Evelyn's membership of its Parent-Teacher Association there facilitated his entry without him taking the exam.

It is also possible that his prowess at cricket helped him, his 9-10 for the Dulwich under-10s the best of many spectacular returns. He owed much to the enthusiasm of sports master Mr T.F. Merritt, who used to take the boys to the Oval on a Wednesday afternoon to watch the great Surrey side of the 1950s. (He and Keith were also present when England regained the Ashes there in 1953.) In addition to greatly admiring the

artistry of Peter May, one of England's finest batsmen, he loved watching Tony Lock, an orthodox slow left-armer with a quicker ball on turning pitches, to whom he was often compared in future although they possessed very different temperaments.

In 1958 Underwood enrolled at Beckenham and Penge Grammar School for Boys, founded in 1901 as Beckenham Technical Institute, before evolving into the above named in 1944 under the headmastership of L.W. 'Jumbo' White who retired in 1962, the year after Underwood left. The school, now Langley Park, a state academy, was highly prestigious and comfortably middle-class as working-class Bill Wyman, later a guitarist with the Rolling Stones, discovered when he was a pupil there in the early 1950s.

Underwood's future Kent team-mate Graham Johnson, a couple of years his junior, also attended the same school before moving to another one close by. He recalls first coming across him when the third form was forced to watch the finals of the school tennis to create atmosphere. He later relived the experience. 'Faced with the choice of supporting the school bully, who regularly stole our sticky buns at the morning milk break, my friends and I opted to support the other combatant who looked to have no hope as he basically seemed to be doing an impression of Charlie Chaplin on the tennis court, with the racket replacing the twirling walking stick. Sensing this gutsy, determined character could beat the hated bully we championed him and finding he responded to adoration and aided by the fact that the third form duces bribed the line judges, a close game ended with our man the victor.'

Underwood was a promising tennis player with the ability to switch the racket from one hand to the other to play forehand

and backhand shots, and he was also a useful hockey and rugby player. Yet whatever his interest in these sports they were a distant second to his cricket. Aged 14, he opened the bowling for the first XI with Keith, who was captain, and against Bromley Grammar School, the latter deliberately bowled wide of the stumps to enable Underwood to take all ten wickets. His gesture was typical of the loyalty that he always showed his younger brother, not least the great pride and pleasure he derived from his many future accomplishments. Underwood also scored 96 against the Masters, until he was adjudged lbw by the head of English.

When the brothers weren't playing at school they played for Farnborough under the captaincy of their father. In a side where the standard was mediocre, Keith recalled that not only were he and Underwood easily the best bowlers, but they were also the leading batsmen. Between them they bowled Deptford out for 9 and so humiliated were the opposition to be shown up by two schoolboys that they failed to stay for a drink after the game. Underwood also took 10-16 against Bromley Town and scored 45. 'Even in those days Derek used to set his own field and he always had these assets of accuracy and good length,' recounted his father.

To play at a higher standard Underwood joined Beckenham, one of the top clubs in Kent, in 1961 and there, under the supervision of former Kent cricketer Ronnie Bryan, he added variety to his bowling, producing a quicker and a slower ball. 'I used to bowl left-arm medium-fast,' he recalled. 'That was all very fine at school level. But when I moved up to the senior level, I found I had to develop something different.' Playing for Beckenham against Gore Court, Sittingbourne, the following

year, the Underwood brothers took all ten wickets, inflicting on the home side their only defeat in their cricket week.

It was at Beckenham that he formed a lifelong friendship with Keith Patterson and his wife Erica and in 1962, attending the Bromley Town pre-season dinner with his father, he met another close friend, Martin Wigram, who recalls him as an ordinary teenager, intensely modest about his cricketing prowess.

During the winter Underwood's father took him to Allders indoor cricket school, situated in the basement of its department store in Croydon, for coaching with Surrey stalwarts Ken Barrington and Tony Lock. It was Lock who recommended him to Kent for his batting, an evaluation which manager Les Ames shared, but his assistants Claude Lewis and Colin Page spotted his potential as a bowler and advised him to make that his priority.

Lewis, who presided over the club's winter nets at Eltham, was a left-arm orthodox spinner who played for Kent in the 1930s, acting as an admirable foil to Doug Wright, the finest English leg-spinner of that era, and was nearing his peak when war intervened. Never quite the same player after the war, he became club coach, in which capacity he acted as a benign influence on the young for many years. According to Alan Knott, he was a kindly and dedicated coach while to Underwood, he was the most knowledgeable man in Kent following years of experience in the game. Lewis was really taken with Underwood's wonderful rhythm and action, later recalling that 'he was something unique in the way he fired the ball in at medium pace. I have never seen anyone like him.' Finding him to be a good listener, always willing to receive advice, especially the need to vary his pace according to the

state of the pitch, he continued to be Underwood's trusted mentor and friend thereafter, not least when he became Kent scorer. During his later years when he needed the odd break Underwood thought nothing of standing in for him and using his coloured pens.

In 1960 Underwood represented Kent Schools, a side managed by George Pope, a genial schoolmaster who quickly detected his class and did everything to encourage it. Beaten only once in the previous five years, he preserved that record by bowling Kent Schools to a nine-wicket victory against London Schools with his quick left-arm cutters. Playing against him was Geoff Arnold, the future Surrey and England fast bowler. He later wrote, 'Derek soon impressed me with his bowling ability. Even in those days his accuracy and length were great assets, and one always felt that he would have a fine future ahead of him.'

Seven of that Kent Schools side were selected to play for the South of England Schools against the Midlands at Cranleigh, one of whom was the 14-year-old Knott. Very small for his age and wearing short trousers, he knocked on the dressing room door. When the manager saw him, he said, 'What do you want, son?' Knott replied that he was there to play. Born at Erith in south-east London, he was brought up in neighbouring Belvedere where his father was a pillar of the local cricket club. An accomplished wicketkeeper, he and his two sons played in the hall at home and in the street, the boys frequently hitting tennis balls into neighbouring gardens. Opening both the batting and bowling at school, Knott was taken to the Kent nets at Eltham, where he first came across Underwood. 'I think we were barely 12 when we first met and were still wanting to be fast bowlers,' recalled the former. 'I suppose back then we might have thought

of having Underwood and Knott opening the Kent bowling.’ Given his size, Knott was encouraged by Claude Lewis to switch to spin. Yet his agility behind the stumps, the legacy of his father’s mentoring, had been noted and it was as wicketkeeper that he was selected for Kent Schools against the Midlands.

In a side that included Arnold, Peter Graves, the future Sussex batsman, and footballer David Sadler, later of Manchester United, Underwood stood out, taking 4-6. Standing back to him, Knott observed his nagging length and his slower ball which accounted for three of his four wickets. ‘What was remarkable about Derek right from the outset was his accuracy,’ he wrote. ‘He so rarely strayed from his length and direction and could swing the ball in considerably to the right-hander.’

That following year Underwood was offered a trial by Kent, which meant surreptitiously missing the odd day of school because his headmaster disapproved of any disruption to his studies. Consequently, Kent batsman Arthur Phebey warned him to keep out of the sun, since a tan would undermine any excuse about ill health.

Selected for the Association of Kent Cricket Clubs (AKCC) juniors tour of the West Country in August, Underwood top-scored with 45 not out in their seven-wicket defeat by Sussex and took 3-32 in the draw against Dorset, then a week later, he took a hat-trick of lbws against Surrey at East Molesey. Playing in that team were Alan Ealham, who later became one of his closest friends, and Frank Ames, cousin of Les Ames, who recalls Underwood as pleasant but rather distant. He also marked his debut for the Kent Club and Ground with 5-19 against Metropolitan AKCC at Eltham, sharing the spoils with opening bowler John Dye, and for the second XI against Huntingdonshire.

At the meeting of the Kent cricket sub-committee on 24 July 1961, the minutes stated that ‘The Manager was given authority to take on the Staff, D. Underwood, aged 16 years, and J. Dye, aged 18 years, both left-hand fast medium bowlers, at a weekly wage of £6.10.0d. for the former, and £8.10.0d. for the latter, plus £30 to £40 winter money.’ On receiving the offer, Leslie Underwood, hoping that Derek’s GCE results would be good enough to continue his education, wrote a non-committal reply to Les Ames, but when his exam results proved disappointing, he joined up in September.

Playing for the second XI against Hampshire at Beckenham in May 1962, Underwood was persuaded by captain Colin Page to bowl round the wicket because the ball was turning and he duly responded with figures of 5-45 and 4-15. The *Kentish Express* called his figures remarkable. ‘The big question is, can he continue to turn in such figures?’ it wrote. The fact that he continued to listen and learn helped his progress. On bowling a long hop on a wet surface at the Oval, which was duly dispatched for four by Surrey’s Mike Willett, Page escorted him down the pitch, showed him the mark where the ball had landed and said, ‘On a wet wicket always overpitch rather than pitch short,’ advice he took very much to heart thereafter. Bowling short on any wicket was a hanging offence in his lexicon and should be avoided at all costs.

With pacemen Alan Brown and John Dye, leg-spinner David Baker and Page himself all among the wickets, Underwood was part of a penetrative attack that helped Kent to third place in the second XI championship. He had two more five-wicket hauls, but against Middlesex at Gore Court, Sittingbourne, he had to share the limelight with Knott. The *East Kent Gazette*

commented, 'From Kent's view, two telling points emerged. The first concerned the performance of 16-year-old Erith schoolboy Alan Knott, who bowled 14 overs and finished with the very creditable figures of 2-26. Knott, who has plenty of time to develop, could well be Kent's foremost off-spinner in a few years' time.' Having kept wicket in a previous game against Northamptonshire at Aylesford, Knott had missed a stumping off Underwood before getting three off Baker against the Royal Engineers at Chatham, a performance that persuaded Les Ames that his future might lie with wicketkeeping rather than bowling. 'Underwood, a 17-year-old slow-medium left-hand bowler played regularly,' reported the *Kent CCC Annual*, 'and showed great promise by taking 42 wickets at an average of 19, his number of wickets being exceeded only by Baker who took 48.' Impressed with his efforts, the cricket sub-committee recommended an increase in his salary to £8 a week (and Knott's from £6 to £7 a week) as well as £40 of winter money.

He also had some success with the Colts, not least with his batting. Opening the innings with Alan Ealham against Kent Schools, they put on 100 for the first wicket, both scoring half-centuries, before Richard Burnett, watched by his grandfather Frank Woolley, one of the giants of the game, bowled his side to an innings victory.

In a year in which Underwood confirmed all the hopes Kent had placed in him, his most arresting image was that of Hampshire's 'Butch' White wearing his MCC touring jersey when playing against him. The sight of the distinctive red and yellow stripes enhanced his imagination and fuelled his ambition to follow in his footsteps.