

## **Blues and the Blues Committee**

### **Some historical notes**

Issue 1 of the Hawk gave a (fairly) accurate account of the current situation concerning the awarding of Blues and Half-Blues. I have been asked, by the Editor, to produce something more, by way of a historical background.

The question of the origin of the Cambridge Blue is often posed, but does not have a simple answer. Sport at Oxford and Cambridge, as we now know it, was very much a development derived from the English Public Schools in the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century. Even at University, school loyalties and influences remained strong (witness the various Trinity boats for ex-members of different schools, and the several school-determined versions of football and fives), and school colours were sometimes still worn. Cambridge Colleges soon developed their own sports clubs, of course, and these again had their own colours and regalia.

The first ever sporting match between Oxford and Cambridge was at cricket, held on 4 June 1827. There is no record of any "colour" being worn on that occasion. In the first boat race, on 10 June 1829 at Henley, the Cambridge crew wore white, with a scarlet or pink (accounts vary) sash, honouring their Captain W. Snow from St. John's. The second, 1836, boat race is the event associated with the origin of the "blue" (mentioned also in Hawk 1). Just before the race, it is said that R.N. Phipps, of Eton and Christs, thinking that the Cambridge boat should have a "colour" at its bows, called at a haberdashers and asked for a piece of ribbon or silk. The colour of the ribbon was light blue, perhaps because it was Eton's colour, or Gonville & Caius' colour (there were three Caians in the boat) or simply because it was the colour of the nearest bit of ribbon to hand! For whatever reason, this choice of light blue, made in 1836, stuck; and became the official colour of the Cambridge University Boat Club.

Despite the early dates of these initial contests, the Varsity cricket matches and the boat race did not become regular annual events until 1838 and 1856 respectively. As and when other University clubs established first their identities and then matches against Oxford, they were at liberty to choose any representative colour they wished. But, thinking to continue in an established tradition, they usually also picked light blue and, in courtesy, sought permission from the C.U.B.C. before awarding this "Blue". Thus arose the custom of consulting with C.U.B.C.; the President of C.U.B.C. becoming the arbiter of affairs for some 40 or more years.

The senior clubs in the University in the 1860s were undoubtedly the Athletics, Boat and Cricket clubs. This is well exemplified by their inclusion, alone, in Volume 1 of Desborough and Croome's classic "50 years of sport at Oxford, Cambridge and the Great Public Schools" - all other sports being relegated to Volume 2. These three all held Full Blue status, and the President of C.U.B.C. often consulted with the C.U.A.C. President and C.U.C.C. Captain, the trio thus operating as an informal Committee, when contentious matters required decision. A number of smaller, or more specialised, sports clubs successfully petitioned for Half-Blue status, and the following had started Varsity matches by 1880: Rackets, Real Tennis, Billiards, Rifle Shooting, Steeplechasing, Bicycling, Golf, Polo and Cross Country running, although not all of these reached half-Blue status. Chess held its first Varsity match in 1873 and, to this day, jealously guards the half-Blue status awarded to it by C.U.B.C. (a letter on file with the Blues Committee reports that the early chess Varsity matches, held in London,

attracted crowds approaching a thousand, with an official needed to try to keep them moving with shouts of "permeate yourselves gentlemen"!).

It is not surprising that, with athletics and rowing dominating the University sporting scene in the Michaelmas and Lent terms (the traditional Boat Race and the Varsity sports, as the Athletics Varsity matches were then called, were held then in March of each year), and cricket the Easter term, these senior sports were not enthusiastic when Rugby and Soccer, having only recently more or less disentangled their origins and rules, and established their own individual identities (another interesting story), began to make great inroads into undergraduate sporting life in the 1870s. Their first Varsity matches were held in February 1872 (Rugby) and March 1874 (Soccer) but, when they sought Full Blues in 1883, Reginald Gridley, the C.U.B.C. President, together with the Athletics and Cricket clubs, put many objections in their way. Despite evidence of great numerical support in the colleges, flourishing Varsity matches watched by many spectators, and the presence of Internationals in the Cambridge teams, the C.U.B.C. President and his cohorts remained unimpressed. The two Football clubs were eventually offered a limited number of full Blues to be shared between them! This was not acceptable, and the Rugby players in the Varsity match in December 1884 awarded themselves Blues, the Soccer players doing likewise in the following term. The C.U.B.C. then brought the dispute before the whole University, in a major debate at the Union. This attracted a huge audience, and was won decisively by the football supporters, thus effectively forcing the C.U.B.C. to concede. Between that year, 1885, and 1912, several more sports began regular Varsity matches: Hockey (which received Full Blue status in 1894); Lawn Tennis, Water Polo, Swimming, Boxing, Fencing and Sailing, all of which had Half-Blue status by 1912; and Ice Hockey, Lacrosse, Gymnastics and Pistol Shooting, which all had to wait longer for full recognition.

During the first years of the 20th century, and no doubt mindful of the 1883-5 debacle, it seems to have been agreed that it was inappropriate for the Boat Club, almost singlehandedly, to determine the status of all other sports, and so it was that, on 1 March 1912, the Blues Committee was established. Initially it consisted of the President and Secretary of C.U.B.C., the President of C.U.A.C. and the Captains of C.U.C.C., C.U.R.U.F.C., C.U.A.F.C. and C.U.H.C. Thus solely the Full Blue sports were represented on the Committee and C.U.B.C. "dominance" was maintained by its holding two seats. Moreover, the President of C.U.B.C. was ex-officio Chairman and had a casting vote. All those founding "standing rules" remain in force to this day, but the membership of the Committee has expanded to include the Captains of all the other Full Blue sports - so Lawn Tennis (1922), Golf (1938), Boxing (1948), Squash (1960), Swimming (1966) and Cross Country (1977) are now represented. The Blues Committee has a "permanent" Secretary, who has always been a don; there have been only six such Secretaries in the 84 years of the Committee's existence, so the average "lifetime" in post is quite high. The Committee meets once each term, with strict quorum rules; but members of the Committee take their responsibilities seriously and turnout at meetings is invariably excellent.

The Committee spends much of its time sitting in judgment on requests for Full or Half Blues. It initially determines an appropriate status for the sport, ranking it as Full Blue, Discretionary Full Blue, Half Blue or non Blue, according to its perceived popularity or importance. Once a sport is judged Full Blue, its Captain is given responsibility for making awards to his team, on behalf of the Blues Committee, and within any constraints or restrictions that the Committee has laid down. In some Full Blue sports, all members of the team against Oxford receive Full Blues (Cricket, Golf, Hockey, Lawn Tennis, Rowing, Rugby Union, Soccer and Squash); in others only some of the team receive Full Blues, the others Half Blues (Athletics, Boxing,

Cross Country and Swimming); the Captain is trusted to make all the decisions. When a sport is judged to be of Discretionary Full Blue status, its Captain is empowered to make the Half Blue awards to his team, and may request the Blues Committee, with some expectation of success, to grant one or more Full Blues to some of its members; thus the Committee, rather than the Captain, has the discretion that is in the title. The current Discretionary Full Blue sports are Badminton, Basketball, Canoeing, Cycling, Fencing, Judo, Karate, Modern Pentathlon, Orienteering, Rifle Shooting, Rugby League, Sailing, Skiing and Water Polo. The Captain of a Half Blue sport is empowered only to grant Half Blues, on behalf of the Committee. But a recent (1990) rule allows the Committee, on rare occasions, to grant an Extraordinary Full Blue in a sport that otherwise only holds Half Blue status. Half Blue sports are Archery, Eton and Rugby Fives, Gymnastics, Ice Hockey, Korfbal, Lacrosse, Lightweight Rowing, Pistol Shooting, Polo, Rackets, Real Tennis, Riding, Table Tennis, Volleyball and Weightlifting. No Full or Half Blue can be awarded in a sport that holds non Blue status.

The Committee is also empowered to make decisions on team sizes in squad sports, on eligibility for Blues of playing substitutes (an absolute rule is that no form of Blue can be awarded to anyone who did not actually play in a Varsity match - causing something of a problem in 1988, when not a ball was bowled in the Varsity Cricket match!) and all sorts of other issues concerning Varsity matches in all sports. In conjunction with their opposite number at Oxford, and with the two independent Womens' Blues Committee, a forum has been set up - the Joint Blues Committee, to debate and rule on matters of eligibility, and to discuss other matters of common concern. The Cambridge Blues Committee has a self-denying ordinance (Rule X) stating "the Blues Committee have no jurisdiction in the affairs of the Women's Clubs" (1948) and "that the Blues Committee does not assume responsibility for awarding Blues to women" (1970). The Cambridge Womens' Blues Committee has full powers in these matters, and liaison between the two Committees is good; the President of the Women's Committee having an observer's seat on the Men's Committee. In this regard, for example, protocol demands that the award of a Blue to a female cox of the men's Blue Boat is proposed by the Men's Committee, but ratified by the Women's.

The Blues Committee is steeped in tradition, and somewhat conservative in its thinking, but by no means unwilling to move with the times. New sports regularly arise, petition for, and receive status; but, to show evidence of permanence, they must have held at least five successive Varsity matches. Sports have recently lost status, and have been required to improve their organisation before retaining it. Decisions, perhaps arbitrary but not illogical, have been reached on the perpetual knotty question of "what is a sport " in reference to various activities, pastimes or pursuits which do not yet feature on the back pages of newspapers. In all these matters, the Committee tries to act in a way that will not devalue the "Blue", so that all those who have earned this distinction in the past can feel assured that the present generation is doing its best to maintain standards.

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