

Profile of Norman Fookes

In the running days of field gun, when 1st Trainers came and went, there was always a constant element in the field gun mix and that was Norman. A sponsor like no other sponsor. A sponsor that was passionate about field gun and one that sought no other reward than being able to assist Trainers in getting an edge over the other Crews. A multi-millionaire, in those days, who put his success down to the fact that he had been a field gunner.

Prior to being conscripted into the navy as a National Serviceman, Norman was on the verge of being selected to represent Great Britain, in the 1960 Olympic Games, as a weight lifter. However, once through HMS Raleigh's gates Norman continued to train in the gym, lifting weights above his head that other men found difficult to dead lift. According to his long-time friend and running mate, Mike 'Doc' Faircloth, once it was known that there was a superman working out in the gym, 1960's PTI Sam Bartlett persuaded Norman to go for a field gun trial. By the end of the first test (the run) Norman began to suspect that the ex-field gunners, and the other 'regulars', resented the presence of a mere, National Serviceman. This was noticed by the 1st Trainer, 'Wiggy' Wigmore; who, at the strength test, where the men had to lift a wheel and throw it over a bar, asked Norman to go first. Norman picked up the wheel and threw it over the bar without it touching. 'Wiggy' then asked Norman to go do it again and again, which Norman did with ease. 'Wiggy' then turned to the other members of the group and said, "Until you can do what Norman just did you're not the man he is". After that display of strength Norman was awarded a grudging respect. Clearly, Wiggy had sent the news of Norman's achievements ahead, because when he arrived back at Raleigh, the Chief (GI) on the Gate (Len Mills) said to Norman, "Well done lad, now go and take the rest of the day off".

Norman began in 'B' with the name 'Sprog', which later became 'Bomb'! No doubt because of the way in which he dismounted from the Trail after it was slipped on the way out. Training began on 1st February 1960, during spells of rain and more rain. According to 'Doc' Faircloth injuries came thick and fast, with a dozen or so taken off the pitch within a short space of time. As related by 'Doc', it must have been a nightmare for 'Wiggy', because by 26th March 'A' Crew was running with seven spare numbers. Needless to add, with hard work and determination, Norman was moved to 'A' Crew, where he stayed until his accident at Earls Court. During a Run Back, in the arena, the gun's assembly under the rig was slow; and, as a result, the gun failed to travel clear of the collapsing rig. Being at the rear of the gun, and bent forward, the cross-piece of the shear-legs landed between Norman's shoulder blades, laying him out. By the time the Army Medics got to him – and as field gunners do when 720lbs of shear-legs have landed on them - got to his feet, told them to go away, and finished the Run. Though pretty sore he turned out for the next Practice Run, but was in too much pain when he tried putting a gun over. X-Rays at the hospital didn't show any abnormalities, so he was returned to duty. However, after collapsing he was returned to hospital, where further tests and X-Rays were carried out. It was then discovered that he had fractured a number of vertebrae in his spine. As a result, Norman was invalided out of the navy and, while ending any prospect of Running again, opened the door to another amazing episode in his life that enabled him to have a more profound effect on the development of field gun equipment.

Prior to joining the navy Norman received the accolade of European Apprentice of the Year award, but even this failed to gain him employment when it was learned why he had been discharged from the navy. However, motivated by the 'can do' attitude, field gun had taught him, he put up as collateral a nice looking watch, that didn't work, for a truck and started working for himself travelling round companies and taking away their scrap metal. His drive and determination to succeed - honed by his field gun experiences, together with a very astute business brain - put him in the millionaire bracket in a very short space of time. Again, according to 'Doc' Faircloth, by this time Norman had a number of companies under his wing; and, as money was no object, began to apply his field gun knowledge to devising ways in which he could help to improve field gun Run times. He introduced ball bearings into the Traveller, in addition to making it, virtually, dust proof,

designed and made the Four Star Bottle Screw, designed and made the metal wall supports (adding the ratchet tightening mechanism) plus many other innovations all at his own cost. The number of times he used his trucks and money to replace or repair tracks are countless.

On Saturday 7th July, 1990 an article appeared in the Weekend Western Morning News highlighting Norman's contribution to field gun. My small endeavour is by way of another thank you to Norman, who continues to support the association in any way he can. Being in poor health, these days, and unable to drive long distances, he keeps in touch with what is going on at the Fort by travelling to Board Meetings and Reunions, as a passenger in my car. These trips mean so much to Norman that he sometimes postpones hospital appointments, in order to attend. When I ran field gun Norman, naturally, mixed with the staff so few of the Crew members got to meet him. However, come Public Run days Norman could be seen sitting next to the Commodore of DRAKE bellowing Oggie! Oggie! Oggie! with such gusto that I'm sure the Commodore wished that he, or Norman, was somewhere else.

Norman has now become a good friend, and while it is difficult to envisage Norman as a top British athlete and field gunner, when you see him on unsteady legs, his active mind still delights in telling yarns about his field gun days and his time as Devonport Field Gun's most generous and devoted sponsor. Long may it continue.

Brian O'Hara