Kerry Packer

Kerry Francis Bullmore Packer, tycoon and transformer of cricket, died on December 26th, aged 68

BEFORE 1977, the words “cricket” and “commerce” had never been put together. The game belonged to gentlemen and players; sponsorship and long-term contracts were unheard of; the pay was poor. When a young man donned his whites, he was expected to symbolise fair play and national glory, not to earn a decent living. As for the game itself, though it had excitement, the pace of five-day matches could be glacial. The sight of small white figures endlessly regrouping, wandering about, pondering the light, all seen from one fixed angle, made poor spectator sport and even worse television.

So thought Kerry Packer. He was no expert; a huge, brawling, bull-shouldered man, he had been a heavyweight boxer at school and preferred a good game of polo, when he could find a pony strong enough to take him. But as the owner of Channel Nine, Australia’s biggest and most successful commercial television network, he wanted to broadcast cricket to the nation, and make it lively. In 1976 he offered the Australian Cricket Board A$1.5m ($8.8m), seven times the usual fee, for exclusive rights to national and international games (“There’s a little bit of the whore in all of us, gentlemen. What’s your price?”). Astonishingly, they turned him down. So off strode Mr Packer to redesign cricket as he thought it should be.

In World Series Cricket, which ran for two seasons before the ABC caved in, the players wore pink and yellow, and the ball was white. Matches were sometimes played by floodlights at night, to get world audiences. They were often also finished in a day, compressing the action to unbelievable heights of tension and speed. Cameras were put at both ends of the pitch, so that with each ball the batsman could be seen reacting; microphones were fitted on the stumps, to catch the sweet thwack of leather on willow and the thunder of the bowler’s feet. Top-rank players, including Tony Greig, then captain of England, and various South Africans, banned from the world game during apartheid, were poached for Mr Packer’s teams, where they were treated to good pay and proper contracts. Mr Packer also took the cricketing authorities to court for restraint of trade. The game, though shellshocked, was modernised and professionalised, and has never looked back.

Swarshuckling ruthlessness typified Mr Packer’s life. He was an iconoclast, a playboy and a man with an impressive instinct for when to buy, when to sell and when to get nasty. His father, Sir Frank Packer, had amassed an empire that included two TV stations, five radio stations, the Sydney Daily Telegraph, nine provincial papers and 60% of the country’s magazines. The son, shrewdly building on that basis, rapidly came to dominate Australia physically, financially and commercially.

In 1972, two years before he became chairman, Mr Packer persuaded his father to sell the Telegraph to the family’s great rival, Rupert Murdoch. He himself, convinced that the future lay with television, not newspapers, pumped the money into Channel Nine. In 1987, at the top of the market, he sold the network to Alan Bond, a financier, for an unheard-of A$1 billion; three years later, he bought it back for a quarter of the price. “You only get one Alan Bond in your life,” he said happily. But 1987 had been a great year; that October, Mr Packer had liquidated his stock holdings just before the market crashed.

A gambling man
He died Australia’s richest man, with a fortune of A$7 billion. This was not bad going for a second son with no obvious ability, publicly called “Boofhead” by his father, who had lost two years’ schooling with polio and whose first job in the firm had been to shovel newspapers on to the loading machine.

His money was funnelled into ski resorts, casinos, polo ponies, diamond mines, cattle stations, oil, engineering works and vast tracts of land in Queensland and New South Wales. Millions were given, sometimes secretly, to charity; millions were also spread over gambling tables in London and Las Vegas. (Though Mr Packer preferred to stay at home, no Australian casino could handle his wages.) A three-week losing streak in London was said to have cost him A$4m but, overall, he came up lucky. Life was one big gamble, and a massive heart attack in 1990 had convinced him that “fucking nothing” lay on the other side.

Questions were often asked about the small amounts of tax his companies paid. Mr Packer brushed that off. Canberra was already spending his money so badly that it deserved to get no more. One government commission stayed close to linking him to organised crime, but the attorney-general cleared him. Politicians on both left and right were afraid of him and gave him what he wanted. A rare rebuff, when media cross-ownership laws blocked his designs on the rival Fairfax newspaper empire in 1991, left him furious.

Yet he was not particularly interventionist. His most brutal moment probably came in 1962, when he was sent by his father, with a few mates, to rough up the owner of a Sydney publishing house who was refusing to sell. He was busy trashing the office when Rupert Murdoch, also with a few mates, turned up to fight him. Almost as good as cricket, Packer-style.