

THE MAKING AND BREAKING OF A FUTURE WORLD CHAMPION

The extraordinary rise of a remarkable young athlete—and how his clearly expressed wishes for his education, his sport and his future were ultimately overridden.

Max Edward Charles Baxter



Prologue

Some stories are remarkable because of extraordinary achievement. Others because of extraordinary adversity. Very occasionally, a single story becomes both.

What made Max's story exceptional was not simply his remarkable talent. It was his all-consuming passion for a sport he had very little opportunity to pursue. Clay target shooting became the focus of his young life. He thought about it constantly, talked about it endlessly and seized every possible opportunity to improve. His father often spent time trying to temper his relentless enthusiasm, reminding him that there would always be another competition, another training session and another day. Yet it was precisely that extraordinary determination, combined with his natural ability, that enabled him to achieve what so many experienced figures in the sport considered almost impossible.

What made Max's story so remarkable was not simply his exceptional talent, but the extraordinary circumstances in which it developed. Almost every advantage normally available to a future champion was absent. Elite athletes are normally shaped through constant training, regular competition and daily access to expert coaching. Living in South Africa, Max had almost none of those advantages. Yet he developed an all-consuming passion for a sport he could pursue only during brief visits to England when he was with his father. Every competition mattered. Every training session mattered. Every opportunity mattered. Those fleeting opportunities were nevertheless enough for some of the most respected figures in international shooting to conclude that they were witnessing an exceptionally rare young talent.

By early 2025, those independent assessments had begun attracting modest interest from documentary producers. Discussions took place about telling Max's story under the working title ***Max Baxter: The Making of a World Champion***. At the time, it was simply the story of a remarkable young athlete pursuing an extraordinary sporting dream.

Then, just as that remarkable journey appeared to be gathering unstoppable momentum, everything changed.

Despite finding himself in the midst of increasingly difficult international litigation, Max's performances continued to reach extraordinary new heights. At just thirteen years of age, he shot a perfect 100 straight in a registered English Skeet competition, a world record score and, soon afterwards, became the highest-ranked Junior (Under-21) English Skeet shooter in the United Kingdom at just fourteen years of age.

His performances were such that he is widely regarded as one of the finest Colt (Under-16) English Skeet shooters in the world.

Yet the events that followed transformed the story beyond recognition.

What had begun as the story of a remarkable young athlete pursuing an extraordinary sporting dream had become something altogether different. It was now the story of exceptional talent, resilience, family conflict, international litigation and a young boy's unwavering determination to pursue the future he believed was his.

As the documentary project developed, Max's father was asked to prepare a detailed account of Max's early years, tracing how his fascination with pigeon then clay target shooting first emerged and documenting the remarkable journey that transformed an enthusiastic young boy into one of the most promising junior shooters of his generation.

In retracing that journey, it became clear that this was no longer simply the story of exceptional sporting achievement. It had become the story of how extraordinary talent, family conflict and international litigation combined to alter the course of one young athlete's future.

That account has since become the foundation of a documentary project now moving towards the next stage of its development.

Many people have met Max. Others have followed parts of his remarkable journey and believed they understood his story.

Very few know the whole story.

What follows is the outline from which that documentary story continues to develop.

Judge it for yourself.

The Journey Begins

From early 2025, Max's path toward an outstanding education and an elite sporting career became entangled in family conflict, international litigation and decisions that abruptly removed him from the environment in which he had begun to flourish.

This document tells two connected stories: how an exceptional young athlete emerged, and how the future he had worked so hard to build came to be placed at risk.

It is a chronological account, supported by documentary evidence, of exceptional talent recognised, extraordinary opportunity created, and how one young boy's consistently and independently expressed wish to attend boarding school in England and pursue the sporting future he had earned was ultimately overridden during proceedings in which aspects of the evidence are now the subject of an ongoing Metropolitan Police criminal investigation. Those wishes were expressed consistently over many months, not only to his father, but repeatedly to independent psychologists, children's guardians, CAFCASS officers, legal representatives, school staff and others involved in his life.

Throughout that journey, one parent consistently supported Max's wish to pursue an English boarding school education and elite sporting development, while the other consistently opposed his relocation to England. The consequences of those opposing positions form the story that follows.

The reader is invited to consider not only what happened to Max, but what may still be lost if nothing changes.

Throughout these events, Max's father has consistently maintained that Max deserves a safe and meaningful relationship with both of his parents. His concern has never been to separate Max from his mother, but to support Max's clearly expressed wishes, his education, his welfare and the extraordinary future that so many independent experts believe remains within his reach.

Brief Background

A Natural Talent Recognised Early

When Max Baxter was just 12 years old, he met 32-time World Champion George Digweed MBE during a visit to England. After watching Max shoot 16 clays, of eight consecutive clay pigeon pairs in a challenge he had set, Digweed was astonished. Learning that Max had been forced to return to South Africa in 2018 following his parents' divorce, where clay pigeon shooting was essentially non-existent, and he could only shoot during the four or five annual visits to England to see his father, Digweed remarked spontaneously:

If afforded proper access to training and competition in England, Max could become a world champion within four years.
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George Digweed was not alone in recognising Max's exceptional potential. Sir Edward Dashwood, owner of EJ Churchill, Team GB Olympic clay shooting training venue in the United Kingdom, expressed similar confidence in Max's future and became his first sponsor.

During the same period, Max also met David Dale, the renowned Olympic official and Head Coach at the National Clay Shooting Centre, who stated that the only comparable young talent he had encountered was Amber Rutter, who became the youngest ever World Cup gold medallist at the age of 15. Watching Max casually try English Skeet for fun, Dale immediately recognised his natural shooting ability, despite having no knowledge of the discipline. He told Max's father that Max's talent was obvious and offered to coach him personally.

The confidence these three highly respected figures placed in Max's potential extended far beyond words. Each later provided affidavit evidence in support of the South African relocation proceedings. In his statement, which included his prediction that Max could become a world champion within four years if afforded proper access to training and competition in England, George Digweed described Max as "the most remarkable junior talent I have seen in my 45 years of competitive shooting."

When Max's father expressed surprise at that assessment, having looked only at Max's scores, Digweed replied, "I wasn't looking at his scores, I was looking at him."

A Complicated Journey

These early encounters marked the beginning of Max's sporting journey.

Max was offered a place at a leading Berkshire boarding school from September 2025, giving him the opportunity to combine an outstanding education with elite sporting development. Despite his strong desire to return to the country where he had spent the first six-and-a-half years of his life, permission for him to relocate to England was refused. His father subsequently commenced legal proceedings in South Africa to enable Max to pursue the future he had long hoped to build.

As the legal proceedings continued, the emotional toll on Max became overwhelming. Seeking stability and the opportunity to concentrate on his education, he made the remarkable decision, entirely of his own accord, to move into boarding at St John's College in South Africa. It was a decision born not of convenience, but of necessity. His father, conscious that he might later be accused of influencing his son, deliberately kept his distance from that decision. Those accusations nevertheless evidently still came. The reality remained unchanged: it was Max's decision, made by a young boy seeking peace, stability and the opportunity to focus on his education. It also enabled him to engage independently with his school and other psychologists, something his father welcomed because he hoped it would further demonstrate that his son's wishes were genuinely his own.

As part of his usual four or five trips he undertook each year, Max made three trips to England, doing his best to coincide with coaching and competitions in April, July and August 2025.

July 2025 – The World Championships That Almost Never Happened

In July 2025, Max was due to travel to England to compete at the World Championships at EJ Churchill. Despite two existing South African court orders permitting him to travel and compete, his mother did not comply with those orders, making a further urgent High Court application necessary before he was ultimately able to attend the Championships.

Permission was finally secured, but a condition that his mother was allowed to accompany him. By the time Max boarded the plane, weeks of conflict and uncertainty had already taken their toll. Instead of arriving focused, prepared and excited, he arrived visibly distressed and emotionally exhausted. Those around him witnessed the strain he was under, and his performances at the World Championships fell well below the standard he had consistently demonstrated, as the continuing tension between Max and his mother overshadowed what should have been one of the proudest moments of his young sporting career.

August 2025 – The Comeback

Determined that those events would not define Max's future, his father worked tirelessly to ensure he could return to England during the August holidays for the British Open.

Max arrived on 7 August, this time not accompanied by his mother, and even though he only had two days to prepare before taking on some of the best young shooters in the country at the British Open on 9 August, he was in a far better emotional frame of mind.

Against the odds, and with almost no time to prepare, Max produced one of the finest performances of his young career. Competing as the youngest shooter in the field, he finished British Open Colt (Under-16) Runner-Up and fourth overall in the Junior (Under-21) English Skeet Championship. His performance, together with that of Junior Champion Tristan Hockey, secured the British Open Junior Team Championship—Max's first British Open title.

With the legal proceedings still underway, Max returned to South Africa where he remained during August and September 2025. Despite every effort to continue his development, meaningful training, coaching and competition opportunities in South Africa, it simply did not exist in that country.

He entered the South African Olympic Skeet Championships and won the senior section, finishing 18 clays ahead of the second-placed competitor and 40 clays ahead of the third. There were only three competitors.

It reinforced what had already become clear: South Africa could not provide the coaching, competitive opportunities or depth of competition necessary for an athlete of Max's ability to continue developing at the highest level.

On 16 October 2025, Max returned to England from Johannesburg for a short South African school half-term break. By then, he had spent his usual six weeks of school holidays in England during 2025, together with an additional ten days connected with his attendance at the World Championships.

Even within that limited time, Max's development accelerated dramatically, progressing from complete novice to regularly scoring in the 80s and early 90s in both English Sporting and English Skeet while still just 13 years of age.

What followed was one of the most remarkable rises ever seen in junior clay target shooting—a story that would once have seemed almost impossible to script.

The First Sign of Something Extraordinary

Straight off a long-haul flight, Max had spoken excitedly to his father about an exceptionally ambitious goal. There was no time to waste. He wanted two days of refresher coaching with David Dale at the National Clay Shooting Centre on 16 and 17 October, a registered competition on 18 October to sharpen up, and then an attempt the following day to shoot a perfect 100 straight in a registered English Skeet competition, at just 13 years of age a world record score.

Both David Dale and his father supported him. They knew it was an extraordinary long shot, but neither of them wanted to discourage a young athlete whose belief in himself had already begun to be matched by his performances.

As is often the case with the best-laid plans, things did not go according to schedule.

Against all odds, Max shot the perfect 100 straight on 18 October—the day he was only supposed to be getting competition-ready.

Remarkably, it came in only the ninth English Skeet competition he had entered since first meeting David Dale.

A Dream Worth Fighting For

Having achieved a world-record performance, Max genuinely believed this achievement might finally persuade his mother to support his return to England, take up his boarding school place and pursue the future he so longed for.

It did not.

When Max asked his father how the South African proceedings were progressing, he truthfully explained that the South African judicial process was complex and that he hoped the independent psychologists would help everyone understand that returning to England was his son's deepest ambition. It is understood that Max quietly replied that he did not believe anything would change without a court order.

On 20 October 2025, as the time approached to leave for Heathrow Airport and his evening flight back to Johannesburg, Max made the most difficult decision of his young life.

He told his father he was not going back to South Africa. Max's father recorded those words in a letter he wrote to Max's mother later that evening.

Max's decision resulted in Hague Convention proceedings being commenced in England. Soon thereafter, Max found himself represented by his own legal team and at the centre of an international legal dispute involving police officers, court enforcement officers, the confiscation of his passport and the service of legal documents. It was about to become the most difficult period of his life.

Once the initial shock had subsided, Max made one simple request of his father:

Dad, if I have to go through this, please let me spend my time in the one place where I feel happiest.
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His father knew exactly what he meant.

The shooting ground became the one place where Max could temporarily set aside the uncertainty surrounding his future and simply be a young boy pursuing the sport he loved.

Defying the Odds

His father knew that, at just 13 years old, he could not possibly appreciate what lay ahead, and accordingly had no hesitation in making him one promise; they would get through it together.

Shutting the legal proceedings from his mind, in November 2025, Max discovered that qualification for the 2026 England English Skeet Team Selection Trials closed on 28 February 2026. To qualify, competitors had to submit five qualifying scores from three different grounds, with scores counting from July 2025, around the time Max had only just begun shooting English Skeet seriously.

There was, however, one major obstacle. There would be no Colt (Under-16) team. To earn a place in the team event, Max would have to qualify for the Junior (Under-21) team.

His father's instinct was to temper his expectations. Competing against shooters up to seven years older, many with years of experience, seemed an impossible challenge and his father saw little to be gained from inevitable disappointment.

Max disagreed.

After thinking about it for a day, he simply announced that he was going to try and qualify.

From that moment, he is said to have dragged his father to skeet grounds whenever he could, on cold, wet, windy days as readily as bright ones.

“I need to be ready for anything, Dad,” was his justification to his father.

While every other junior had eight months in which to record their qualifying scores, Max, arriving from South Africa, completed his qualifying campaign in just eight weeks, between 18 October and 13 December 2025. Despite that dramatically shorter qualifying period, his performances led him to believe he had done enough to earn an invitation to the England Team selection trials.

Those eight weeks were far from normal. During that period, his father, often accompanied by Max, was required to endure eight separate days of court proceedings, together with enforcement action and other legal processes arising from the ongoing Family High Court proceedings. Owing to the confidentiality requirements that protect children involved in family court cases, those events cannot be described in detail here.

When the rankings were finalised on 28 February 2026, Max had achieved something that, only a few months earlier, would have seemed impossible.

He qualified for the England Team Selection Trials as the top scoring Junior in the United Kingdom.

England Junior ESK Team Scores (U21)									
Home International - Final Selection 28 February 2026									
#	Name	CPSA #	Scores						
			1	2	3	4	5		Ave
1	Max Baxter (Colt)	148772	100	97	97	97	95	A	97.20
2	Jessica Milnes	150121	100	99	98	97	91	A	97.00
3	Kian Maher	140905	98	98	97	97	95	AA	97.00
4	Ethan Lord	138716	99	98	96	96	89	AA	95.60
5	Finley Jacques	150757	97	96	95	94	94	A	95.20
6	Alice Marks	144975	97	96	95	93	93	A	94.80
7	Leo Taylor Davis	151313	97	95	93	92	88	B	93.00
8	Hermione Burns	134892	94	88	85	84	84	C	87.00

The achievement attracted international attention. After reviewing Max’s scores, an official from the National Skeet Shooting Association (NSSA), the governing body for skeet shooting in the United States, noted that he knew of no Colt anywhere in North America producing comparable performances. Arrangements were immediately made for Max to receive an invitation to compete at the 2026 World Skeet Championships, in order to complete formalities, so that, as George Digweed had long predicted, Max could “be seen on the world stage.”

Having completed his English Skeet campaign, Max turned his attention to English Sporting at the end of December.

In January, he began a concentrated campaign to improve his national ranking in the English Sporting discipline in the Colt under-16 category. At the end of the previous ranking quarter, ending 31 October 2025 (CPSA Issue 80), Max was ranked 14th in England, based on a minimum of five competitions. By the end of the following quarter, ending 31 January 2026, after only four weeks of concentrating on the discipline, he had risen to seventh in the national Colt rankings.

When his father later asked a CPSA official for her thoughts on Max's progress, her reported response was a single word: "Extraordinary."

Looking back, Max's development has been shaped by two defining realities. First, he had remarkably little opportunity to train or compete during the years before George Digweed first recognised his exceptional ability. Then, when he finally gained the opportunity to shoot regularly after October 2025, those precious four months unfolded against the backdrop of intense Family High Court proceedings involving repeated court hearings, police involvement, enforcement officers and constant uncertainty about his future. That remarkable progress was achieved not because those obstacles did not exist, but despite them.

This is precisely why Max's journey is about far more than winning trophies. It is the story of a young boy who has continued striving to achieve his goals despite circumstances that would have overwhelmed many adults, never mind a thirteen or fourteen-year-old. His achievements cannot be understood without understanding the obstacles he has had to overcome simply to pursue the education and sporting opportunities he so clearly wanted.

Sir Edward Dashwood, who has watched Max's development from the very beginning, made an observation that captures the extraordinary nature of his progress:

"He doesn't even realise how good he is."

Taken together, those independent assessments and Max's subsequent achievements establish him as an exceptionally rare young sporting prospect. His performances have consistently reinforced what leading figures in the sport recognised from the very beginning.

Max's performances were also beginning to attract commercial recognition. Despite being only fourteen years old, he had already secured sponsorship within the United Kingdom, with further sponsorship opportunities expected to follow as his performances continued to develop. Unlike England, where clay shooting enjoys a substantial competitive and commercial environment, South Africa offers very limited sponsorship opportunities, if any, because of the sport's much smaller participation base. George Digweed addressed that reality in an affidavit in South African proceedings, explaining that Max's future opportunities, both competitively and commercially, depended upon continuing his development within the United Kingdom.

The Turning Point

On 24 February 2026, the Family Division of the High Court of England and Wales ordered that Max be returned to South Africa. The decision rested substantially upon findings concerning enmeshment and parental alienation that remain strongly contested. A separate accompanying summary explains why those findings are disputed, the evidential issues that have since emerged and the consequences those findings have had for Max's education, welfare and future.

Later that same day, the Court of Appeal granted permission to apply for an appeal, and the High Court's order was stayed pending the appeal.

Throughout those proceedings, repeated concerns were raised regarding the accuracy and interpretation of important evidence.

On 26 February 2026, Max was effectively placed into isolation with his mother in the Cotswolds while the appeal was pending.

The appeal was heard before three Lords Justices on 31 March and 1 April 2026. On 30 April 2026, the Court of Appeal upheld the decision of the High Court Family Division.

On 6 May 2026, Max was returned to South Africa. By then, his father had not seen him since 24 February. During that period, his only contact with Max had been a supervised video call limited to ten minutes each week, and even that contact had ended on 12 April.

Once back in South Africa, Max became subject to an ex parte order that prohibited all contact with his father and placed any future contact, together with his therapy and reunification arrangements, under professional supervision. The practical consequences of that order are explained in the accompanying summary.

The Story Takes Another Turn

Having become completely disillusioned by what had transpired during the Family Court proceedings, Max's father sought guidance from the Disclosure and Barring Service. Acting on that advice, he lodged a complaint with the Metropolitan Police Service on 11 May 2026 concerning various evidential aspects of the case.

Within five days, Max's father had attended extensive meetings with Metropolitan Police investigators, lasting several hours. Those discussions resulted in the commencement of a criminal investigation. Over the following two months, the Metropolitan Police undertook an evidential referral, while extensive forensic analysis of the documentary evidence and specialist forensic psychological analysis were also carried out.

That work has resulted in an evidential referral supporting allegations of perverting the course of justice. The investigation now rests entirely with Metropolitan Police forensic specialists pending referral, where appropriate, to the criminal justice authorities.

Whatever the outcome of those investigations, one reality remains unchanged. Every week that passes is another week in which Max loses irreplaceable opportunities in his education, his sporting development and his relationship with those who have supported him. Those are losses that no later legal decision can fully restore.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this story is that Max himself does not know the full circumstances that have led to his present situation. From his perspective, he has simply lost access to his electronic devices, all communication with his father has ceased, and a significant part of the life he had worked so hard to build has suddenly disappeared. Whilst he is likely to understand that those restrictions arise from court orders, he has not been informed that the evidence relied upon in support of those orders is itself the subject of an ongoing criminal investigation, nor that serious questions have since been raised concerning the accuracy, truthfulness and reliability of that evidential foundation.

Consequently, Max has been required to live with the consequences of decisions founded upon evidence whose integrity is now itself under independent scrutiny. He knows only the practical reality of those decisions, not the serious evidential issues that have since emerged. In many ways, this represents the defining tragedy of the making and breaking of a future world champion: a young athlete whose education, relationships and extraordinary sporting future have been fundamentally altered without knowing that the evidential basis for those changes is itself now under criminal investigation.

Why Your Support Matters

This document has not been prepared to criticise or vilify any individual, nor to interfere with ongoing legal proceedings. Its purpose is simply to support Max's welfare, his education, his sporting future and his right to have his own clearly expressed wishes properly heard.

You do not need to understand every legal issue to recognise what is at stake. For those who wish to understand the background, ***How a Future World Champion Was Stopped*** summarises the disputed findings, the restrictions imposed on Max, and the opportunities that were taken from him.

Max never asked for litigation.

He simply wanted to attend boarding school in England, pursue the sport he loved and build the future he had worked so hard to earn.

Every child deserves the opportunity to become everything they are capable of becoming. Max deserves nothing less.

If, having read this document, or both documents, you believe Max deserves the opportunity to reclaim his education, his sporting future and the life he worked so hard to build, please add your name to the growing number of people who are standing behind him.

Every week that passes is another week of Max's childhood that cannot be recovered.

You are also encouraged to write a personal message to Max.

He almost certainly won't be permitted to read those messages now. He does not know that there is a growing groundswell of support for him, nor how many people have heard his story and are standing beside him. But every message will be kept for him.

One day, when he is able to read them, they will show him that he was not forgotten, that people recognised what was happening to him, and that they believed his future was worth fighting for.

Please send your name and your message for Max to:

support@max-baxter.com