



Deadly obsession

Falling under the spell of Derek Underwood led to a web of elaborate school lies for **Dave Roberts** Pictures by **Patrick Eagar**

Local heroes were in short supply when I was growing up in Bromley in the '60s. The only really famous person to come from there was HG Wells, and his appeal among primary schoolers was limited. But then, in the summer of 1966, everything changed. 'Deadly' Derek Underwood, almost overnight, became the country's most talked-about bowler after taking 38 wickets in Kent's first seven matches.

Having him as my idol presented one or two problems. Namely, that I was only one of about a dozen Derek Underwoods in the playground. I tried to differentiate myself by adopting the nickname 'Deadly' David Roberts. But it did not catch on. I adopted his left-arm-over-the-wicket bowling style. But, since I was right-handed, this led to me spraying the tennis ball anywhere but in the direction of the oversized stumps painted clumsily on the playground wall.

On weekends I played for the Beckenham CC Under-12 team as a middle-order batsman and part-time bowler. One day after school my dad showed me a letter from the club announcing a pre-season coaching school for all junior teams.

Indifference turned to uncontrollable excitement when Dad, who had no interest in cricket, told me that someone called Derek Underwood was doing the coaching. Would I like to enrol? Places were limited to 30-odd and I must have conveyed just the right amount of urgency as he wrote out a cheque on the spot. Minutes later I was on my bike, pedalling furiously towards the Foxgrove Road ground to deliver my application in person.

At school the next day I casually mentioned that I would be coached by Underwood, perhaps even giving the impression that it would be a one-on-one session. This produced the desired reaction of envy, at least among the few boys who believed me.

When the day of the first coaching session finally arrived there was an excited chatter as we gathered by the nets, which turned to awed silence when Underwood appeared and, in possibly the most unnecessary act I had witnessed, introduced himself.

The coaching was a memorable experience. He encouraged me to expand my repertoire of strokes beyond the forward defensive and, when he said "Good ball" after one particular medium-pace effort, I felt as though I was a real cricketer. I desperately wanted his autograph but could not quite summon the courage. Luckily in those days cheques were returned once they had been deposited, with the recipient's signature on the back. When dad handed me

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the one with Underwood's slanted signature I glued it at the front of my autograph book.

And perhaps that was what pushed my imagination over the edge. It suddenly did not seem enough to boast about being coached by Underwood. Although I never said he and I were good friends who went round to each other's house for tea, I did imply it. In reality the only times I saw him were on TV. When he made his England debut in 1966 I lived every ball he bowled in West Indies' first innings. There were only 12 of them, since captain Colin Cowdrey seemed oddly reluctant to use him.

He did not become an England regular that summer. That would come later. But he did top the first-class bowling averages by taking 157 wickets at a little over 13, which was enough to spark a life-long passion for cricket in me. Together with a group of

school friends I played – and watched – as much of it as I could. And that was why, one Sunday, we made the short journey to the Beckenham ground for a charity match.

The thrilling sight of a slip cordon made up of Rolf Harris, Graham Hill (fresh from coming fourth in the German Grand Prix) and a man I later discovered to be Jak, the *Evening Standard* cartoonist, was overshadowed when I saw a familiar figure standing behind the stumps. The umpire was Derek Underwood. My excitement was soon replaced by fear. My friends believed that Underwood and I were good friends and would insist on meeting him. He would probably not even recognise me. I was one of dozens of kids that he coached several months previously and not one likely to stick in his memory.

As we approached him during the break between innings (Nicholas Parsons had skittled the opposition) I hatched a plan to run away. It was too late. My friends had cleared a path for me among a gaggle of teenage autograph-hunters and were pushing me through, telling them I knew the great man.

"Hello Derek," I mumbled when I found myself directly in front of him.

He looked up from the book he was signing and smiled as though he was genuinely pleased to see me. "Hello David," he said. "How's that forward defensive stroke of yours?"

That was nearly half a century ago. While the intervening years have seen plenty of cricketers I have admired, from Colin Milburn to Shane Bond, none of them has come close to being my favourite cricketer. That is and always will be DL Underwood, of Kent and England. **■**

Dave Roberts is the author of *32 Programmes*, which was shortlisted for the William Hill Sports Book of the Year 2011. To find out more visit www.daverobertsbooks.com