

# The Grand Old Duke of Edinburgh has no patience with political correctness

Saturday, 15 May 2004

Ian Wooldridge Daily Mail 15 May 2004

Mercifully the Grand Old Duke of Edinburgh - now 82 and still competitively carriage driving like some demonic Wells Fargo Charioteer - has no patience with political correctness. True, he occasionally puts both feet in it up to his garters but mostly his more considered observations have an earthy grain of truth, never more so when the subject is sport. Having frequently lambasted the disastrous sell-off of playing fields, he has now concentrated attention on another calamitous blight which is making a mockery of the pious vows to raise a healthier, less obese, more adventurous generation of youngsters. Every week more than a million unpaid volunteers have been serving in capacities from tea lady to head coach at more than 100,000 sports clubs in Britain. Gradually, in some cases in droves, they are dropping out.

The reason? They are worried about becoming the victims, not of the beneficiaries, of our country's latest hobby: the compensation culture. Equally this applies to schools, where teachers are increasingly concerned about being hauled into catastrophic litigation should a young batsman take a glancing blow on the head in the nets while under supervision, and then find themselves sued by some unscrupulous parent alleging the poor child had been brain-damaged in perpetuity. Obviously there are many genuine claims and payouts for industrial accidents. There are also many that are spurious, fatuous and, in some cases, patently fraudulent. I am a great admirer of sports coverage on Sky Television but I must confess that every 15 minutes or so, during the commercial breaks, I feel like kicking in the screen. Remorselessly, an actor with wriggling shoulders and a woman of concerned countenance advise you that if you have slipped on a spilled fried egg in a restaurant or tripped over a marginally unaligned pavement stone in the high street, you can sue for compensation on a no-win-no-fee basis. Then up comes a beaming recipient brandishing a cheque for anything from Â£5,000 to Â£50,000. Heavens, had I claimed for all the mishaps that have befallen me, mostly of my own making, some attributable to a liking for Scotland's better malts, I'd be writing this column from a gently swaying yacht moored just offshore from a Mediterranean casino.

Our government has prevaricated about this problem but I am happy to record that in Parliamentary committee last Wednesday morning three Labour MPs - the irrepressible Kate Hoey, Derek Wyatt and Frank Dobson - plus a couple of Tories and Lib Dems urged our rulers to get off their backsides and intervene. They were armed with case histories that mysteriously have fallen into my hands. A club football goalkeeper playing in a match in Hertfordshire last year tripped over a hole in the pitch and has sued the referee. The case is still in court. A martial arts instructor, supervising a class of 10 year-olds, was present when a young performer injured himself in a fall and is being sued by the boys parents. A gymnastics coach in Manchester last year was in charge of a trampoline session. A competitor injured himself and complained that no safety mat was in place. The coach says there was and the mat was in excellent condition. The case is still in court.

A rowdy student at a sports club in Lancashire was asked to leave in 1999 because of his disruptive behaviour. In June 2001 he reapplied for membership but was refused. In July 2002 the club manager received a solicitor's letter citing that his client had been seriously injured and held the club responsible. There is no evidence that the injury ever happened. Five years later the case is still in court. I could quote you another dozen instances of similar claims but won't bore you. They are on my desk and available for scrutiny. I come from a generation just too young to have fought for my country in World War Two. My family did fight, as did so many others, and compensation for grievous injury, let alone the deaths of young Battle of Britain pilots and foot-sloggers in the Western Desert, was never considered. The Grand Old Duke of Edinburgh fought and survived and, in my view, thus won the right to be as controversial or cantankerous as he pleases.