



MY HERO - JT MURRAY BY GRAHAM SEED

My childhood was spent in London where my parents ran a small hotel off Baker Street. My father was a keen club cricketer, so I quickly caught the cricket bug. I can still remember the first time my father took me to Lord's over a Bank Holiday weekend to watch Middlesex play Sussex. It was right from that day back in the 1950s that John Murray became my hero.

I was in awe of him – maybe it was his theatricality that I liked, or the way that he used to cup his hands, tap the fingers of his gloves together and then delicately touch his cap before crouching as the bowler approached in his run-up. His performance seemed almost choreographed, and as soon as I returned home, I started to copy these mannerisms.

There was an elegance about J.T.'s keeping that was so different from that of today's keepers. He was always immaculately turned out, in pressed, loose fitting flannels and a long sleeved shirt. With wonderfully soft hands, he never seemed rushed when taking the ball, before elegantly tossing it back to the bowler.

In my opinion then, and to be honest now as well, John was the best wicket-keeper in the country at the time, and it was a scandal that he didn't play more for England. The selectors kept choosing Jim Parks, who they thought was a better bat. But J.T. was a capable batsman too – a tremendous front foot player, a great driver of the ball and someone with a level-headed outlook who rarely got flustered.

I must have been about 11 when I finally plucked up enough courage to go up to J.T. and ask for his autograph. He was coming out of the back door of the Lord's Pavilion with Fred Titmus, and he had a habitual cigarette in his hand, making him look, I thought, rather raffish. To my sheer delight, J.T. couldn't have been more courteous in signing my little autograph book, and he even wished me good luck when I told him that I was a wicket-keeper as well. How much that scrap of paper meant to me – I still have it in fact!

As far as my playing career was concerned, I kept wicket for my prep school 1st XI, before earning a spot behind the stumps for Charterhouse U15s, U16s and then, rather triumph-antly, for two years in their 1st XI, where, with the dormant actor inside me, I still copied J.T.'s mannerisms, believing that they would stand me in good stead. I even used to throw the ball up in the air as J.T. did on receiving a catch, until that is the school coach Doug Wright talked me out of it after I had made a rather embarrassing drop in an important match!

I did manage to play once in a charity match against my hero. It was around twenty years or so ago on the Westminster School pitch in Vincent's Square and involved a Celebrity XI against an Old England side that boasted such stars as John Snow, Brian Close and David Steele.

J.T. was the 'keeper for the Old England side and I still remember how he looked throughout the match as dapper as when I had first seen him in county action back in the 1950s. I could barely contain my excitement when he came in to bat, and I stood up to the bowler, desperate to hear him murmur "well taken" as the ball thudded into my gloves. I was a child again for those few blissful moments!

Twenty years on, I'm still playing cricket, and of course anno domini has meant that I'm not as spritely as I once was, and am now prone to letting through more byes than I, and the teams I play for, would like. But I'm still lucky enough to participate in this great game and, through it, stay in touch with so many good friends from the world of theatre and cricket.

Children need heroes. Thank you John Murray for being mine.