WHOSE GAME IS IT ANYWAY?

Football, Life, Love & Loss

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Chapter One

Father and Son

THE HANDMADE wooden box had lain neglected in a corner of a garden shed for many years. It was covered by a latticework of spider's web and a dark, tar-like substance that once, presumably, had a preservative quality. Two ancient plant pots, containing shrunken, dehydrated soil, were perched on top, and added to the sense of abandonment and decay.

It was an unlikely family heirloom, a chance discovery. The box, 35 inches long, 15 inches deep and 14 inches in height, opened to reveal an array of woodworking tools. There were chisels with finely worked wooden handles, a range of saws, blades still sharp despite the rust, two types of plane, a combination square, marking gauge and faded yellow spirit level.

All were embossed with the name F.C. Goss, in what had evidently once been tiny golden capital letters.

Frank Charles Goss was born in 1898, one of five children raised by John Goss, a builder, and his wife Elizabeth. He was known as a placid man, and, by repute, never lost his temper. Carpentry was a trade that suited his quiet diligence and seemingly inexhaustible patience. When times were tough, he

worked as a clerk at what was then called the Labour Exchange to earn extra money.

Oliver, his only son, was born on 23 June 1922.

Olly, as he was known, was an athletic, resourceful and intelligent child, who had obviously inherited the genetic tendency to gentility. He became my father-in-law and, in 45 years, I never saw him agitated. He had an innate ability to relate to people, regardless of age or social class. His generosity of spirit was remarkable.

He first clapped eyes on me when called back to the family home from a party with friends by his daughter Lynn, my girlfriend, who would later become my wife. I was 17 and had passed out, trousers around my ankles, in his downstairs toilet after raiding his drinks cabinet. Somehow, he resisted the temptation to throttle me before driving me home and dumping me on the doorstep.

Frank passed away in 1971, without enjoying the long and fulfilled retirement he had planned for, and unwittingly left behind a multi-layered mystery. Why, inside the lid of that box, had he pasted the fixture lists for three Watford teams for the 1932/33 season? What subliminal message did those pieces of water-scarred text from an official club journal represent?

How did the minuscule photograph of an unnamed player, above the fixtures for the seven-team London Professional Midweek League, fit into the equation? Who was he, and why was he sufficiently significant to warrant such an intimate platform? Did it signal anything deeper than an affinity with a humble club?

If only it were as simple as deciphering the scores written, in pencil, beside the schedules for the first team, which finished in comfortable mediocrity, 11th out of 22 in the Third Division South, and the reserves, 11th out of 24 in the London

Combination. When the box was discovered, the initial phase of the pandemic was raging. Olly was approaching his 98th birthday and in lockdown at his care home in Devon.

He was suffering from an accelerated form of vascular dementia. The curtains across his memory were being drawn; though he had retained his easy-going nature, his lucidity was intermittent and unpredictable. And yet, because of the emotional intensity of his connection to football, something stirred when, on one of our daily telephone calls during enforced isolation, my wife asked him about watching and playing football.

He remembered the ritual of walking a mile with his father through the terraced streets of West Watford to the match. He was an outstanding youth footballer. He loved his dad's presence on the touchline, and his approval when he played well. Saturdays meant a treat at the sweet shop, the anticipation of the result and the drama of the game. He couldn't recall individual players, but he was hooked.

My children loved him unconditionally, and he loved them in return. Grandpa meant games and groan jokes. In retirement, he played football and cricket with them in the garden and on the beach. He shared stories of the pre-war footballers depicted on his collection of cigarette cards. They used his half set of Petron Impalas to hack golf balls into adjoining fields, which, in a sadly familiar act of vandalism by local planners, would be turned into a housing estate by 2019.

Late that year, my wife and I spent a 54-hour vigil by his hospital bed and were warned to expect the worst. When he astonished doctors by emerging from a coma, his first thought was to ask me how Watford had got on the previous day. They had lost 8-0 at Manchester City, conceding five goals in the opening 18 minutes.

When I told him I declined to answer on health and safety grounds, he laughed gruffly. His eyes shone with the sardonic acceptance of fate that identifies the true fan, too often treated like a Victorian scullery maid by those who control the modern game. I passed over the Sunday paper; the booming back-page headline consisted solely of the scoreline. He nodded, chuckled and changed the subject.

The box had been found at his bungalow. His handwriting on the sliding wooden top of his father's chisel set suggested that the tools were a form of inheritance, but mention of the photo triggered no immediate memories. How did it relate to those Watford teams who plied their trade when he was in his last year at primary school? A lifetime's allegiance to his local club was already established: were there hints of identity in his early childhood heroes?

Admission to Vicarage Road in 1932 cost a shilling (five pence), including 20 per cent entertainment tax. Dad and lad Goss had a new, steeply banked concrete terrace on which to stand behind one of the goals. It was built, over the summer, by manager Neil McBain, trainers Peter Ronald and Alex Gillespie, and two players, Taffy Davies and Arthur Thurley.

McBain's extraordinary career began with Ayr United in 1914. He guested occasionally for Portsmouth in the First World War, where he served in the Black Watch before joining the Royal Navy. An elegant wing-half, known for his aerial ability and intelligence on the ball, he returned to professional football in 1921, when he was sold to Manchester United for £4,600.

He made his Scotland debut the following year, and moved to Everton in 1923, crossing Stanley Park to join Liverpool in 1928. He remains the oldest player to appear in an English Football League match, being aged 51 years 120 days when,

as manager, he answered an injury crisis by playing in goal for New Brighton in the Third Division North.

He spent two years as Watford's player-manager from May 1929, and would remain in charge until 1937, when he was sacked for what was euphemistically called 'family illness'. A scratch golfer and regular punter on horse and greyhound racing, his fate was sealed when an unnamed player complained to the board that, when he asked for his £35 seasonal bonus, the manager told him, 'The bookies have had it all.'

McBain subsequently managed Leyton Orient, acted as Chelsea's chief scout and spent two years as head coach at Estudiantes de La Plata in Argentina. Most unlikely of all, he returned to Watford for a desultory three-year spell from 1956. His lifestyle was distinctive; he lived off fish and chips and insisted players wait on the team bus while he popped into a convenient pub for a drink on the way to away matches.

The jowly, bloated figure of that time, looking at the cameraman with suspicious, deeply hooded eyes, is in stark contrast to the dapper, self-confident individual in a cream summer suit with high-waisted pleated trousers, who poses casually in front of the main stand for an informal version of Watford's 1932/33 team photograph.

He stands to the left of his 18-strong senior squad, augmented by nine apprentices, sitting cross-legged in front of them. They were evidently fresh from a three-team, nine-a-side training session. A third of the players were bare-chested, a third wore white shirts and the remaining third wore roll-necked goalkeeping jerseys.

Goalkeeping was the bane of McBain's life that season. Ted Hufton, a former England international signed from West Ham at the age of 39 to be first choice, never really recovered from breaking a finger badly in the first pre-season match. He

played only twice before retiring, and was never adequately replaced.

The shining light was Billy Lane, a forward who began his career at Gnome Athletic, originally the works team for an engine manufacturer in east London. He became notorious for verbally inciting opponents and liked to instruct his wingers to get early crosses in, so that he could 'let the keeper know I'm around'.

He had a great spring, so this strategy invited assault by shoulder, stray elbow and, in one case captured by the camera, his backside, which connected with the goalkeeper's chin. He scored a hat-trick in nine minutes against Clapton Orient, contributed 68 goals in three years and went on to manage Brighton & Hove Albion to their first title, the Third Division South in 1957/58.

Watford was not a happy club. The directors did not endear themselves to the players by demanding extra fitness sessions. Fans were accused of apathy by the chairman, John Kilby, owner of a local brewery. He threatened to resign after being confronted by a supporter, who advanced on the directors' box and, in the polite phrase used by the local newspaper, the *Watford Observer*, 'made use of an objectionable sign'.

I studied that black-and-white team photograph, seeking similarities with the head-and-shoulder shot in the tool box. I recognised Taffy Davies, whose tanned torso stood out amid so many pale bodies, but he was fair-haired. The player in the portrait had dark, luxuriant hair. My pet theory, that he was Billy Lane, looked the most plausible.

Lane was between Davies and his manager in the team picture. His hands were tucked respectfully behind his back. His baggy shorts were pulled up well above his waist. He had dark hair, but in summer trim. There was a passing resemblance

to the player in Frank Goss's box, but it was insufficient to justify a leap to conclusions.

Lane was 28, and in common with many players of his generation, looked old before his time. Action shots, taken later that season, were indistinct. The only other archive photograph of him I could find was taken in 1961, when, as Brighton manager, he was welcoming a new signing, John Goodchild. His hair was shorter, curly, and he had a widow's peak. Dead end.

By the time that photograph, a traditional football club image of a transfer, was staged, Olly had returned from Canada and become a respected teacher in the Watford area. He would allow a Greek-Cypriot sixth-former named Georgios Panayiotou to perform at the school disco with his friend Andrew Ridgeley and another pupil, Shirlie Holliman. He was suitably unimpressed, but within months George Michael and Wham! were unleashed on the world.

Olly had served as a Royal Marine commando in the Second World War after training in Devon. His fitness was honed on speed marches and he learned survival skills such as weapons handling, map reading, small boat operations and demolition, both by day and by night. He was in the first wave during the Sicily landings and was deployed in advanced positions.

His missions were extremely perilous, often covert, initially in the advance through Italy, and then during the reclamation of France. He also served in Africa, the Netherlands and Germany. In common with many young men of his generation, he sought to bury memories of horror and heroism, since such reminders could only corrode the spirit. He opened up to me only twice.

The first time he told me about being the solitary survivor of an ambush, having crawled to the bottom of a ditch, beneath

the bodies of friends and comrades, to avoid detection. Each marine troop typically consisted of 30-man sections, divided into three sub-sections of ten men, so the sense of loss was personal and acutely painful.

On another occasion, advancing along the spine of Italy, his troop rested overnight in a barn. To their delight, they discovered a large vat containing rough red wine, dispensed through a wooden tap at its base. It was only the following day, when one of the commandos climbed to the top of the vat, that they realised it contained decomposing bodies.

His medals, kept without fanfare in a drawer at home, suggested valour under fire and significant sacrifice that he didn't wish to share. In the words of a quotation beneath a memorial of a commando soldier in Westminster Abbey, 'They performed whatsoever the King commanded.' He remained in the Marines until the commandos were disbanded in 1946.

He used football as part of the healing process, alternating between Vicarage Road and Stamford Bridge when semi-professional playing commitments permitted. It was when we were putting his affairs in order in the shuttered spring of 2020 that we came across another fateful photograph. Again, it was dulled by time, and had been roughly cut out of what seemed like an official publication.

It was of the Royal Marine NCOs School football team in the 1945/46 season. The manager was front and centre, in full uniform, with his cane across his lap. The captain was seated to his right, his seniority signalled by the leather football – with the legend 'NCO's School F.C.' in white paint – pressed between his legs.

The figure to the manager's left offered the most persuasive solution to the mystery, and posed a follow-up question. He sat

straight-backed, arms folded, gazing intently into the camera lens. His thick hair seemed longer than regulation length. His left sock had been darned and both toecaps on his football boots were scuffed. It was, unmistakably, Olly.

The player featured on the inside of the tool box was younger, probably in his late teens, but strongly resembled him. Had his father added it as an act of love or pride? Did it signal that Olly had been given a pre-war trial by his hometown club? We will never know, since club records do not extend to such detail, but I would love to think so.

The possibility, distinct but distant, was deeply moving and strangely empowering. Football had facilitated an indelible impression of intimacy, and erected a bridge across generations.

We all, as fans, have a truth to tell, a secret to share. This is as good a time as any to make my confession of cardinal sin: at around that time I had fallen out of love with football, the game that had enriched me, emotionally, spiritually and professionally since childhood. I maintained the pretence, played the role of devotee, but had been infected by its cynicism and opportunism.

Worn down by its negativity, venality and elitism, I reached the point where anger was exhausted, and was ready to surrender to apathy. I loathed the institutionalised bitterness and ignorance of social media, on which everyone has to have an opinion, however bigoted or uninformed. I despaired of football's hysterical high priests and its bloodless bureaucracy.

Pondering the significance of that photograph, I knew I needed to reset.

What was it saying to me? How had the game spoken to me as a child? What did I forget to learn along the way? When had football's human touch grown cold? Why did I fall in love with the game, become consumed by its theatre, and allow

myself to be distracted by its imperfections? Was it too late to reconnect with the boy who once fantasised about football on an isolation ward?

I was that boy, struggling to bridge the chasm between adolescence and adulthood. Nearly half a century after I recovered from tuberculosis, the world entered quarantine. Our notion of normality has subsequently been mottled by time and circumstance like an old headstone in a country churchyard. The pandemic, and the political incompetence and amorality it exposed, has left vivid scars.

Olly Goss was one of the victims of the grotesque lie that Boris Johnson's government 'threw a protective ring around care homes'. He passed away just before 6.30am on Thursday, 7 May 2020, having been infected by a fellow resident who was carrying the Covid-19 virus when released from the local hospital without a test.

We spoke every day when he was sufficiently lucid, but were unable to comfort him in person. That lack of contact, a simple privilege we had underestimated, was haunting. He remained stoic, gentle, and was loved by the orderlies who suffered from shortages of protective clothing. His last words to me, on a Facetime link the day before he passed, were 'Thanks for your support'. I often wonder what he meant.

He had touched so many people, spiritually, yet we had not been allowed to touch him, physically. Many wanted to pay their respects; only ten mourners were permitted to attend his funeral on a perfect summer's day caressed by an onshore breeze from the western reaches of the English Channel. We smuggled 13 into what we intended to be a celebratory service in a sanitised, impersonal chapel in a modern, featureless crematorium.

The farewells were fond, but he deserved so much more.

Why should sport matter in such circumstances? What is the importance of the surrogate family it provides, the equality of allegiance it promises? Should it be sustained as a communal activity, a social lubricator? Can it continue to act as a safety valve and an emotional conduit? Will its universal language ever be spoken again, lyrically, loudly, cogently and, above all, passionately?

The boy in that sanatorium in 1973 had no conception of how football, in particular, would shape his life. It has taken him to more than 80 countries, and set him on the perilous path of coming into contact with his heroes. His experiences will, hopefully, illuminate and educate as, much older and not appreciably wiser, I set out to make my peace with the game.

In the words of Jürgen Klopp, 'Your football has to be mirrored by your soul.'

It can still be a Beautiful Game, if that is readapted as a meaningful phrase instead of a convenient cliché. The riddle of that tool box is a parable, of sorts. When football is the enduring expression of an unbreakable bond between father and son it is, indeed, a matter of life and death. It's personal, not a business.

Love will find a way. It always does.