

Melvyn Pignon

England women's hockey star with a penchant for fashion who was dropped suddenly from the team after a divorce scandal

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Melvyn Pignon was one of the most famous hockey players of her generation

Melvyn Pignon, under her maiden name Hickey, was arguably one of the most famous hockey players of her generation. Undoubtedly she was the most glamorous. Her dazzling runs down the left wing and skills in the circle made her one of the most feared forwards in the game, while her penchant for resplendent hats and accessories ensured she made her mark off the pitch.

In her book *Hockey for Women*, published in 1962, she revealed a schoolgirl dream of taking her hockey stick to an international at Wembley so that if any England player was injured she would rush on to the pitch and play. When she fulfilled her dream to represent England on Wembley's hallowed turf, her contemporaries remember shouting, "Hickey for Hockey".

Her international career, however, ended in heartbreak and controversy when the England selectors — without a word of warning — dropped her from the 1968 team, after she agreed to be named as co-respondent in Laurie Pignon's divorce (obituary, April 23, 2012).

Her relationship with the veteran British sportswriter was not widely known. Once she was cited and it became public knowledge, the selectors took a dim view of her circumstances, brutally axing her after selection trials. She never played for England again.

Team-mates were incredulous at her omission as she had captained the team in the previous two years.

Val Robinson, who was chosen to replace her, said that all the players were “absolutely stunned” and that “no one said a word when the team was announced”.

“She was up there with the best I’ve ever played with. Always so gracious and vivacious, with never a bad word to say about anyone. She was the first to come over and wish me luck, and I can still see her trudging off with her suitcase.”

Pignon kept the dozens of letters of support she received from the public and fellow players for the rest of her life.

Variouly described as combative, formidable, supremely elegant and highly intelligent, Hickey attracted Pignon’s attention when she arrived at Wimbledon with Rita Bentley, a Federation Cup player and hockey international, wearing an eye-catching hat. He set up a blind date and after the romance blossomed they were married in July 1968.

Her stepdaughter, Suzanne, described Melvyn as “a wonderful, wonderful friend”. A shared love of horses had helped her and her younger sister get to know their stepmother during a difficult time for the family.

Wearing an eye-catching hat, she attracted Laurie Pignon’s attention

Suzanne added: “She had a horse called Winston Churchill, ‘Winchill’, and we all loved spending time with him. Melvyn was never judgmental and always willing to go that extra mile.” She and Laurie “absolutely adored each other, and after meeting it very quickly turned to a romantic and enduring love affair. She worshipped the ground he walked on and agreeing to be co-respondent was an indication of her devotion to him.”

Melvyn Mary Hickey was born in Stourbridge in 1930, the youngest of two children of Seymour Yorke Hickey, a civil servant in the Department of Pensions, and Madge (née Raymond). Her older brother, Raymond, died in 1995.

She excelled in all sports and first played hockey at Kidderminster High School for Girls. After training as a PE teacher at Lady Mabel College of Physical Education, near Rotherham in South Yorkshire, she began her teaching career at Joseph Leckie Comprehensive School in Walsall.

Playing for Kidderminster HC, she represented Worcestershire and from 1955 became a fixture in the Midlands team. She won the first of her 62 England caps against Ireland in 1957, also representing England on tours to South Africa in 1954, Australia in 1956, the Netherlands in 1959, and the USA in 1963.

She moved south in the late 1950s, living on a houseboat on Taggs Island, where former team-mates recalled numerous late-night parties.

Taking up posts at St Teresa’s RC Convent in Sunbury and Ashford Grammar School, she frequently honed her shooting skills against the first XI goalkeeper.

A tenacious real tennis player, she was a long-time member of the Royal Tennis Court, Hampton Court Palace, playing in numerous tournaments. She served on the executive committee of the Ladies Real Tennis Association (LRTA) for 13 years, as well as editing the LRTA newsletter and contributing a chapter in Lord Aberdare's book on tennis and rackets.

Widely acknowledged as a witty and brilliant writer, Melvyn Pignon often wrote for *Hockey Field* magazine and the All England Women's Hockey Association. She was president of Wimbledon Ladies HC, the oldest ladies hockey club in the world, for 21 years. In 1985 she drew on her famed charm to persuade the all-male members of the Wimbledon Club to amalgamate with the ladies.

Life with Laurie was never dull, and they enjoyed an idyllic existence at their cottage in Sunbury. A wonderful cook and hostess, Pignon also made all her own curtains and bedspreads, and when Laurie was away on one trip she thought nothing of redecorating the whole house.

Driving Laurie uncomplainingly to tennis tournaments all over Europe meant that the couple could never have pets, but the dogs in the village always stopped at the cottage gate on Rope Walk waiting for Melvyn to give them a biscuit.

She wrote a delightful account of how she once rescued a duckling close to death, revived it and set it off down the towpath to find its mother. On successfully reuniting the family, she was amazed to witness it swim off apparently none the worse for its ordeal.

She is survived by her two stepdaughters: Suzanne worked as a PA, and Jacqueline is a horticulturist.

Her sense of adventure never dimmed. She celebrated her 60th birthday with a hot-air balloon flight over the Surrey countryside.

When Pignon was diagnosed with dementia in 2010 it was a terrible blow to someone with such a lively mind; she fought it tooth and nail.

Melvyn Pignon, England hockey international, author and editor, was born on July 13, 1930. She died of a chest infection on September 4, 2016, aged 86