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Obituaries

Christopher Davidge

Olympic oarsman and administrator who rejected Margaret Thatcher's call to boycott the Moscow Games

Christopher Davidge had a 36-year involvement with the Olympic Games, as competitor, manager and administrator, but it was in rejecting the pleas of Margaret Thatcher's government to boycott the 1980 Games in Moscow that he had perhaps the greatest influence.

The initial instinct of the Amateur Rowing Association council, of which Davidge was president, had been to support Thatcher's call for Britain to join the US boycott of the Games in protest at Russia's invasion of Afghanistan. After a mutiny by the athletes, including Colin Moynihan, the Olympic cox and later a sports minister under Thatcher, the council changed its mind and Davidge went to deliver the refusal to the foreign secretary, Lord Carrington. He was met in an ante-room by Douglas Hurd, Carrington's parliamentary private secretary, who had been with Davidge at Eton. It was a last gentlemanly attempt to get him to change his mind. "I hope I'm not going to get into too much hot water, but I'm not complying," Davidge told Hurd, who replied: "Good luck, have a go."

Davidge told Carrington that it was unfair to expect athletes to give up a life's dream while the government was still trading with Russia. "We are not prepared to be used as the whip for protest," he recalled saying. The athletes would compete under the Olympic flag. Davidge later said: "It was a meeting I shall never forget. They were trying to pick us off sport by sport and we were an obvious first target." Moynihan's eight went on to win the silver medal.

The Oxford coach once called him 'the iron man of the stroke seat'

Ironically, Davidge was to a small degree responsible for another boycott at the previous Games in Montreal, where he was chef de mission for the Great Britain team. Several African countries had demanded that New Zealand withdraw from the Olympics after the country had sent a rugby team to tour apartheid South Africa. New Zealand's chef de mission sought advice from his British counterpart and Davidge told him not to withdraw under any circumstances, since rugby was not an Olympic sport. New Zealand stood firm, leading to 30 nations boycotting the Games.

Christopher Guy Vere Davidge was born in 1929 and showed promise as a schoolboy oarsman when he stroked the Eton eight to the final of the Ladies' Plate at Henley in 1947. After winning the event the next year, he went up to Trinity College, Oxford, to read law, but spent more time on the river than in the library. His father, Cecil Davidge, an Oxford fellow and bursar of Keble College, had been a college rower and was treasurer of the university boat club.

If Davidge's rowing accomplishments had been limited only to the Boat Race, it would still have been a remarkable career. Dan Topolski, coach of 12 victorious Oxford crews in the 1970s and 1980s, once called him "the iron man of the stroke seat" and he held the key position in three of the most fascinating contests in the event's 186-year history. In 1949, Oxford lost by a quarter of a



Davidge tries to keep warm before Oxford's victory in the 1952 Boat Race. Below, he rowed in three Olympic Games



length, the closest result since 1877. The race was notable for the BBC's John Snagge delivering the immortal piece of commentary near the end: "I don't know who's ahead. It's either Oxford or Cambridge. It's neck and neck the whole way over."

Davidge was elected president of the boat club the next year but was unable to row because of jaundice. Re-elected for 1951, he went down with his crew as Oxford sank two minutes into the race. The umpire, the Bishop of Willesden, declared it a no-result and ordered a repeat, which Oxford lost by 12 lengths. Davidge finally got his victory in 1952, which was rowed in a snowstorm, but the margin was by only 6ft. Afterwards he led his crew into the Coliseum to see *Call Me Madam*.

His efforts at Oxford brought him to the attention of the national selectors and despite little international experience, he was sent to the Helsinki Olympics in 1952 in a coxless pair. They came fourth. He went to the Australia Games four years later which involved a five-day plane journey to Melbourne. There he was installed in old army barracks. "The first thing our team had to do was to go and buy a whole load of electric fires." They failed to make the final.

His best chance was possibly at the 1960 Games in Rome, but after his coxless four qualified for the final, one of the crew, Mike Beresford, went down with malaria. "We had to nurse him through and finished fifth," Davidge said.

Retiring as an athlete, he served as a national selector and resumed his in-

volvement with the Olympics at Mexico City in 1968, when he was the rowing team manager. One of his duties was to hide from the team and their parents the news that several hundred students had been shot by police during protests in the lead-up to the Games. He was Britain's deputy chef de mission in Munich, when 11 members of the Israeli team were killed by the terrorist group Black September and worked for the world governing body's regatta's commission until 1988. He once claimed that by following the final of the coxed fours in 1984 from a launch, he was the only Englishman to see Sir Steve Redgrave win his first Olympic gold, since the mist on Lake Casitas was too thick for spectators on the bank to get a view.

He tended an agricultural estate outside Northampton, which had been in his family since the 18th century. He was married twice and is survived by his second wife, Jill, whom he married in 1993. He had no children. When Lord Coe paid his first visit to Henley in 2004 and expressed admiration for its efficient organisation, ethos of fair play and the resistance to modern commercial demands, Davidge, who had been a regatta steward since 1967, proudly told him: "Ah, you know the reason for that: it's because we are all amateurs."

Christopher Davidge, Olympic oarsman and sports administrator, was born on November 5, 1929. He died on December 22, 2014, aged 85

Lives remembered

Father Gleb Yakunin



Canon Michael Bourdeaux writes: Visa refusals and his imprisonment meant that I first met Father Gleb Yakunin (obituary, Jan 7) more than 20 years after I had

originally written about him (this was when in 1965 he circulated the exposé of religious persecution in the USSR). My wife and I had barely arrived in Moscow in June 1988, after our visas had initially again been refused, when we received an invitation to visit his flat. To accept was a higher priority for us than to spend time at the official events of the celebration of the millennium of Christianity in Russia for which we had come. Fr Gleb had only recently been released from his ten-year sentence. The door of his modest flat opened to reveal a galaxy of Christian dissidents who had also recently been released from prison, all bursting to update us with their stories. Stunned, we listened for hours.

Billie Whiteclaw



Judith Burnley writes: Billie Whiteclaw (obituary, Dec 22) was not only a brilliantly intuitive actress; she was also one of the bravest women I've met.

Playing the Mouth in Beckett's *Not I* may have been an unequalled act of theatrical courage, but Billie had true grit in real life, too. When her little son Matthew had meningitis she held him in her arms while they gave him a terrifying injection. Though she was trembling all over, she rose magnificently to the occasion. And when her husband, Robert Muller, was very ill in hospital, she put notices on his bed, where he could not see them, warning visitors (and nursing staff) that he might be ill, but he was not deaf and so could hear everything they said.

Geoff Pullar



Mark Price writes: I was privileged to be acquainted with Geoff Pullar (obituary, Jan 6), who was a class act and a gentleman. The last time I spoke to him, he proudly told me that he was amazed to find out, only recently, that he was one of only five Test cricketers who had consistently had a batting average of over 40 throughout their test careers.

He also told me the true story about his nickname "Noddy". It was the Australian Ken Grievess, who became Lancashire captain, who was allocating nicknames to the team and he had seen Noddy sat in a little red car. Geoff then drove a red sportscar and thus he was anointed.

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