

Maurice Watkins CBE 1941 – 2021 obituary

One of the UK's best known sports lawyers, former Manchester United director, Maurice Watkins has died.

He was currently chairman of British Swimming and oversaw a new era which has seen the GB swimmers become a powerhouse and have their best ever Olympics in Tokyo.

Maurice was the mastermind who drafted many Premiership hirings and firings of top players and managers during 28 years as an Old Trafford director until 2012 – and the man who famously brokered the deal to keep Sir Alex Ferguson after he had decided to quit. Fans would chant Maurice's nickname "Mo" at home games.

Sir Alex said; "Maurice was really supportive during my time as manager and great company. In my 26 years there were some rocky moments and he was always there with wise advice. He had great energy as well – involved in so many organisations.

"He was unflappable. During some tense games I'd look over and he would be calmly reading the programme.

"His legal experience was invaluable. When I called him to say I wanted to stay at United he said they had already sorted a new manager, but not to worry he would dig us out. And he did. He was a true gentleman"

Maurice, 79 year old father of four - Andrew, Peter, Timothy and James and stepdaughter Emma - had battled with prostate cancer for years. For the past 29 years he shared his life in Cheshire with partner Elaine.

After leaving MUFC, he was appointed chairman of British Swimming and led the organisation with a change of direction into history-making medal success at the Tokyo Olympics.

Jack Buckner CEO British Swimming paid tribute to the way Maurice transformed the organisation's performance and culture which led to outstanding results in the pools at Tokyo.

He said; "I have been fortunate to experience Maurice's personal dignity and humility. He has been a leader of deep wisdom and patient intelligence, the wise steward at the heart of the sport.

"Even in his last days his total focus was on Tokyo and the great events which unfolded there.

"Maurice - a piece of these medals belongs to you."

Solicitor Maurice navigated Manchester United through the legal and media minefield following Eric Cantona's infamous Kung Fu kick on a Crystal Palace fan in 1995.

Every major deal at the Reds since 1976 when he first became involved at Old Trafford until he stepped down from the board have involved the law expert who was renowned and respected internationally throughout sport for his diplomatic and professional skills.

He was head of sport law for Brabners solicitors in Manchester and always said he would carry on working to the end.

But it was not just football where he shone. He was interim chairman of the Rugby Football League in 2012, chairman of the Greyhound Board of Great Britain from 2009 to 2014, was a current director of Lancashire County Cricket Club, chairman of the European Swimming Legal Committee a trustee of the Professional Footballers Pension Scheme and the former chairman of the British Basketball Federation. He was also chairman of Barnsley FC for four years.

He was voted 2014 International Sports and Entertainment Lawyer of the Year at the Who's Who Legal Annual Awards in New York.

Away from sport he was back at his old school, Manchester Grammar School where chaired the board and launched a bursary programme for parents who could not afford the fees. For the NHS he helped raise over £68 million for hospitals as chairman of the Royal Manchester Children's Hospital charity appeals board. He was made CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours 2011 for services to charity.

During his many overseas business trips he even met the Pope in Italy and Nelson Mandela in South Africa.

Recently, Maurice completed the manuscript for a book about his life in sport. It is due to be published later this year.

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