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The Telegraph

Obituaries

Val Robinson, the ‘Pele’ of hockey, who became the first woman to win 100 international caps – obituary

As a footballer she was praised by Matt Busby, and she played top-level hockey into her late fifties, as well as twice winning Superstars

By Telegraph Obituaries

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Val Robinson, who has died aged 80, was an attack-minded, wonderfully skilful and quick English hockey player, who first garnered praise from Matt Busby for her football skills before becoming the first woman to earn 100 international hockey caps and twice winning the BBC’s Superstars programme.

Thought to be the first working-class hockey player to be selected for her country, Robinson made a then record 149 appearances for England as well as winning 21 caps for Great Britain. Renowned for her trademark dummy, right-hand dodge, and ability to pass opposition players – “whooshing like an Intercity 125”, as one observer put it – the Lancastrian was an international for more than 20 years, scoring 46 goals.

She made her England debut in 1963 while she was studying at Chelsea College of Physical Education. Unfortunately, playing Wales in front of a crowd of more than 50,000 at Wembley, England lost their first match there in 13 years. During the game she collided with her close friend Lynne Thomas, and later recalled momentarily forgetting that they were on opposing sides and picking up her stick for her. The Welsh defender told her to get on with the game.

Robinson was made a scapegoat for the defeat and did not regain her place until 1966. Standing 5ft 5in and weighing around 9st, the slender but robust Robinson became a teak-tough forward; as a marked player she never buckled under the physical challenges meted out by the likes of the Dutch and Germans.

She became British hockey’s first superstar, in either the men’s or women’s game. Adoring schoolchildren were in awe of her resilience, turn of pace and ball-carrying skills, and banners would hail the “Lass from Lancashire” or declare that “Val Robinson eats Scots for breakfast”.

She was also a talented footballer, and played for Accrington Ladies in her teens. When the team folded in 1959 she joined Preston Ladies, and her manager, Kath Latham, once recalled her Manchester United counterpart Matt Busby watching a game at Blackpool. He remarked that Val “was the best (female) player he had seen in his life and, if she had been a man, he would have signed her up there and then”.

Val Robinson gave up football, though, to concentrate on hockey, and went on to help England to victory in the 1975 World Championships in Edinburgh. Three years later she was called up to the newly created Great Britain team, but when the women’s game made its Olympic debut in Moscow in 1980 she missed out, as GB Hockey – along with the equestrian, sailing and shooting teams – joined the US-led boycott.

She played for Bedford’s Parkside Ladies from 1965 to 1980, with opposition players tending to the awestruck when she walked out on to the pitch. “It was like local footballers finding out they’re going to play Pele,” her vice-captain Jill Hoyle recalled.

Her fame transcended her sport when she won the BBC Superstars competition, first in 1979 and again in 1981, when she was 40. In her first appearance she won five of six events, in disciplines that included basketball shots, canoeing and obstacle races, going up against the likes of Tessa Sanderson, who would go on to win Olympic javelin gold in 1984.

Val Robinson’s first victory earned her £1,000, which she donated to the All England Women’s Hockey Association to protect her amateur status. She was not invited back to defend her title in 1980 – considered too good for the competition – but she returned a year later and duly triumphed again despite not having eaten for three days, suffering from poisoning after exposure to a chemical explosion at a factory near her home. (A friend recalled that Val Robinson’s hair turned grey afterwards.)

For all her evident fitness, she admitted that she would only go for the occasional two-mile run, while her smoking habit left her with a “nasty cough in the morning”, though she did give up after the factory explosion, because, she said, it had affected her taste buds.

Valerie Walsh was born in Accrington on December 18 1941, the second daughter of an engineer father and a mother who worked as a cotton-mill weaver. She was usually to be found with a band of boys playing football on the train tracks and clambering across cotton-mill roofs; three friends died during her childhood, one from drowning and two from falls.

She attended Accrington Girls High School, though she did not take up hockey – “like football with a stick”, she said – until she was 14.

She later became head of girls’ PE at Stratton School in Biggleswade, Bedfordshire, before moving back to Accrington, where she set up a residential hockey school alongside her husband Gwyn.

Val Robinson retired from the international game in 1984, and the following year she was appointed OBE. She continued to play at domestic level for Blackburn Northern, including the inaugural women’s national league season in 1989-90. She played on into her late fifties, finally retiring in 1998.

Val Robinson married Gwyn Robinson in 1965. He died in 2020.

Val Robinson, born December 18 1941, died February 13 2022

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Val Robinson in 1972



In action against Scotland, c. 1982

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The England team in 1972, with Val Robinson centre, front row
Evening Standard/Hulton Archive/Getty Images



In action for Blackburn in 1998

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