

We live in an information age.

It's probably not as cold as an ice age, or as boring as a stone age, but it comes with its own peculiar set of challenges and frustrations. One of which is that, for many of us, the closest we seem to be to the ones we love is reading about them on Facebook.

Facebook always strikes me as a slightly dull and unimaginative way to try and do justice to something as complicated and extraordinary as a human being. Especially when that human being is Maxwell Biles, who made being human look effortless, and exciting, and genuinely worthwhile.

But, over the last seven days, the eloquent and affectionate tributes posted by so many of Max's friends and team-mates have helped me to better appreciate somebody I didn't see as often as I would have liked in recent years. I'm sure I speak on behalf of his wider family, when I say that they have helped us better come to terms with his loss.

By way of expressing our gratitude to all of you, I'd like to begin by offering a view of the Max we grew up with – a friendly, fun-loving cousin, or nephew, or brother, or son, who does not seem to have forsaken any of these qualities to manhood.

The memories have fermented into family folklore. All of us will remember those afternoons, playing musical chairs at Melcombe Avenue, skimming stones at Greenhill,

running rampant around the gardens of the many homes and houses at which the Biles resided over the years we grew to know them.

When we cousins met up it was generally a boisterous affair, under the watchful eye of an older generation who seemed to relish seeing their offspring come together, like some deranged human chemistry experiment. We formed the kind of unholy whirlwind that ought to instil fear into anybody of an adult sensibility, but generally precipitated an air of dignified resignation, as the fruit of their collective loins tore pieces out of grandpas gooseberry bush.

Max was in the thick of it. He was never a bad kid, far from it, even at a young age he had a highly refined sense of right and wrong. It's just that gooseberries don't deal in right and wrong. They're just a spiny Eurasian shrub, with greenish purple-tinged flowers, and ovoid yellow-green or purple-red berries. They never saw Max Biles coming.

You love your children. You shower them in affection, you watch them running naked in the summer sun, bathed in love. As young children, as cousins, we knew nothing but peace, and tranquillity, and family. Max was at the heart of that, the spirit of youth, the vanguard of fair-play. Our late grandfather, Ted, the head of that side of our family, I believe his greatest satisfaction was watching our generation raise hell in his herbaceous border.

If I had a year or two on Max, it might just as easily have been the other way round. I remember visiting him once, at one of the many military barracks at which the Biles resided.

I remember asking him once why he was friends with one of the more awkward and unpopular boys living there. The answer was simple – it was because he and Leo were the only friends the boy had.

This was twenty five odd years ago, but I remember it vividly, maybe in part because it put me to shame, but also because of the strength of character and emotional sophistication it showed in somebody who can only have been six or seven years old.

Looking over your tributes to Max, you recognise him as...

...a gentleman...

...a gentle giant...

...one of the nicest guys you'd ever meet...

...a true legend...

...irreplaceable...

...a beautiful soul...

...maybe just too good for this world.

From some of the photographs taken of Max over the last few years I can see that, whether on the rugby pitch, or on the dance floor, or on the lash, he had some pretty choice moves. After all, this is somebody who listed among his interests 'sports', 'the Oxford English Dictionary', 'chaos' and 'dancing with the points of my elbows flailing dangerously'.

Looking at some of the Facebook groups of which he was a member...

...Rugby is better than Football...

...Rugby Union is better than Rugby League...

...Petition to sack Brian Moore from the BBC.

...we can see that Max loved rugby, and - like so many of us - appreciated that, while Brian may have been a world-class hooker, he lacks the tactical insight and verbal dexterity to justify his continued selection for the BBC commentary team.

If rugby was his first sporting love, it was surely because, like all true leaders of men, he cherished the fellowship and camaraderie he encountered on and around the rugby field. He lifted a few cups in his time, and plenty of glasses. Max had a natural sense of fair play, loving lager, beer, ale, stout, bitter and cider in equal measure, the measure in question being that of the pint.

Max also proved himself pretty handy with bat and ball – once, if I’ve understood the figures correctly, taking five wickets for four runs. No doubt he met each of the departing batsman – the hapless victims of such a clinical spell of bowling – with the same good humour and broad, knowing smile with which he seemed to meet life itself.

Max has been described as ‘a renaissance man’, and this he clearly was, matching great sporting prowess with creativity and flair as a writer and performer. I never made it to one of his legendary Christmas pantomimes, but I do know that he loved good monster movies. I can only wonder at how he might have woven the story of the Nativity and that of the Creature from the Black Lagoon into a piece of compelling seasonal theatre.

He possessed a keen mind, with a talent for Monopoly, suggesting a bright career in business. Fortunately he possessed more than just financial acumen, and seems to have instinctively understood that a career in something as clumsy as commerce would have been a waste of his prodigious talents, not to mention his precious time.

All in all, everybody Max came into contact with – even Anne Robinson – seems to have quickly developed a soft spot for him, sensing a man of character, possessing an extraordinary emotional intelligence rare in a man of his time.

As youngsters, we didn’t have to look far to see where he got it from. If he got his heart and soul from his mother, it was his father, Chris, who taught him how to use it, just as it was Chris who first taught him how to hold a rugby ball, or how to use state-of-the-art army-issue night-vision equipment to go badger spotting.

Anybody who knew Chris wouldn’t be surprised by the man Max grew into. Competitive, yet compassionate, both were fair-minded, and generous of spirit.

Both understood that true fulfilment isn't found in a huge salary, or material wealth; it exists in the love and affection of friends and family; the loyalty and admiration of team-mates and supporters; the gratitude of strangers, who might not have the right to expect your help, but to whom you volunteer it nonetheless. Both had the wisdom to understand this, and, more unusually, the resolve to follow it through.

That Max, like Chris, was taken from us so much before his time, causes me the greatest sadness I have known in my life. I can only imagine how Liz, Briony and Leo have withstood such loss, and all I can offer is the promise that we will honour their memories. And being here, before you now, is my greatest honour, and will stay with me, until the day when I can hope to see him again.

Max was golden. And, though he has been taken from us, he will shine forever, in the heavens of our hearts and minds.