

## Sport Rugby union

# 'I know half of the crowd – if we lose I won't go to the shop'

John Westerby meets two Bath men, past and present, who know the pressure and joy of a West Country derby

When you have experienced the intensity and tribal rivalry of a derby between Bath and Bristol, the occasion tends to live long in the memory. Freddie Burns remembers watching from the stands as a 14-year-old, rejoicing when Frikkie Welsh scored a length-of-the-field try for Bath, then crestfallen when Bristol stole a dramatic victory with a late try from Lee Robinson. On Saturday, Burns will take the field for his boyhood club as this particular West Country derby is transported to a grander stage at Twickenham.

"Growing up in Bath, watching and now playing for them, these games remind you what it means to pull on the shirt," Burns said. "West Country rugby was strong when I was growing up and these derbies are great for the game."

Tony Sutton needs to go a little farther back for his derby recollections. Now 98, the oldest living former Bath player, a veteran of the Normandy landings, Sutton will travel to Twickenham from his home in Devon on Saturday and recalls the closely contested games with Bristol in the late 1940s. "They were very keenly fought but never ill tempered," Sutton said. "We were both strong sides, Bristol probably slightly stronger. And most of our players had Somerset accents."

Burns, the fly half, is one of the few among the present first-team squad to speak with the local burr, which helps to explain his fondness for games against Bath's near neighbours. He is familiar with more than one side of these rivalries, too, having spent the

first seven years of his career with Gloucester. After The Clash against Bristol Bears on Saturday, for which about 55,000 tickets have been sold, Bath travel to Kingsholm seven days later. "To have these derbies coming up with so much still to play for is fantastic," Burns said.

Just as vividly etched in Sutton's memory as those derby games are the meetings Bath enjoyed against leading Welsh clubs. "Cardiff were extremely tough opponents," Sutton, comfortable in the back row or second row, said. "And I remember playing Llanelli away and we beat them one try to nothing. When we got back to Bath, one of the committee members had organised a band to welcome us home when we arrived at the station. That was nice."

In the professional era, the depth of feeling for the club among local supporters can feel like a mixed blessing. As someone who grew up in the city, Burns is never short of advice after a game. "It feels like I know half the crowd when we play at the Rec," he said. "It's great but it puts more pressure on. I tend to stay out of town after a loss. I'm lucky that I live a few hundred metres from my parents' house. If I've got no food in the fridge after we've been beaten at home, I won't



Sutton, circled, playing in the 1948 West Country derby and, below, with Burns, the fly half, who will face Bristol on Saturday

go to Morrisons, I'll go and have dinner at my mum's."

That claustrophobic feeling hit home for Burns in October after a highly publicised error against Toulouse, when a premature try celebration before the ball was knocked from his grasp over the tryline contributed to an agonising defeat. "You're going to get the negative response, the pointing and the laughing," Burns said. "But the general support I got was great. My mum was pretty upset after the game and, as she was leaving, someone gave her a hug, and that was brilliant. It was hard to escape for a while and there were some quite extreme reactions. I feel like I owe the club. You move on but it still stings."

Unlike Burns, Sutton was not one of those born and bred in Bath. He came to the club for the 1948 season, moving to the city, aged 27, to complete his articles as a solicitor. After serving in the Westminster Dragoons in the Second World War, for which he was awarded the Military Cross and the Legion d'Honneur, he graduated from Oxford, where he played lock in the university's multinational first XV. "We had quite a few returned warriors, a bit older and more experienced," Sutton said. "We won all our matches in my second year, we had a very good side."

His team-mates included Basil "Jika" Travers, an Australian flanker who won six caps for England, Ossie Newton-Thompson, a South African scrum half, capped twice by England in 1947, and Martin Donnelly, the New Zealander who also won a cap at centre for England in 1947, but better known as one of cricket's finest postwar batsmen.

Like Travers, Newton-Thompson and Donnelly, Sutton played for the university at cricket. He had one game for Somerset in 1948 but it was with that Oxford University team that Sutton enjoyed his finest moments on the cricket field. The 6ft 4in off spinner took five wickets against MCC at Lord's in 1946, a haul including the wickets of Denis Compton and Bill Edrich. Typically for a No 10 batsman, though, he took as much pleasure in a rare success with the bat. "I made 25 in that game and hit Compton for six," he said. "He was bowling chinamen and I thought, well, if it's turning that way, I can hit it that way. So I did. It very nearly cleared Father Time [a weather vane at Lord's]. Compton was furious."

But his fondest memories came from Oxford's games against Yorkshire at The Parks. The first, in 1946, was Sutton's first-class debut and he soon found himself bowling to none other than Len Hutton. "I thought I'd bowl him two fairly fast off spinners to start with, then flight one and try to get him that way," he said. "The first one he played nicely past mid-on and took two runs. The next one was exactly the same, it turned a little and he missed it. It hit his pad and went on to the wicket. I never got a chance to bowl that third ball at him."

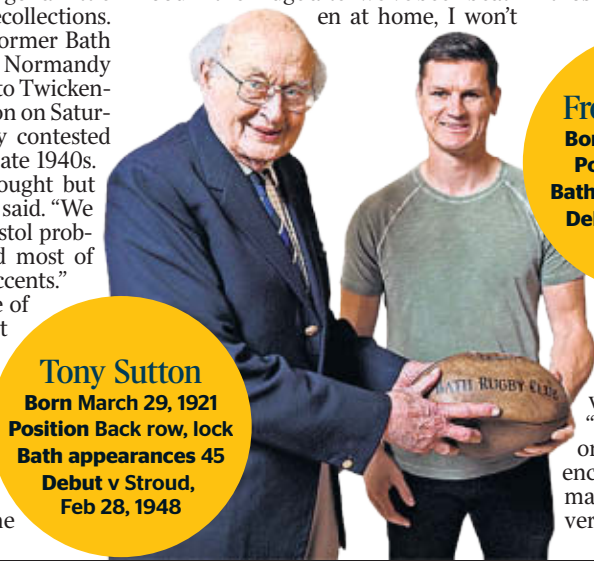
Remarkably, the next time he came up against the great England batsman, the following summer, he bowled him out again. "Yes, but he'd made a hundred by then," Sutton said. "He was ready to get out."

Tales of those postwar sporting triumphs are told with the perspective of what had gone before. In Sutton's case, this was playing his part in the invasion of the Normandy landings, sweeping the beaches for German-laid mines. "We had to be first on the beaches and my brother was there on D-Day," he said. "I arrived in a Jeep four days later. That was a terribly important contribution to the success of the landing." His regiment later moved on to the Netherlands, where Sutton saw the action that would earn him the Military Cross.

"He saw a wounded man lying in a ditch ... dismounted from his tank and crawled some twenty yards under continuous machine gun fire," his citation reads. "After about ten minutes, Lt Sutton regained his tank with the man and, with the assistance of another member of the crew, succeeded in landing him on to the deck and reaching safety."

The glorious triviality of sport has perhaps never been felt so keenly as by those who survived to play in the post-war years. To those who lived through such experiences, a ball dropped carelessly over the tryline, a narrow defeat in a derby, was quickly put in true perspective. "I was very lucky," Sutton said. "We all felt very lucky."

● To buy tickets for *The Clash between Bath and Bristol Bears at Twickenham on Saturday*, from £15 per adult and £5 per junior, visit [bathrugby.com](http://bathrugby.com)



**Tony Sutton**  
Born March 29, 1921  
Position Back row, lock  
Bath appearances 45  
Debut v Stroud,  
Feb 28, 1948

**Freddie Burns**  
Born May 13, 1990  
Position Fly half  
Bath appearances 37  
Debut v Saracens,  
Sept 9, 2017