

Canons Park: *The fulfillment of an ASL dream 20 years on*

AS SL marks 20 years of Canons Park, Alice Iacuesssa (ASL 1979–2000) and Cathy Adams (ASL 1974–2005) asked a host of ASLers past and present to cast their minds back to recall the history of the school's playing fields at Canons Park.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the school's purchase of Canons Park playing fields on Honeypot Lane, Stanmore. For many years, the absence of outdoor athletics facilities at ASL had presented a significant problem for the School. At the time, our fifth head of school, **Judith Glickman (ASL 1992–98)**, commented, "We have been at the mercy of rents, schedules and usage rules of local parks...I am immensely pleased that we have acquired such a superb facility." Erstwhile athletics director John Lockwood

added, "At long last, we can have home games!"

Being situated in London, the School was incredibly lucky to find such a large expanse of green in a location accessible in less than half an hour, served by the Jubilee underground line. Captain of the 1994 girls soccer team **Kristen Deaton '94** approved of the purchase. "It's great having home fields and being able to host tournaments," she declared in 1994.

The School took possession of the 21-acre site in January 1994, an acquisition made possible by donations and pledges from ASL parents, alumni, friends and corporations, and overseen by then board chair **John Farmer (P '91 '94 '97)**, and director of institutional advancement **Don Kirkwood (ASL 1992–94; P '96 '08)**. A fun-filled day of

celebration to officially open the fields took place on Saturday, 30 April 1994, organized in true ASL style by a group of dedicated parents. Local residents were also invited, including fields neighbor Jack Packer, who opined, "In the 35 years I've lived here, we've never seen such a happy occasion!"

At the time of purchase the fields were owned by the Parochial Foundation of the Church of England and ASL was given a 250-year lease. The land was overgrown and neglected and a combine harvester had to be hired to cut the grass. Stanmore Tennis Club continued to use the fields for a year after ASL took ownership, and Watford Football Club approached **Alf Buksh (ASL 1994–2010)**, who refereed Watford's games, to ask to use the fields for training sessions during the week. Watford stayed for five years, and was elevated to the Premier League during this period.

Back in the present day, Athletic Assistant **Doreen Murphy (ASL 1988–present)**, who attended the celebration in 1994, observes, "Over the years there have been massive changes at Canons Park. The grounds now have four 11-a-side soccer fields, three 8-a-side soccer fields, two rugby fields, two permanent baseball fields and one permanent softball field."

To broaden the program for our youngest students, 2005 saw the launch of the lower school environmental project,

which gives our students an opportunity to learn in a way that is qualitatively different from their classroom experience. Lower school students visit the garden for a full day six times during the school year. Environmental Education Teacher **Lee Phifer (ASL 1992–present)** has led the project since its inception. Writing in 2008, Lee expressed, "Every day, students make discoveries as nature opens up a new world to them. Visiting the same place repeatedly gives them a chance to compare, to hone their connections with nature and its components...Nature is a great teacher."

The pavilion received a complete refurbishment thanks to the PCA in 2011, which also brought improvements to the play and study spaces. The facility now benefits from a bright and airy function room, a modern kitchen, improved

changing rooms, a physio room, offices and storage areas. In celebration, an ice-cream social was enjoyed by the community in October that year, along with a quiz night for faculty and staff the previous month.

Canons Park is also used during the summer for a significant part of the ASL Summer Program, organized for many years by **Trevor Jones (ASL mid-80s–present)** and his team and, until his retirement this year, **Bob Carter (ASL 1969–2014)**.

Remembering Canons in the early days, **Ollie Weiner '96** describes the rather neglected facilities, "The fields held great promise, but the locker room looked like it had been frozen in time, years previously. Dirt and dust were everywhere. Thankfully, my mind has blocked any memory of the shower area!"



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Accents Fall '14



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Doreen Murphy recalls the state of the grounds, “The field was a marshland and had to be drained two or three times. The baseball team was the first to use Canons Park, but we had trouble getting red sand to build the diamond. And the gates had to be widened to accommodate the athletes’ buses.” It’s reported that neighbors became annoyed because balls kept going into their gardens. John Lockwood had to make peace.

But progress began and **Bob James (ASL 1994–2006)** was hired as groundsman that first summer and moved into the house at the fields with his family. Alf Buksh was also hired as custodian. While Bob lovingly nurtured the turf, Alf oversaw the running of Canons by scheduling events, hiring referees, maintaining uniforms, and working with the Booster Club.

Mark Dodson '98 has memories of both Alf and Bob as kind gentlemen, who took a lot of pride in their work. He goes on to recall an incident involving Bob and Trevor Jones in the late 90s. “Bob was particularly proud of the grounds. Trevor was overseeing the Summer Program and was boasting to the students at lunch about his golf skills. The students challenged him to prove it, and everyone went outside to watch Trevor hit golf balls. What they didn’t see, however, was that Bob had cordoned off a section of the main soccer field next to the clubhouse because he had just reseeded it. Trevor proceeded to hit balls one after the other, taking huge divots with each swing! Bob was all the way across the park at the time. When he saw what Trevor was doing with his beloved turf, he sprinted across from the far corner, yelling madly all the way. He may have been red faced from running and screaming, but the students were impressed with his pace!”

Mark also has memories of Alf having to put up with the Dodson family dog, Quincy. On more than one occasion, referee Alf had to stop a soccer game because Quincy had arrived late and bounded onto the pitch to greet him.

Nicole Ceccacci '97, a member of the girls soccer team, recalls the commute, which seemed quite a way to students living in central London. “At first the girls dreaded the trip, but in the end it gave them more time to laugh, joke and chat.



The team always stopped to get candy on the way home, much to the dismay of Coach **Dave Noble (ASL 1971–1998)!**

ASL enjoying home facilities ultimately won over the students. Ollie Weiner remembers that pre Canons Park, the rugby team practiced at Primrose Hill or Regent’s Park, “Both of which were horrible. Even the flattest part of Primrose Hill felt like the bottom of Kilimanjaro, with concrete sidewalks running through it, but the camaraderie was there.” It was, he says, a unique group of boys, coached by a man who drove a convertible and carried an acoustic guitar—Trevor Jones.

In 1996, ASL hosted its first ISST at Canons Park—rugby. Doreen Murphy recalls that the kitchen facilities were not yet finished, so the nearby Busy Bee Café served the referees. The ASL team



didn’t win any medals, but, according to Ollie, it finally had a home at Canons Park.

The softball team was another group to use the fields in the early days, but not just for practicing softball. As Coach **Keith Bing (ASL 1981–2003)** recounts, “There is buried treasure at Canons Park. Before ISSTs, the girls buried personal mementos at the fields. If the team won, they were dug up; if the team lost, they stayed in the ground forever. One year, the team buried a stuffed kangaroo. The team won the ISST championship and the girls were more interested in digging up the kangaroo than getting medals!”

It seems the softball team also loved to play pranks. Coach Bing elaborates, “One year, the prank was on the varsity boys baseball team. Just before the boys departed for their ISST, the softball girls painted the boys’ catching gear and batting helmets pink, and included flowers and slogans.” Keith recalls that the baseball team finished second in the ISST, above projections, so the pink and flowers helped the boys. The softball team also hosted a mock wedding for Keith and wife **Sharon (ASL 1994–2003)** at Canons Park prior to their official ceremony.

The athletes and coaches who used Canons Park in the mid 90s could not have imagined the 21st-century facility we enjoy today, but they did embrace the fields as home and started to create ASL memories.

