

DRIBBLE!

**The Unbelievable
Football Encyclopaedia**

Harry Pearson



Little, Brown

LITTLE, BROWN

First published in Great Britain in 2007 by Little, Brown

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-316-02794-6

Typeset in Baskerville by M Rules
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Little, Brown
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette Livre UK Company

www.littlebrown.co.uk

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The unbelievable material in these pages previously appeared in different form in the *Guardian* and *When Saturday Comes*; my thanks to both publications for allowing it to be reproduced here. I would also like to thank Andy Lyons at WSC and Ben Clissitt at the *Guardian* for giving me a platform to witter from for so many years, and all the editors and sub-editors who have laboured to turn my work into something recognisable as English.

HARRY PEARSON

- A -

Acting Managers

We live in a TV age and so it is hardly surprising that more and more football managers are tailoring their performances during games for the benefit of the cameras.

It all began with Sir Alex Ferguson. The Manchester United manager's grim touchline behaviour was widely blamed for his team's failure to win the title in 1991–92, the prevailing view being that his clearly visible tension transmitted itself to his players. Since then the Scot has rarely been seen on television without a benign smile on his purple face. Many viewers think this is even scarier than the tortured grimace he used to wear, seeing it as the most sinister display of jollity since the child catcher turned up offering free sweets in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. The results speak against them, however.

Ferguson's success has led other coaches to follow in his footsteps. Nowadays they seem increasingly to be acting on a cue from the producer. They give us pensive, elated, stoic and determined-man-of-vision-staring-at-destiny-while-sucking-on-a-pen-top. Not once are they caught looking bewildered, or staring serenely into space with the happy expression of a bloke who has just remembered the names of the key personnel in *Goober and the Ghost Chasers*. Never do they sit, as poor old Don Revie used to, with their hands stuffed deep in their pockets, knees pressed firmly together and the pained, shifty look of someone who is deeply regretting having that extra

cup of tea before coming to the memorial service. They have abandoned Ron Saunders in favour of Robert De Niro.

Acting Players

Footballers have generally rejected attempts to lure them into making feature films. This is not through any shyness, but because they have great artistic integrity and are rarely offered the sort of challenging parts they crave. Jimmy Greaves, for instance, infamously turned down the part of Jimmy Greaves in *Goal*, the official film of the 1966 World Cup, because he had his heart set on playing the Geoff Hurst role. Similarly when John Huston was casting *Escape to Victory* Glenn Hoddle stubbornly insisted that he would not play Glenn Hoddle because he ‘didn’t want it turning into a typecasting situation’.

‘Glenn was really interested in exploring his craft, pushing the envelope, challenging himself,’ the theatrical agent Theo Cravat explained later. ‘He had identified the role he wanted in the movie but unfortunately the producer was adamant that the part of Pelé was earmarked for Pelé. It was typical Hollywood – a safety-first choice.

‘They offered us the part of John Wark instead, but we thought it was totally underwritten. The scriptwriters had never really got past the “no front teeth, totally incomprehensible accent” aspect of the character. Glenn suggested a few changes: putting the teeth back, and giving John Wark a smart yet modern haircut, a set of strong personal beliefs based on the lyrics of Supertramp and a light, pleasant singing voice, but the director said that would make him too much like the Russell Osman character (a role which, incidentally, was originally promised to Jeremy Irons), and besides, by that time Glenn had got his Pelé head on and there was no chance of him getting it off in time. Could Glenn Hoddle have played John Wark as

Pelé? Yes, I believe he could, but it was too dangerous artistically and so they didn't give him the chance.

'I saw the film when it came out and, yes, Pelé did a decent job as Pelé, but I still feel that Glenn would have made it more believable, given it more dimensions. Later, Jean Luc Godard told Glenn that if he had been French they'd have built a movie around him – *Pauline at the Beach* in all probability.'

Animals

Alnwick Town chairman John Common had a peculiar sense of humour. His idea of a practical joke was to leave an animal carcass ('The smallest a mole, the largest a sheep') in the visitors' dressing room.

In any other walk of life this might have marked John Common out as being as mad as a bag of cheese, but in the world of football his antics are frankly not that unusual, even leaving aside Barcelona fans' attempt to pelt Luis Figo with a boar's head, or those El Salvador supporters who take it as their patriotic duty to bombard visiting goalkeepers with dead cats.

Ten years ago, for example, Eastbourne United officials were shocked to find a pig's head nailed to the front of their dug-out before a Unijet Sussex County League clash with Worthing United. It turned out to be the handiwork of Worthing defender Dave Clarke. Clarke, a part-time butcher, explained, 'It is something I have been doing as a laugh for some years. Unfortunately on this occasion people didn't see the funny side.' Miserable buggers, eh?

Dave Clarke would undoubtedly have found more sympathy for his hilarious offal-related japes in Norway. In 2003 Tromsø were battling desperately against relegation when a supporter, Jarle Johansen, offered to kill a goat in the centre circle before

the team's final game of the season against Lyn. 'Can you imagine how much fun it would be,' Johansen said, 'if I was allowed to slaughter the goat, then Tromsø crushed Lyn?' Whether he followed this statement with a burst of maniacal laughter is not recorded. Amazingly instead of phoning the local funny farm and alerting them to the presence of a man who was himself clearly several points short of safety, Tromsø's directors said they would 'consider the proposal'. Eventually, after careful deliberation, they rejected it. The goat was spared and, happily, Tromsø stayed up.

Football's animal magic comes in many forms. In the heady days of the 1970s Carlisle United used to place a stuffed fox (perhaps female, possibly called 'Olga' – debate still rages from Longtown to Penrith) in the centre circle before home games. As prematch entertainment this may seem somewhat dull, but it sufficed in Cumbria, a place once summed up by former Carlisle star Stan Bowles with the immortal words, 'Freezing cold and sheep shit in the garden.'

Luckily the animal doesn't have to be dead to take part in the fun of match day. Few who have visited Edgar Street will forget the sight of the Hereford bull being paraded around at half-time. It certainly is a magnificent beast; powerful, muscular and considerably lighter on its feet than Michael Ricketts.

In a variation on the bull idea, a few years back a Bolivian club side took to parading a vicuña around the pitch before games. After a while the fans got the idea into their heads that this relative of the llama was psychic and communicated news of forthcoming victories by smiling. A long-faced vicuña signalled certain defeat and inevitably sparked a stampede for the exits. Eventually the club, mindful of the effects this grumpy beast was having on gate receipts, got rid of it. Nobody knows what became of the animal, though suspicion remains that it is probably sitting on the pools panel.

4 Animals

Arturo Anteater

In the late 1990s Israeli super-agent **Pini Colada** attempted to persuade clubs that due to the escalating cost of indigenous players they would be better advised spending their money on foreign imports. ‘Here is your choice,’ he told interviewer Frank Gutt in 1998, ‘you can have Robbie Fowler for £12 million and £50,000 a week in wages, or you can have Arturo the Giant Anteater on a free transfer from the Argentinian pampas, and all he wants is clean straw, a warm burrow and his own termite mound.’ Asked if the anteater was any good, Colada replied, ‘He unnerves defences.’ Pressed on whether he believed Arturo would unnerve tough British defenders such as Neil Ruddock, he responded, ‘I don’t care if you are Neil Ruddock, Vinnie Jones, Julian Dicks or whoever. If you have got a shaggy South American with a three-foot-long sticky tongue stood behind you, you are going to be unnerved.’ Colada also represented a number of other top animals, though he refused to deal with herbivores, believing that they ‘lacked heart’. This opinion was proved conclusively when Bon Bon, a red squirrel Colada had sent on trial to Leeds United (claiming that ‘with his size, agility, speed and ginger hair he is the obvious successor to Gordon Strachan’), ran up a floodlight pylon during a reserve match at Barnsley and refused to come down until the crowd had gone home.

Antocliché

The antocliché is football punditry’s equivalent of the antonym. Sadly even masters of English such as Lee Dixon rarely employ it. This is a pity since it would be nice to hear every once in a while of an unnatural goalscorer, or to listen as a studio expert reacts to a sliced volley that sailed over the bar like a helium-

filled balloon by saying, ‘Oh dear, and this boy certainly has got a savoury right foot.’ It would be gratifying to hear a pundit rubbish a Kaka tap-in with the words ‘And if he hadn’t been Brazilian we’d have stopped talking about that long before the pub shut’, and explain the revival in fortunes of a previously floundering club with a quick ‘In the past fortnight the word coming out of the club is that the manager finally found the dressing room.’ This latter comment would, of course, be followed swiftly by a reminder of what had gone on over the previous six months, an arched eyebrow and the words ‘But what the supporters have to remember, Gabby, is that a bad manager doesn’t become a good manager overnight. Though, to be fair, in this game you’re only as poor as your last result.’

Aqsaqtuk

A type of football played by the indigenous Inuit of Baffin Island, Aqsaqtuk utilises a caribou-hide ball stuffed with moss and is played on a pitch that can be anything up to ten miles in length. The most singular feature of the game, however, is that it is played between mixed-sex teams divided along marital lines: couples play singletons. The effects of this are easy to imagine. The married team argue among themselves about who last cleaned the toilet while the singles worry that passing the ball too often to one particular team-mate might be construed as an invitation to intimacy. As a result most moves break down in a wave of paranoia, bitterness and cries of ‘Admit it, you’ve always resented my creativity’, and a dull 0–0 stalemate is the usual outcome.

Arithmetic

In 2006 the G-14 group of clubs announced a compromise proposal to Fifa's rules limiting the number of teams in Europe's top divisions. 'The Group of fourteen has eighteen members, so why shouldn't a sixteen-club top flight consist of twenty teams?' asked G-14's general manager Thomas Kurth rhetorically. 'We believe that if football operated according to this new 14–18 numerical system in which one unit represents 1.285, it would solve many problems. For example, Sepp Blatter could impose his limit of a maximum of forty-five games per season and still leave us free to play fifty-eight. Of course, people will say it flies in the face of logic, but you must remember: football is bigger than the laws of mathematics.'

Arts

In 2004 Tony Adams was made patron of the Young Writers Festival at the Royal Court Theatre. Doubters questioned the former Arsenal centre-half's qualifications for the post, but given most young playwrights' obsession with savagery, lunacy and dysfunction, spending your formative years in close proximity to Bob Wilson was surely preparation aplenty.

At the time many within the game hoped that Adams's appointment would be the first of many in the arts for retired British defenders. Our nation's artists have always been eager to acknowledge the inspiration they draw from a well-drilled and coldly brutal defensive unit. Unfortunately arts administrators have tended steadfastly to ignore the contribution that full-backs and stoppers can make to the cultural life of the nation. Instead of seeking direction from strapping, raw-boned men with so much scar tissue their faces look like they're made of cooked pasta, administrators have become mesmerised by

flair players such as Pat Nevin, Chris Waddle and Nicolas Serota.

It is testament to the durability of this remarkable prejudice in artistic circles that Adams was the first robust English clogger to scale such heights since another Highbury man, Peter Storey, briefly took charge at Glyndebourne Opera House during the 1974–75 season.

Storey was a fellow of rugged virtues who spent his spare time working for a North Sea oil company. As a drill bit. His other off-the-field activities included a brush with the Obscene Publications Squad over some creative Continental material that was alleged to have wormed its way mysteriously into the tyre of a lorry that was attempting to enter Britain.

Critics are still divided over the exact worth of Storey's theatrical legacy, though few would disagree that his decision to mix the classics with more modern works such as Benjamin Britten's *Billy Budd* and Jens Bumpesen's *Danish Farm Girls Go Dutch III* was a challenging, at times almost cathartic, experience for the picnicking opera-goers.

Those observers who always felt that having a burly centre-back pacing up and down the galleries and rehearsal rooms of Britain barking out encouraging words ('Let's get up their arses', 'Channels, channels', 'Funnel him', 'Let's not let the feeling of alienation drift into the comfort zone of simple loneliness'), or sticking the occasional elbow in to prevent the sort of costly loss of context that can lead to a slide into self-referential kitsch, were convinced that Adams's appointment would mark a sea change in policy among the arts establishment when it comes to 'the big lads at the back'.

Glenn Hoddle once said that 'it is easier to destroy a work of art than to create one' (proof positive that he has never tried to set light to a Pink Floyd album), but destruction and creation are two sides of the same mattress. 'If the Royal Court had

room for Tony Adams, surely,' one columnist asked, 'there must be space at the Tate Modern for Steve Bould?' The call went unanswered, alas.

In Europe things have generally been handled differently. On the Continent cultural institutions seeking reinvigoration traditionally look to the earthy, combative skills of uncompromising central defenders and obdurate man-markers. One thinks of Andoni 'The Butcher of Bilbao' Goicoechea's successful spell as curator at the Prado in Madrid (a post for which he was selected, incidentally, after it was revealed that in a glass case in his sitting room he keeps the boots he was wearing when he snapped Diego Maradona's ankle – a witty echo of the work of Marcel Duchamps and Mike Doyle); or German hardman Jürgen Kohler's magical period at Bayreuth during which he proved conclusively that lack of pace is no handicap when it comes to directing Wagner. Although his decision to have Siegfried's cloak of obscurity made in the colours of Manchester United did lead to an unsavoury row with Sir Alex Ferguson.

Of course things have not always worked out. The appointment of Juventus's Claudio Gentile as artistic director of La Scala is the example usually cited by those who feel that the creative arts and the back four should never mix.

Gentile was noted for his gritty style (though he also had his sensitive side: he once sued a newspaper in Rome for describing him as 'a barbarian' and received a large financial settlement plus the right to burn down the Colosseum and carry off as many local women as he could lift) and it was believed that the Milan opera house would benefit from a few clattering challenges, the odd bit of shirt-ripping and the occasional grabbing of a star performer's vitals during set pieces.

Alas, things went wrong when Claudio insisted on rewriting *La Bohème*, replacing 'Your Tiny Hand is Frozen' with an aria of his own composition, 'Your Weedy Shin is Broken.' The

Milanese audience, who had wanted Giuseppe Bergomi and his quizzical eyebrows all along, was not impressed. As one critic noted, ‘Gentile’s roughness is nowhere near ironic enough for clever people like me to enjoy.’