

From Prizes to Prison

~ a school talk with a twist



Outside speakers can often deliver powerful messages to school pupils and help them learn important lessons. One such guest speaker is John Hoskison, a professional golfer and former member of the European PGA Golf Tour. Not only does his story highlight many of the qualities needed to succeed, including the importance of preparation, hard work and dedication, but it contains a salutary account of the tragic and devastating consequences of making the wrong decision.

For twenty years John was a successful golfer, representing Europe in PGA Cup Matches against the USA and making a living competing against some of the best golfers in the world. Those include Nick Faldo and Sandy Lyle who were in the England boys team John represented when a pupil at St John's School in Leatherhead. His parents were the Headmaster and Headmistress of the independent Quinton House School in Northampton. It is perhaps his very middle class background that gives added poignancy to his message and keeps his audiences fascinated as the story unfolds.

'These lessons John learned in his sporting career alone would be worth hearing - but the story then takes a devastating turn when he talks about the needless risk he took' said the head of boarding at a Wiltshire college.

In 1994 after playing in a golf match John broke a discipline he had maintained for 20 years and accepted a drink before driving away from the club. On his short journey home he hit and killed a cyclist. 'When I look back, it was my inability to say 'no' that led me to have that drink' said Hoskison. 'Irrespective of the circumstances, whether it be drink, drugs or simply speeding in a car, the consequences of being unable to say 'no' and not following your conscience can be tragic and devastating'. John received a three year prison sentence.

In a story that has many profound messages John explains how he

was able to look positively towards his future in prison because of the incredible Christian-like forgiveness he was shown by the widow of the man he had killed, who even asked for leniency to be shown at his sentencing trial. 'Without being forgiven it would have been hard for me to carry on, but once being shown a way forward I looked towards my sentence as positively as I could. Somehow I had to find a way to look after my wife and son'.

The time John spent in prison clearly demonstrates that not everything in the press should be believed. Often portrayed as a holiday camp Hoskison shows that prison is a hostile and often violent place to be avoided at all costs. With help from other inmates however Hoskison survived and wrote a book highlighting some of the worst things about the prison system. When the book was published Sir David Ramsbotham, the then Chief Inspector of Prisons suggested it should be required reading by all those connected to the prison service as it offered a true insight into the realities of the prison.

Wrote the head boy at a West Midlands school: "Pupils were kicked into life by your visit, talking and debating about big issues such as the prison system, laws on drink driving and the government. It was a hugely eye-opening experience. I have learnt many valuable lessons

that I will carry very close through the rest of my life".

At this point in the talk Hoskison shows that the lessons he learned in a sporting environment helped him recover in the outside world and support his family. For ten years John spent time travelling, delivering his message to young people from some of the top schools in the country, to some of the toughest young offender institutions.

Towards the end of the talk John leaves the still transfixed pupils with a positive message. "Although my circumstances were extreme, I make sure that the pupils realise that with a positive frame of mind you can deal with all life's up's and down's" he said.

After support from everyone concerned John has now made his way onto the European Seniors Tour where last year he played in the final round at Woburn with the Ryder Cup Captain Ian Woosnam (see picture). He has also become the Golf feature writer for the top online magazine Suite101.

While John has been able to get his life back together he is determined to continue to offer his advice and experience to school pupils. 'I am thrilled that many of the top schools have invited me in this year, I receive many letters of thanks from pupils and the testimonials I receive from the teachers are extremely rewarding. It's not the easiest talk to deliver but if I can stop one pupil from taking a stupid risk it is worth it'.