

Harry Hansen-Knarhoi

1932 - 2024



Harry Hansen-Knarhoi obituary: 'Huck' put the ball in patients' court

Patrick Cornish, The West Australian

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We expect our surgeons to be models of precision, with the steadiest hands and most empathetic manner. With Harry Hansen-Knarhoi, you got all that. Gentle man and gentleman, he put patients, families and colleagues at ease.

There was, too, a sense of humour. The sheer craziness of The Goon Show on radio delighted him. In his University of Adelaide days he was the only student wearing a false nose in an official group photograph. He was an accomplished player of the violin and trombone, among other instruments. A pinnacle of achievement was singing at the Sydney Opera House.

On the tennis court he was a schoolboy champion. Unlike some who show such early prowess, he continued to shine. He played his last match at 90.

Everyone, however, is permitted one flaw. With this keen boatman, the parking of his vessel properly was pursued but not always accomplished. He had bought the old wooden vessel, Mark Twain, because it was named after his favourite author. Crashing into pylons while manoeuvring into the pen was one sight that became part of family folklore. So did the occasional collision with a reef on entry to Marjorie Bay at Rottneest. Such aberrations were not common ... for years he enjoyed sailing dinghies at Royal Freshwater Bay Yacht Club.

A fellow surgeon and close friend, John Hanrahan, praises him as “a talented individual in a number of ways, straight as an arrow, kind, with a great sense of humour, admired and loved by his family and their partners”.

Despite Harry’s gleeful pointing to life’s absurdities, he had enough professional expertise to be elected president of the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons, from 1989 to 1991. His role entailed ensuring the best life-changing treatment for people in need.

He knew what it meant to come in from the cold. The oldest of six children of Rebecca (nee Henderson) and Harry Hansen-Knarhoi, he was born on April 4, 1932, the very depths of the Great Depression. Harry senior, a wool classer, spent time unemployed and was forced to shift his family from their home to a meagre rental in Victoria Park. Harry junior, starting school just before World War II, was far from the only child going to school barefoot. Lessons in violin and boxing broadened his education.

Harry first attended Millen State school, continued primary education at East Victoria Park, and won a scholarship to Perth Modern School. Along the way he fell in love with *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, by Mark Twain. From the book’s character Huckleberry Finn came Harry’s lifelong nickname, “Huck”.

“Huck” gained a Commonwealth Scholarship and completed one year at the University of Western Australia, which then had no medical school, before transferring to the University of Adelaide and boarding at Lincoln College. He graduated in 1956.

Harry started his career as a “house surgeon” in Fremantle in 1957, before having a year back in Adelaide. He then worked at Perth’s Princess Margaret Hospital and King Edward Memorial Hospital, followed by general practice in the town of Williams from 1959 to 1961.

Of the many friends he made, the most important was Dorothea Brooks, whom he married in Adelaide in June 1958. Surgery training in England followed in 1961. Returning to WA in 1966 after five years and passing the exams of the Royal College of Surgeons, he was now a qualified general surgeon. Inspired by the groundbreaking plastic surgery of Harold McComb, Harry took on that specialty.

After further exams, he was admitted to the fellowship of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons in 1970. He worked as honorary plastic surgeon at Royal Perth Hospital, as well as running a private practice in West Perth. He retired in 2000.

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His son, Matt, also a plastic surgeon, says Harry's capacity to nurture was a million miles from the image of surgeons as "petulant tyrants". Matt recalls: "He was precise, decisive, resolute, meticulous, conscientious and caring. It was all about the patient, his or her problem, and the plan, not the surgeon's ego."

Harry died on May 12, survived by Dorothea, their daughter Belinda, sons Matt, Jamie and David, 10 grandchildren, and by Harry's sister Athena and brothers Kingsley, Alan and Peter.

Away from operating theatres, Harry retained the leisure interests he had clasped in schooldays. He sang in choirs performing Handel's Messiah, and appeared in student musical productions such as Guys and Dolls. The satirical comedies of Gilbert and Sullivan were a particular joy.

Two favourite tennis stories endured long after his last game, set and match. One related to Harry's fade in the singles final of an under-18 tournament. He was leading 5-0 in the final set, only to lose 7-5. The other story, much happier, was written up in the newspaper the next day. He won the match 19-17, 4-6, 6-4, perhaps the longest schoolboy match in history. It started at 9am and finished at 1.30pm, with no rest at change of ends and neither water nor other sustenance. Harry, in for the long haul, then played pennants that afternoon.

Born: Perth, 1932

Died: Perth, aged 92