



## Clare Balding

(Newnham 1990) is a sports journalist and former champion amateur jockey. She presents all the BBC's horse racing coverage, and is also the main presenter for rugby league, show jumping and three-day eventing. In 2003 she was voted Sports Presenter of the Year

'I know Tuesday is terribly important because that's when we have to meet our supervisors,' I said to Jean Gooder, my director of studies, during my first week at Newnham. 'But I would very much like to go to Chepstow...'

'Chepstow?' she said. I explained that this was the racecourse where I was riding in the final race of the series to decide who would win the Lady Rider's Championship for 1990: 'If I win the championship, I would receive my weight in champagne – and bring reflected glory on to the college.' Luckily Jean was always good at compromise, so she made a deal with me: 'I understand every page of the newspaper except one – the racing page. You can go on Tuesday if you promise that by the time you leave here, I will understand the racing page too.'

In my third year, she and her husband came to stay with my parents at Kingsclere and we went racing at Newbury. I think that Richard Gooder was rather more keen to put money on horses than Jean was, but she loved the experience.

It's so extraordinary that I got into Cambridge. I wasn't a straight-A student at school. I got an A in my English A-level, but my grades in History and Latin were poor. I applied in 1988 to read Law at Christ's – my dad went there – because I thought this was a sensible thing to do. I was turned down.

At the time it was devastating. My father [Ian Balding, trainer of the champion Mill Reef] was very disappointed: he had got in with only O-levels! I couldn't bear him being so upset. I took myself off riding for two hours, which is my form of escapism.

It's what I always tended to do to get away from it all.

Then I was turned down by nearly every university in the country. In fact, it did work out for the best. This slap in the face was part of the reason why I had two years out between school and university. I took History A-level again and went to Paris, to the Sorbonne, and also to a typing school, which I hated, although I can now type very fast. It was 1988 when I started riding in races. My very big years were 1989 and 1990; I rode eight winners in one season and nine in the other.

I hadn't enjoyed my interview at Christ's; having come from an all-girls school, I wasn't very masculine in my thinking. So I was tutored at Radley College, the school my brother [trainer Andrew Balding] was at, where you learnt to be not so woolly in your thinking and to say things quicker and with more conviction. I felt terribly comfortable at the Newnham interview. I walked out thinking they were interested in me, which may have been the difference between Law and English. I loved Newnham. I loved the grounds, the buildings and the people.

I threw myself into university life. I was specially interested in the Union because I was fascinated by good speakers and debaters. I quite enjoyed the discipline of debating. Oddly, I find it is easier to argue for something you *don't* feel passionately about; you're not so tongue-tied. If you care too much, you cannot understand why no one else agrees with you.

I was President in my second year. I got elected thanks to the help of a friend at Peterhouse called Matthew Gould, who was the brains behind my manifesto; he eventually became a speechwriter for the late Robin Cook. As it was the summer term – ie. exams – it was difficult to get people to come to hear the debates, but there was a good turn-out when the Dalai Lama came to speak. He was a funny man, a real giggler and a very engaging orator. One of the motions we debated, not surprisingly given my interest in sport, was 'This House Believes It's the Winning, Not the Taking Part, That Counts'.

Speaking at the Union has probably helped me in my job but so has reading English. I think it teaches you how to think in sentences. It increases your vocabulary, and helps you structure an argument; and debating teaches you how to verbalise all that. This is the greatest training for when they tell me, 'Stand up and talk: the VT [videotape machine] has broken down'. At one Olympics, they mistimed the event and asked me, 'Can you talk for seven minutes?' Believe me, that's a long time.

When my father was at Cambridge, he would run off the rigger field and go and ride at Huntingdon racecourse. He was a much better amateur rider than me and could have been a professional. I gave up racing after the Ladies Championship, but I still used to ride because it was so central to my being: you need something in your life that you can do, like singing or art. I can't do either, but I can ride.

During my first year, and some of the second, I also used to get up early to row; in my third year I slept longer and worked harder. I used to get up at about five and drive – I was allowed a car – to Newmarket, but it was awfully hard to stay awake during lectures. This was quite an unusual thing to do. People can't just ring trainers and say they want to ride one of their thoroughbreds, but I'd had a fair amount of experience so I was regarded as safe-ish.

Lots of people at Cambridge were interested in horse racing. I was on the Committee of the Racing Society and helped organise a quiz – I may even have been asking the questions



Above. In the saddle, still a jockey in 1994. Top of page. In the pink. At Royal Ascot, July 2007

PA PHOTOS/DAMI DAVY



With Simon Mayo, presenting for Radio Five Live from the Centre Court at Wimbledon

– and John McCririck [Channel 4 racing pundit] and a few other telly people came down for a racing *Question of Sport*.

I really did enjoy English. The only bit I didn't like was Medieval English. I loved doing American literature, in particular the poems of Emily Dickinson. My father is half-American and it was fun paying homage to this part of his ancestry.

We read lots of Shakespeare, of course, and for this Germaine Greer was one of my supervisors. She could not abide ignorant people, but in your first year you're bound to be

ignorant. We got on, after a few occasions when I disagreed with her. Neither of us realised at the time that we shared an interest in racing, but since then I've met her a few times by chance at Newmarket where, for once, I've had the upper hand in terms of knowledge. She's keen to learn more about the horses and how to tell what 'looks well' in the paddock.

Jean Gooder was a most incredibly warm person but she didn't take any nonsense – and I did try it on from time to time. Although she never went on about what I did at the Union, I think she was pleased about it. She always thought it was important to have outside interests, and to make the most of university life. And I really think my other activities – riding, rowing and debating – made me a better student.

Jean was a hugely influential person in my life; she believed in me and so I believed in myself. She probably shouldn't have done so, but she told me that her husband had marked

one of my Finals papers. The names were not given to the examiners but he read out part of an essay from one of the candidates and was very complimentary about it – and she knew it was me. He gave me a First on that paper. My degree was a 2.1. I would have slipped into a safe 2.2 without Jean; that's all I thought I was worth but she made me think differently.

After Cambridge I got a job on Radio 5, doing a couple of early morning race reports, and through that a job as a BBC trainee. I've now worked for BBC radio and television for twelve years and am looking forward to staying put, at least until the London Olympics in 2012. Originally I imagined going into written journalism rather than television, but that worried me because I was reading so much great literature. I thought, 'How am I to write anything that is going to last as long as that?' Now I've stopped worrying. ■

**Interview by Jonathan Sale**

DAVID FISHER/REX FEATURES



**Konnie Huq**  
(Robinson 1993) leaves *Blue Peter* shortly after ten years as its first Asian presenter. She also presents 4Radio's 'The Tube' on [www.channel4radio.com](http://www.channel4radio.com)

'Please don't ask me anything about Economics! I haven't done any!' I remember thinking desperately when I came up for interview from Notting Hill and Ealing High School. I'd done Physics, Chemistry and Maths at A-level but didn't want to do sciences any more. It was either law or economics – and I didn't want to be a lawyer. In the event they did ask me one economics question, but I managed to bluff my way through it.

Economics is a good degree to have, though I honestly didn't find it the most riveting of subjects. A lot was self-taught: I particularly enjoyed my dissertation on youth culture and consumerism. Cambridge approaches the subject in a very theoretical way but some of the lecturers make it very entertaining. I specially enjoyed the lectures of James Trevithick and his book *Involuntary Unemployment*. It was my Bible. I liked the way he wrote, the way he explained his subject and the way his brain worked. I once went up to him in a pub and said, "You're really brilliant". Another book I liked was *The State We're In* by Will Hutton.



Though my sister Rupa was at Newnham, I wasn't sure about going to Cambridge; I thought historic colleges like King's and Trinity might be a bit stuffy. Now I like old colleges, but I enjoyed being at Robinson, which is not so steeped in tradition. Formal halls can seem overwhelming to outsiders, but at Robinson they didn't feel at all like some strange freemasons' event – maybe because there wasn't much Latin. Robinson is much more like a regular modern uni; you weren't about to come across anything archaic, like a member of the Pitt Club. It was a really sociable place, and I'm still in touch with loads of my contemporaries. University is good for your social skills: much better than schools, which are quite insular.

Robinson is built in tiers. You have French widows with balconies, so you can walk along someone's balcony and bang on the windows. The layout is like a rat-run and very good for 'Assassin', the game we played during Rag Week. You were given the name of someone in the college, who you were then supposed to spy on and shoot with a water pistol. For the victims the library and hall were safe-rooms. The library with its big windows and little cubby-holes – hidey-holes – I really liked.

I still have lots of images of Cambridge: May Balls, punting, lectures, the Sidgwick site, bops in different colleges. I was the Rag Week co-ordinator one year, and on the May Ball Committee the year we hired the Abba tribute band, Björn Again. Rob Webb, of Mitchell and Webb [later stars of the cult television series *Peep Show*], was reading English at Robinson and in Footlights when I was there.

At the age of fourteen I'd been on *Blue Peter* with the National Youth Music Theatre and sang a solo, and always thought I'd like to act at Cambridge. In fact I didn't do anything like that. In vacations I was filming. I'd done a bit of television before Cambridge – I saw an ad for a cable and satellite station in *Time Out* – so it was already in my system. During my first year I presented a morning show on GMTV. With the eight-week Cambridge term – eight weeks and you're out – it was easy to find a big block of time for



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With television presenter Vanessa Feltz (Trinity 1980); and, right, on duty last year at Postman Pat's 25th anniversary party

recording. It was a quiz show called *Eat Your Words*. There were forfeits like a custard pie in your face, but it wasn't really *that* gungey. Nobody at Cambridge noticed the show.

I didn't do anything for Q103, the Cambridge commercial radio station, although I've recently been presenting *The Tube*, the music show on the internet station 4Radio. I was going to join the Union, but people who *had* joined put me off. In a way I wish I had. I got asked to talk at the Oxford Union recently and wanted to go, but couldn't because of filming. I've never been asked to the Cambridge Union.

There was no masterplan for my career. I got a 2.1 in Finals, worked at *Q* magazine (where I'd spent some time during my summer holidays), then was at Channel Five, then *Blue Peter*. A lot of my friends who did Economics ended up working

in the City, of course. My director of studies was asked to recommend high-fliers to the Bank of England and recommended me. I honestly had no interest in it, but thought I'd better go and visit. The two people I met were quite nice: both wearing suits: brown, not grey, not black. Then I found out that it was dress-down day in the office, and remember thinking, 'If this is dress-down day, what are the ordinary days like?' There was an aptitude test too, in which I did really badly.

Weirdly, for years after that the bank used to write to me at Robinson College, addressing me as 'Dr Huq' and asking me to recommend good students for interview. Someone plainly got their files or databases mixed up. And I did think it would be funny to recommend a friend who was no good at Economics... ■

Interview by Jonathan Sale