

OBITUARY Colin Bland - The Times April 18 2018

Cricketer renowned for his remarkable fielding abilities and for bringing a sense of fun and showmanship to his quiet sport



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It was estimated that Colin Bland's fielding saved as many as 50 runs per match In the summer of 1965, when leading cricketers around the world were rarely seen in England or on television, a demonstration of one of the great arts of the game was staged by the most renowned of all fielders. It is exceedingly rare for a fine batsman to be remembered primarily for his skill at throwing down the wicket, but such was the lasting impression made by a tall and vulpine figure in the covers. The St Lawrence at Canterbury, then the most traditional of cricket grounds, was an appropriate setting for one of the finest fielders in the game's history to demonstrate how to hit the stumps. The match involving the touring South Africans had been delayed while the pitch dried out, and to quell a restless crowd, Colin Cowdrey, the Kent captain, asked Bland to put on a show. He gave Bland six balls and challenged him to throw from 25 yards. "Surprisingly, no one had ever made such a request before and he was rather embarrassed by it," Cowdrey recalled. "We set up three stumps and Bland never stopped moving. He swooped on the balls rolled to him and in one flowing movement threw them on the run. With his first throw he knocked the stumps sideways, with the next two he missed, with the fourth he lifted two stumps out of the ground and with his fifth he laid the remaining one flat. The spontaneous ovation was one of the warmest I heard any cricketer receive at Canterbury."

Bland's ability had been spotted when he was six years old by Ian Smith, a future prime minister of Rhodesia and a family friend, who prophesied that he would become famous.

At Canterbury, Bland knew the ground was wet and the balls were like pieces of soap. He felt he could easily have made a fool of himself. In the Lord's Test against England that year, Bland demonstrated his skills for real. Ken Barrington, on 91, pushed to midwicket and set off. Bland scooped up the ball, swung round and threw down the stumps at the bowler's end. He then ran out Jim Parks. As he picked up the ball, the batsman was directly between him and the stumps. So he threw back his arm — "like an Olympic javelin thrower" according to Cowdrey - and hurled the ball under Parks's feet as he ran. The middle stump went cartwheeling. "It was the most breathtaking piece of fielding I have ever seen," Cowdrey recalled.

Bland ascribed his talent to his wartime childhood in Bulawayo when there were no toys. "I made up for the shortage of materials by throwing rocks at telegraph poles." Later he would practise throwing at a single stump. The runs he saved by his fielding are beyond measure, although Denis Lindsay, the wicketkeeper for South Africa in the Sixties, put it at 50 runs per match.

Lean and long-limbed, Bland hoped he might also be remembered for his batting. He often launched his innings with a six and although his likeness for lofting the ball sometimes got him

out, he was reluctant to curb his natural instinct. Over 21 Tests he scored 1,669 runs at an impressive average of 49.08.

Kenneth Colin Bland was born in Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia, in 1938, the son of Brownlee, an accountant with the country's railways, and Audrey. Bland showed promise in cricket and rugby. His father, who had been a handy cricketer for Matabeleland, became his coach and mentor. At that time Rhodesians were able to play for South Africa and Bland made his Test debut in 1961 against New Zealand. Although he was outstanding against England in 1964-65, making 572 runs in five Tests at an average of 71.50, he played little further Test cricket.

In 1966 against Australia he crashed into a boundary fence. "As I bent to pick the ball up, my knee collapsed and I hit the fence. There was a gap underneath and I went half under it and injured my knee — had there been a full fence it could have been my neck."

He set up a sports shop in Bloemfontein and coached children. He suffered ill-health, particularly after moving to England at the age of 60 with his wife, Dorothy (née Cornwall), to be closer to their sons, who lived in London. Warrick works in property and Hylton is a technology programme manager. English winters did not deter Bland from walks around Wimbledon Common. "We loved England from the word go," his wife said. "You don't look back."

Bland met "Dot" in Salisbury, through cricket. Ian Smith would have attended their wedding in 1965 had it not fallen on the day he declared independence. He sent a telegram instead. Bland coached for MCC and enjoyed watching boxing. He was too retiring to enjoy interviews, just as he had been reluctant to show off at Canterbury.

He did once reflect on his value to a high-class South Africa side. "Sometimes," he said, "when things were quiet, I would warn the wicketkeeper and the next time the ball came my way I would rush in and whoosh, over the top of the stumps. People would think something was happening and it would wake up all the buggers dozing off, including the fielders. It was just a bit of showmanship. Cricketers are paid to entertain. I always thought that was what made me. They loved it."