

Alfred Harding

Joined Club:	1934
Membership Years:	1934-2000
Management Committee:	1934-1989
Chairman	1962-1972
President	1960-1989
Elected Life Member:	1949



Empire could not have chosen a better founder for its club than Alf Harding - a gifted and enthusiastic sportsman and administrator and a proud advocate of Petone.

Until his final illness in 1997 and death at the dawn of the new millennium on 1 January 2000, he was to give his talents, enthusiasm and unwavering support to the Empire club for a remarkable 66 years. Made a Life Member in 1949 and Patron from 1990 to 1997, he was accorded the official title of *Founding Member* from then until his death in his 87th year. His memory lives on.

Alf was adept at recognising the potential in others and was always generous with his support and encouragement. But he always led by example: spending hours in the cold streets selling raffle tickets to raise funds for building improvements - and even once being threatened with arrest by Wellington Police for his "over-enthusiastic approaches to passers-by" (their words - Alf called it "passion for the cause") on Lambton Quay.

Going back to the birth of Empire, Alf recalled in his preface to *50th Jubilee souvenir publication*, of which he was the author, that the club was formed to give his Empire cricket club members off-season interest and activity - women taboo! It was back in 1930 and the cricket club consisted of an enthusiastic group of Petone and Lower Hutt teenagers with an average age of 16.

Alf adopted the pen-grip style and soon became as much adept with the small bat as with his larger cricket bat. He was club singles champion for the first three years (1934-36) and won 10 open doubles club titles - the last in 1972 in the mixed doubles partnered by his wife Merle.

He played regular interclub from 1935 to the mid-1970s and was a member of six champion A Grade teams and six champion A Reserve teams. In 1946 he played in the winning New Zealand "Champion of Champions" team. He represented Hutt Valley at senior level six times between 1936 and 1952, and in 1964 made headlines by being named HV captain at the age of 50. He won the Over 45 Men's Doubles at the 1965 New Zealand Championships.

At the age of 80 he took bronze at the 1994 World Veteran Championships in Melbourne in the men's 80-and-over doubles, an achievement he regarded as the highlight of his playing career. He was the only member of the 61-strong New Zealand contingent to bring home a top medal and only the second New Zealander to ever win a medal at world level. He was very proud that his wife Merle won the women's 80-and-over singles consolation event at the same championships.

Even during the Second World War Alf managed to keep up his table tennis. While serving with the RNZAF he won the South Pacific Islands championship and for the rest of his life carried around the clipping which told how the "chunky champion from Down Under pinged and ponged his American opponent off the table" to win the title.

Alf's newspaper career and his love of table tennis were intertwined. Starting work as a message boy at the age of 14 on Boxing Day, 1927, he worked handling paper roll cutoffs in the bowels of the old Evening Post building in Wellington's

Willis Street and it was during these days that he first picked up a bat. The table used to cut the rolls doubled as a table tennis table during the 30 minute lunch breaks, where he once recalled "there was always a rush for getting out there early and getting a game".



Alf Harding in 1937

Writing and submitting articles to the paper on table tennis, cricket and rugby brought him to the notice of the sports staff and he was "given a chance" to become a reporter. Approaching the challenge in typical Alf fashion he rose to be deputy sports editor and later moved into general reporting. He was eventually appointed chief reporter at the Hutt Office.

The High Street office for the 18 years from 1959 to his 1977 retirement was legendary for the table tennis table which dominated the room. Alf's answer to any critics about such an unusual office set-up was that staff never went out for lunch and thus were always on hand if a big story broke. The value of his newspaper connection in giving table tennis a public profile is hugely underestimated.

As an administrator, Alf put a lot back into sport over and above his connection with the Empire Club. He cut his administrative teeth on the Hutt Valley Cricket Association management committee in the early 1930s and went on to join the Hutt Valley Table Tennis Association in its foundation year. In his 16 years on that executive he was treasurer, sole selector and then its chairman for 9 years. He continued as Patron of HVTTA until his death. He was a member of the New Zealand Table Tennis Association Executive for 25 years, the last 12 as its chairman. He was a Life Member of NZTTA, Hutt Valley TTA and Empire.

In a tribute to Alf upon his retirement from the National body at the age of 68, Evening Post reporter Milton Hayes noted that meetings of the NZTTA executive would not seem the same without Alf, "the jaunty man from Hutt Valley". He wrote: "People involved with the sport throughout the country - and one suspects that smiling Alf knows most of them personally - will find it hard to believe that *Mr Table Tennis* has had enough."

In 1971, Alf was manager of the New Zealand table tennis team to the Commonwealth Championships (Singapore) and to the World Championships (Japan). He accompanied the Chinese team on their tour of New Zealand in 1972.

At club level, from 1934 Alf was secretary for the first eight years and treasurer also for the first two. He served as President (1960-89), Chairman (1962-1971) and Patron (1990-1997). After the 1998 restructure of club administration he was accorded the unique honour of being named at the head of Office Bearers as *Founding Member*. He attended his last AGM in 1997.

On 17 September 1994, Alf and wife Merle were guests of honour at the Empire Club's 60th Jubilee dinner. They were transported by limousine to the venue where Hutt City Mayor Glen Evans was on hand with over 100 well-wishers to pay tribute to the club and its contribution to sport and the Hutt Valley.

Alf was much blessed that the two women in his life supported and shared his interest in his beloved table tennis. In the first club championships after WW2 Alf's first wife, Mavis, made waves as a new player, causing an upset in the women's doubles with Pat Meddings by beating two Hutt Valley representatives. Mavis went on to become an A grade player as well as always being a willing helper wherever the club needed her. Her name lives on in the Mavis Harding Memorial Rosebowl. Sadly Mavis died young in 1951, leaving Alf with two wee girls, Lynn and Shirley. The girls were 14 and 12 when Alf married widow Merle in 1959 and all of them embraced the Empire 'family', Merle later modestly recalling Alf "talked me into playing table tennis and I improved from then on".

In 1972 one of Fiji's top table tennis players, Pat Low, was introduced to the family through Lynn. Pat was suffering from a serious bone disease and, at Lynn's urging, Merle and Alf assisted him to have operations in New Zealand to save his leg and eventually helped him settle here permanently. Thus an honorary son joined the Harding family - and Empire. Pat's second child, Melanie Low, went on to represent New Zealand at the world table tennis championships. It was a proud day and the best 'thank you' the Hardings could wish for.

Alf's fatherly nature, demonstrated here with the Low family and manifested in multiple other ways, embraced not just his own extended family, but the Empire Table Tennis club as a whole. His legacy lives on - in today's Empire.