Michael Roy Whitney AM

The Mike Whitney story began in 1976 when he failed to honour an invitation to try out with Randwick Cricket Club. The call between South Sydney football and the Maroubra surf divided his attention but the persistency of the Randwick secretary eventually paid off and the 17 year old left-hand mop-top was drafted into the 4th Grade team complete with hand-me-down whites and boots. Match figures of 9-26 against Nepean after just a few games confirmed he was a rare fast bowling talent.

A suspension for sneaking off mid-summer to the Gold Coast with his footballing mates brought a change in attitude and by the end of the following season, Mike had spearheaded his 4th Grade team to its first premiership in 20 years. Promoted to 2nds the next summer he again led the way to premiership glory while he celebrated his 1st Grade debut season in 1979-80 with yet another premiership victory. Three premierships in three years! Michael Whitney was clearly a star on the rise.

And so it proved to be. NSW selectors had not overlooked Mike's demolition of opposing batsmen and in 1980-81 he shared the new ball with Geoff Lawson and Len Pascoe at the 'Gabba in the first of his 77 Sheffield Shield appearances for the Blues. This taste of first-class cricket saw him trek off just a few months later to join Fleetwood in the Northern UK League eager for experience. He also managed a few matches with Gloucestershire in the County Championship before receiving a dramatic call to join the Australian Test team in Manchester following a number of injuries in the squad's fast bowling ranks.

Within two days, the 21 year old Surry Hills-born left-hand fast bowler and Qantas trainee mechanic with just seven first-class appearances was wearing the baggy green of Australia in the Fifth Ashes Test against England at Old Trafford! And the fairy tale continued when the great English batsman David Gower became Mike's first Test wicket. It was a long way from Coogee Oval and Maroubra Beach. It was centre stage in the world of cricket. And Ashes cricket at that!

Mike's Test career in the years which followed was somewhat of a roller-coaster with the call to represent his country coming only 12 times over a period of 11 seasons. Despite his irregular Test appearances his two best first-class bowling performances were achieved in Test matches: 7-89 against the might of the West Indies in Adelaide in 1988-89 and a magnificent 7-27 as part of match figures of 11-95 against India in Perth in 1991-92. In his 13 year first-class career, "Whit" played 118 games and took 412 wickets including 39 in Tests. He took five wickets in an innings 19 times while his 251 Sheffield Shield wickets currently places him eighth on the list of the all-time greatest wicket takers for NSW. He also is the holder of an unwanted record. He is the only Australian Test player to make a "pair" on debut.

While the joys of Mike's magnificent playing career were soured by a long list of injuries causing doctors to "write him off" on a number of occasions, his greatest disappointment was being omitted from the 1989 Australian Ashes team to England. His 58 wickets that Australian season were the most by any bowler and to many his non-selection remains one of the great cricket selection mysteries. Subsequent Test Match tours of Sri Lanka and West Indies confirmed the error of his Ashes omission.

Despite the strains of a long and demanding first-class career, Michael Roy Whitney always found time to turn out for his beloved Randwick. In all grades, he took 385 wickets over 17 seasons including 262 in 1st Grade. With his Poidevin-Gray wickets, his tally jumps to 416. His best season was 47 wickets to win the 1978-79 2nd Grade premiership. His best in 1st Grade was 38 in 1979-80. The very next season he produced his best figures with a 7-47 haul against Sutherland. He took another "seven-for" with a 7-50 performance playing North Sydney at Coogee in 1987-88. He took five or more wickets in an innings 15 times in 1st Grade and 25 times across all competitions.

Mike also won five Grade Cricket premierships. His first came in 4th Grade in 1977-78 at age 19; the second the following summer in 2s at age 20; and the first of his three 1st Grade premierships the next season at 21. In four years of Grade Cricket he won three successive premierships.

Club management responsibilities did not elude him and Mike was elected to the Randwick Management Committee in 1991. He was made a Life Member two years later which he regards as one of his proudest moments in cricket. His contribution was recognised formally at State level with life membership of the NSW Cricket Association in 2002.

In 1992 the NSW Cricket Board granted Mike a Testimonial Year *"to recognise the magnificent contribution to Australian and New South wales cricket by Michael Whitney, both on and off the field".* The highlight of the year was a Testimonial Dinner at the AJC Centre Randwick attended by more than 960 persons including all members of the Australian and West Indies teams who were playing a Test Match at the SCG. Such was the popularity of Mike, the function was the largest ever held at the venue.

The following season with yet another serious knee injury, Mike retired as a player. That did not mean he had retired from the game or the club. When Randwick Petersham came into being in July 2001 following a merger of the Randwick and Petersham Marrickville clubs, there was no hesitation from each of the merging camps that Mike Whitney should be the first Randwick Petersham President. It was a fitting choice as Mike Whitney brought to the new club the same flair, courage and commitment which characterised his playing career. He gave nothing less than 100% to everything he did and at a time when the new club needed someone with those heady attributes, he was the ideal man for the job.

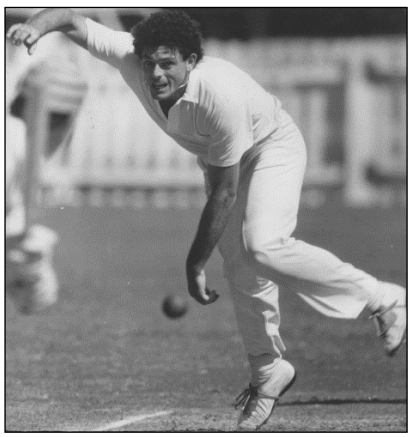
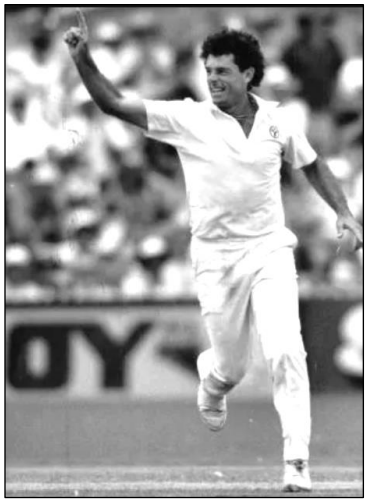
Apart from possessing an enviable reputation among Sydney cricket club administrators, Mike Whitney is one of the most highly respected ex-first-class cricketers remaining in service to the game. That point was highlighted in 2012 when he was installed by his NSW first-class cricket peers as the first Chairman of the newly-formed The Baggy Blues, a support group set up to assist former NSW Blues players in need.

What should also not be overlooked is Mike's involvement in saving the historic rugby league club South Sydney Rabbitohs from oblivion. He was deputy chairman of the Rabbitohs and was at the forefront in the fight against the National Rugby League between 1999 -2001. After many public rallies and three court cases the club was re-admitted to the competition in 2002. And while the strain of it all forced Mike to stand down mid-way through the battle, his contribution was a major factor in achieving an outcome which for most of its time appeared unlikely to succeed. He was made a Life Member of the Rabbitohs in 2009.

A community conscious person, Mike has been generous with his time. For many years he was involved with the Christopher Robin Committee for the Children's Hospital at Randwick and for eight years from 2008, served on the Board of Surfing NSW.

Elected Randwick Petersham President unopposed for the 20th time in August 2020, Whitney is the second longest serving president in the combined 260 playing years of the club and its founders. His original intention was to serve the first two years following the merger but such has been his influence, dedication and leadership that he remains in the role today (2021).

Mike has come a long way in his professional life. From a trainee aircraft mechanic to one of the longest serving hosts in the most competitive industry—television. It speaks a great deal for his loyalty, sincerity and dedication. Those attributes were tested in his early days as a promising cricketer with many lucrative offers to leave the Randwick club coming his way. But his loyalty to a club which had helped him in troubled times ensured those offers were rejected. With Mike Whitney, loyalty does not have a price.

And in his teenage years struggling with a direction in life, he heeded the advice of senior members of the Randwick Cricket Club who indoctrinated him with the principles of trust, respect and humility–ideals which Mike has lived by ever since.

In 2000, Mike was awarded the Australian Sports Medal for his achievements and contribution to Australian sport. Further acknowledgement was to follow. It was therefore, no surprise to anyone close to him or who had admired him from afar, that when the 2019 Queen's Birthday honours were announced, the name Michael Roy Whitney was high on the list. As the most worthy recipient of an appointment as a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) it was an award well-earned and earned well, by one of Randwick and Randwick Petersham's most treasured sons.