

Tears came to my eyes several times as I was reading this book and remembering the moments that I lived through at Middlesbrough.

They were some of the happiest moments of my life, especially the first time I was there, and then the last time, winning the trophy that was our big goal when I first went to Middlesbrough.

Thank you very much to Mark for his words, and for this account of everything. Everything he has written reflects what I felt and what I experienced when I was at Middlesbrough.

Finally, congratulations for this book. I hope it will be very successful, that everything goes well for Mark and that he has good health for many, many years.

Juninho, Middlesbrough and Brazil

Moving, funny and beautifully written. Mark Davies has delivered a wonderful, uplifting chronicle of where sport – in this case football – can take you when life has transported you to the darkest places. I cannot recommend it highly enough

Phil McNulty, chief football writer, BBC Sport

Football has been my life in so many ways, and when you hear stories like this one it both underlines how important our great game is to so many people but also what really matters most at the end of the day.

Steve Gibson told me about Mark's challenges when I was at Boro and I followed his progress through Steve's updates.

I know what it is like when life deals you a cruel blow, but you've got to keep plugging away. Mark has done that, and showed great determination and strength, and this book is a great achievement. Well done, and keep smiling.

Neil Warnock

Reading Mark's account and experiences of dealing with myeloma certainly rekindled a lot of experiences I had forgotten about. I made contact with Mark after reading a Tweet about his upcoming stem cell transplant. Having experienced similar thoughts and worries two years earlier I was able to advise and reassure on what lay ahead, and was able to add to what he had been told by his medical team.

During my treatment advice from fellow patients was invaluable and relatable, knowing they had first-hand experience of the process, and I was more than happy to pass this on to Mark to ease his journey. I am sure any patient reading this book will be reassured that it's not just them feeling the way they do.

Multiple myeloma is quite a specific disease and it affects patients in many different ways, from fatigue and infections to broken bones and kidney failure. The side-effects of some of the treatments can also be quite severe. I can't imagine what it must be like being a Middlesbrough supporter on top of all that! This is a great book which captures a lot of emotions, good and bad, about a journey he and I both know much more about than we would like.

Kev Prince, myeloma warrior and Newcastle United supporter

Profoundly moving, brilliantly written and beautifully observed, this is a *Fever Pitch* for our times, a wonderful antidote to the ills of modern football and a reminder of the power for good the game still wields.

*Oliver Holt, chief sports writer, Daily Mail and Mail
on Sunday*

A tender reflection on the way the love of football helps us cope with anything, even our own mortality ‘

Alyson Rudd, The Times

*'Profoundly moving, brilliantly written and beautifully observed,
this is a *Fever Pitch* for our times...'*

Oliver Holt, Chief Sports Writer, *The Mail on Sunday*

MARK DAVIES
A
LOVE
LETTER

TO FOOTBALL
**From the Terraces
to a Transplant and Back Again**



FOREWORD BY STEVE GIBSON

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Not all doom and gloom?

THE TINY office was in a warren of corridors on the ground floor of King's College Hospital in south London. I was sitting on a plastic chair wedged behind the door next to the haematology consultant's desk. What little light there was filling the room came from the grey dusk of a dull autumn day outside. It was January 2016.

I know King's very well. Both our sons were born there, and we've visited the A&E department together dozens of times, generally as a result of the kind of minor mishaps familiar to most parents: a few stitches here, a bandage there. There have been a couple of surgeries too. And there was one time when life truly went on hold, everything stopping one agonising evening when Laurie was just two and had an extreme allergic reaction to a Brazil nut. Blue-lighted to the hospital, his body covered in angry red hives, I can still see him looking at me, his face full of confusion and fear. A few hours later we were heading home, our panic quelled by the swift and calm action of the medics. That was one of those evenings when the day-to-day trivialities of our existence suddenly come into very sharp focus. It underlined a point of great good

fortune in our lives: if you must have a hospital in your life, you could do a lot worse than happen to live near King's.

A few months before my latest visit I'd had a heart scare, something not quite right on a scan leading to a load of checks. In the end it was nothing to worry about, and as I sat in haematology and waited to be called for my appointment I was expecting the same. The tests of the last few weeks had been worryingly thorough, but I was trying to see them as a necessary irritation caused by my GP's extreme caution. Otherwise it was a chance to visit the nice little cafe by Denmark Hill station. The haematology department could hardly ignore the requests they'd received, I reasoned, and I'd already seen a kindly consultant who'd reassured me it was very unlikely this would amount to anything serious, especially given how young I was. I was 48 and didn't feel young, so that made me feel pretty good. I was confident that this was just a case of going through the motions. There were protocols for this kind of thing, I said to myself, and quite right too. The efficiency was admirable. It was annoying that I'd had to sit for so long in the waiting room, crammed in on the squishy red seats without a wifi connection, and so instead reading an old copy of *Marie Claire*, but I'd soon be on my way, scooting across the road with my head in my phone, either scrolling through Twitter or trying to make my work inbox a bit more manageable as we headed towards the end of the week.

I was the youngest person waiting, by some distance. The receptionist called me over to ask if I had a 'line in'. I had no idea what she meant, but rather than pursue the point I just said no, I didn't think I did. I know now that it referred to a tiny tube threaded through the body to the

vicinity of the heart, which makes it easier to get blood samples.

As I waited I remembered another test I'd had, way back in 1982. That was a distraction, too, a medical check-up at school. We'd all lined up outside the main hall which formed the focal point of our 1960s-built comprehensive with its flat-roofed house blocks and leaking ceilings and waited for our names to be called. Once it was, the boys were told to go behind a curtain where a doctor was waiting to tell us to drop our trousers and underpants. He then held our testicles and told us to cough. There may have been more to it, but the testicles part of it sticks in the mind, unsurprisingly. I know there was some reason for it but it escapes me, and I'm not sure it's a thing any more. I've thought about Googling it but I'd be worried about the effect on the algorithm.

I'd dreaded this day for weeks. Distractions back then were not as easy to find as they are today; no option available to idle away some time by watching Middlesbrough highlights on a pocket computer, or lose yourself in a virtual debating chamber hellhole run by a man with a fascination for space rockets. In 1982 I would update the League Ladders I'd collected from *Shoot!* magazine – a cardboard kit for keeping a record of the state of play in football's main divisions – tape the charts off the radio on Mum's tape recorder or keep a record of how many minutes to go before the next gig I was going to at Newcastle City Hall, an hour's drive up the road. It was a period of rich pickings in that regard: remarkably selfless, Mum would drive me and various friends up to the city and then sit and wait for us in the car outside while we watched Echo and the Bunnymen, U2, Simple Minds

and the Cure. Mum was so bafflingly patient she even waited while we hung around to meet the bands. ‘Sorry Mum, just hang on a bit while I chat to Bono about the third track on the second side of *War*, will you?’

Television, meanwhile, provided limited options for watching sport. It was a time when it could seem like the only live sport on TV was hours and hours of snooker. I was among the 18.5 million people still up and watching BBC2 gone midnight, gripped by the drama as Dennis Taylor, the man with the upside-down glasses, beat Steve Davis in an incredible and nail-biting World Championship Final in 1985. There was live rugby league too, to be fair, with up-and-unders described by commentator Eddie Waring in a way which made him famous, but I could never quite get into that. And there was cricket. Thank goodness for cricket and the chance to spend five days watching a Test match, or lose a Sunday afternoon listening to the warm West Country tones of John Arlott describe a John Player League one-day match while Mum waited for *Antiques Roadshow* to come on. As for football, we had to wait for the FA Cup Final or an international match to get a live fix.

So when it came to the looming medical once-over there were limited distractions to take my mind off it. And it was keeping me away from much more pressing priorities. Most important on my to-do list was what I saw as a pressing need to develop my image. Having devoted a couple of years to cultivating a make-up regime in homage to the bands of the New Romantic movement, I’d moved on to a growing devotion to guitars and post-punk, as my concert-going suggests. And within that something life-changing was happening: a friend had played me the

first album by a band called the Psychedelic Furs. Even now when I hear the first track, 'India', I am propelled back to his front room, listening spellbound to the eerie, captivating intro to the song while eating his mum's freshly made fruit cake. This is what constituted a rock-and-roll lifestyle in suburban Teesside, the area in north-east England where I was lucky enough to grow up. So after being introduced to something a little more edgy than the likes of Ultravox, Visage and the Human League, I was now vigorously engaged in developing the look necessary to meet the requirements of this new passion. The angst that the impending medical was generating, the fear that I was about to be told to prepare my family for desperately bad news about my health, was keeping my mind off matters such as where I might procure a jacket like the one the Furs' lead singer, Richard Butler, had recently worn on *The Old Grey Whistle Test* on BBC2 (the answer, incidentally, was an army surplus store up the road in Stockton-on-Tees).

Football at this time was a big part of my life but what was happening at my club, Middlesbrough, was becoming a bit of a horror show, and I was feeling a little let down. After the first flush of our tempestuous romance was forged in 1973 when I was six, a honeymoon period which was largely a beautiful coming together of two slightly lost souls, things were turning sour and I was baffled. How could they do this to me? We lost five of the first seven league games in the 1982/83 season, for instance, and conceded 20 goals. We didn't win a match until mid-October.

It meant that the likes of Richard Butler, Ian McCulloch of Echo and the Bunnymen and Robert Smith of the Cure were threatening to edge Boro out of

my affections. A few days after our first win of the season I travelled to London with my friend Ed and his brother to see the Psychedelic Furs at the Hammersmith Odeon, now the Apollo, a trip which seemed like an incredibly edgy adventure for three middle-class boys from the north, though we did go with their mum (she didn't go to the gig, at least). Given how exciting it all seemed, and turned out to be, it was hardly surprising that jangly guitar music was starting to rival football for my affections. While in London we were stopped and searched by the police when we haplessly wandered into the rehearsals for the forthcoming Falklands War victory parade, while the gig itself was magical and full of actual punks. To top it all off we caught the train back up to Teesside OVERNIGHT and went straight to school in the morning.

Incredibly exciting it may have been, but the love triangle forming between football, music and the 15-year-old me was being badly disrupted by the thought of the forthcoming medical. I needed to clear this hurdle because I couldn't concentrate on the things that really mattered. I've never been very good at compartmentalising, and was finding it increasingly difficult to separate out my work in homage to Richard Butler from my concern over the whole testicles shenanigans. Never mind worrying about Boro's leaky defence. So while I have erased from my mind most of the details of the medical itself I can still remember the feeling of sheer relief and elation as I walked in the drizzle across the yard outside the main hall and past the music block, having been given a clean bill of health to resume my search for post-punk apparel and wonder if Boro could regain a foothold in my affections. And maybe do some work on my O Levels. I caught a glimpse of my reflection

on the music room windows. It was going to be OK, I told myself.

I was telling myself the same thing as I sat and waited to see the consultant in haematology in early 2016. This is what happens, I was thinking, when your raging hypochondria catches up with you. You end up in situations like this. When I was nine I was admitted to hospital for a week because of a mystery stomach bug which probably had more to do with how much I disliked Miss Hanlon, our form tutor. Eventually they let me go home, the suspected appendicitis coming to nothing. I was simultaneously the boy who cried wolf and also a nervy child with a tendency to believe that every mild ailment was a signal of something more serious.

In this latest case, so many decades later, I had got myself into this pickle when my paranoia about some odd aches and pains had taken me down to the surgery at the bottom of the hill near our house in south London one Monday morning.

The system at the surgery back then was a kind of medical pot luck. You turned up between eight and ten and never knew which doctor you'd end up seeing. It could be one who'd look me up and down, tell me to lose a few stones and send me packing. But on this occasion it was a new GP at pains to admit that while she was inexperienced, she would do whatever she could to help.

I explained that I'd been experiencing a very weird sensation in my feet. Even for me, this one seemed particularly unusual. They felt wet, I said, as though I'd walked through a puddle without bothering to put shoes on. I'd checked and checked but my socks were dry. I

was also getting really unpleasant shooting pains in my ankles, I said.

The GP was candid: she didn't have a clue what was wrong, but she was true to her word and said she would order some blood tests and let me know if they threw up anything unusual. It would probably be nothing, but worth checking, she said.

She must have been particularly thorough in asking for the test because she ticked a box most GPs don't when it comes to routine blood tests, one which would show whether I had any paraproteins in my blood. In a nutshell, paraproteins are abnormal antibodies which – as the name suggests – shouldn't be there. It was a decision which turned out to be bittersweet. It brought me very bad news, but also saved me a lot of pain.

The GP called me a few days later. As soon as I saw the name of the surgery flash up on my phone I knew something was up. I left the meeting I was in and headed for a quiet place to take the call, and she explained that there was an issue about the results. I looked out of the window on to a grey London day, groups of smokers huddled in a doorway in the street below. It could be cancer, she said, but try not to worry. It might not be, and probably wasn't, but it needed checking out. I put my head on the table, my stomach now somersaulting in ways I have become very used to over the years.

The next few weeks meant a flurry of trips up to the hospital. I had a positron emission tomography (PET) test, which involved injecting a radioactive drug into my body to see what would then show up on a scan. It sounds pretty gruesome, but was in fact uneventful. I was then kitted out in a medical suit of armour for an magnetic

resonance imaging scan – an MRI to you and I – during which I became panicky and claustrophobic as the machine clanked and clattered away for 90 minutes. Finally – at this stage anyway – there was a bone marrow biopsy, a really nasty procedure which involved a young doctor somewhat gleefully, it seemed to me, showing me a very long needle which he proceeded to plunge into my hip to extract a sample for analysis. The pain was excruciating, and I found myself repeating the names of my children over and over again to try to get through it. The doctor burrowed away with his needle, scratching around for a good angle, and asked me if the names I was reciting were those of my children to which I told him that of course they bloody were.

A few weeks later I was dozing in the waiting room when I heard my name being called. The consultant I'd first seen had retired at Christmas, I was told by the new man overseeing my case. He asked me to follow him as he strode through the corridors, past a man trying to work out how to use the vending machine and into a tiny office. He offered me the seat behind the door and started to tell me about a rare and incurable blood cancer called myeloma. No, me neither.

It was this, he said, which had been flagged as a possible cause of the high paraproteins in my blood, and he started to describe all the warning signs, the things they look for when this happens. There are four key indicators for myeloma, he said, and started to go through them one by one. On reflection it was like a slightly cruel game show, 'Using an MRI scan we checked to see if you had bone lesions caused by cancerous activity – you did not! So we checked to see if your kidneys had been damaged by

any cancerous activity – they had not! Then we checked for signs of anaemia – there were none!’ I was starting to think I might have won a speedboat or a new motor home. But then came the catch. ‘Finally, we checked for signs of cancerous cells in your bone marrow – you had absolutely loads!’

That’s the point where the audience groans in sympathy and the contestant laughs and tries to pretend that they didn’t want the money or the boat in any event. And that’s kind of how I felt. On the outside I was trying to be breezy and nonchalant. Inside I felt sick with disbelief and fear.

The consultant carried on talking, explaining somewhat fruitlessly that I shouldn’t feel too despondent. At this stage the cancer was essentially dormant and there wouldn’t be a need for any treatment, just blood tests every three months. When it’s like this they call it ‘smouldering’ myeloma which was both reassuring in some ways and deeply disconcerting in others: no flame, but it’s definitely burning. Huge progress was being made in finding new treatments, he went on. Eventually I would probably have to have chemotherapy and a stem cell transplant, but not yet and hopefully not for a few years. It all felt a bit like I was being handed a consolation prize, the Dusty Bin of cancer diagnosis (for the uninitiated, Dusty Bin was the consolation prize on the ITV quiz show *3-2-1*, hosted by Ted Rogers and drawing in mass audiences – sometimes up to 16 million – between 1978 and 1988).

I should have known this was going to happen. I’m a supporter of Middlesbrough Football Club, after all. Just when you think things are going well they rip the rug from under you. Just when you think you are about to see a Boro captain lifting the first trophy in the club’s

history, when you actually see red and white ribbons being tied to the trophy, you concede a last-minute goal. And lose the replay, naturally. You get to a European final and lose four bloody nil. You are playing against lower-league opposition in the FA Cup semi-final and go two down, claw things back, go ahead, and then concede a last-minute equaliser. You get through the replay to reach the final against Chelsea and concede a goal after 43 seconds. You avoid the perils of football's hooligan element for years and then get battered by your own fans after a game at York City. A nasty bug sweeps the dressing room and you think you've got clearance to skip a game at Blackburn, but the authorities think otherwise and take three points off you. And guess what? Those three points are enough to relegate you from the Premier League.

You are 48, have a great life, good job, wonderful family, and what happens? A shiny-faced consultant sits you down in his poky little office and tells you that you have cancer. Of course he bloody does.

I don't really remember what I said in response to this grim news, but I do know that I tried to put a brave face on it. My stomach was doing somersaults again, but as a well-brought-up middle-class boy with unduly deep levels of respect for authority, I didn't want to inconvenience the poor consultant, who was no doubt very busy and had other patients to see. And he did seem quite keen that I didn't hang around. While I had been well schooled in how to deal with news like this from a dedicated commitment to watching TV dramas and Hollywood tear-jerkers, I found that as it was actually happening to me I didn't have the time or inclination for wistful gazes out of the window, emotional demands for a second opinion or even a few

tears. I just didn't know what to say. So I thanked the consultant very much for the update.

I can sometimes be so deferential that I irritate myself. I almost certainly inherited it from my dad – a tendency to seize up nervously when in the company of an authority figure, not wishing to make their lives any more stressful than they are already, or terrified I will say something silly. Or be slightly overwhelmed by their apparent importance and get a bit giddy in their presence. Dad and I once bumped into the headmaster of my school as we left Ayresome Park, Middlesbrough's now long-gone old ground, following a game against Southampton. Dad had been fairly sullen during the match, not being much of a football fan. But faced with Mr Oliver, he transformed into a giggling wreck, almost salivating at the opportunity to listen to the words of wisdom no doubt being dispensed by this giant of the education system. I watched Dad do the same thing many years later in a slightly larger consultant's office at the James Cook Hospital in Middlesbrough. The genial consultant was telling Dad – who was by now 87 – that he had a very serious and life-limiting illness. My dad sat listening as closely as he could (he had been deaf in one ear all his life and his hearing was badly impaired in the other), smiling and nodding as he always did, his woolly hat slipping off the top of his head as it always did, his face twinkling with the broad smile which was one of his greatest assets. As we left the consultant looked at me and almost whispered 'he's got months, not years'. Dad was gone within a matter of weeks.

I was less coy with my consultant than Dad had been. But not much. I asked him in a kind of roundabout way, as though somehow my life didn't merit an inquiry about how

long it might last, what he thought my chances were. Eight to ten years he said, once treatment starts. I did a quick calculation. With a bit of luck I could get my youngest off to university, if he was that way inclined, before my time was done. But the ever-shrinking possibility of the Boro ever winning the Premier League in my lifetime now seemed infinitesimally small.

But the consultant wasn't having any of this negative thinking. Not a bit of it. It might not be the news I was hoping for, he said, but it really wasn't necessary to be too down about it. It's not all doom and gloom, he said. It reminded me, albeit not immediately because my chin was rapidly heading for the floor at the time, of a fan event I went to when our then club manager Steve McClaren – later to be a much-derided England coach – mentioned a young midfielder who he felt would be an excellent replacement for a seasoned international who had decided Teesside wasn't for him. It's OK, he said, don't worry – we've got so-and-so, to which almost everyone in the room started laughing uncontrollably, startling McClaren, who was clearly oblivious to the absurdity of what he'd just said. I didn't feel like laughing right now, but being told I didn't need to be too downhearted didn't seem quite right in the context of being told you have a rare and incurable cancer.

I do realise that it's a bit glib to compare my cancer with a lifetime of devoted support for Middlesbrough. It's a serious subject which has of course caused me much pain and reflection. At times I find it incredibly difficult to cope with. Looking to the future always feels a bit difficult: there's a permanent question mark – as for us all of course but more acutely for me – which can cloud things or at best make it difficult to plan ahead. And while

I love football beyond measure, I do realise that comparing that to my misfortune in relation to my health to the ups and downs of supporting my club is perhaps not giving due regard to the gravity of the situation. But it's also my cancer, thank you, so I will deal with it as I see fit. There's enough that's serious about it to make me yearn for simple pleasures. And when you've endured a season or two of Gordon Strachan managing your club, you are ready for anything. Sorry Gordon, but it was awful (to be fair to Strachan, he knew too and agreed not to take compensation when he left the club).

I suppose at 48 I should have been old enough to deal with this uncertainty. But as I've always felt about 25 inside, at most, I wasn't. And the reality is that nothing prepares you for something like this. People say I'm brave, but unless bravery is just getting on with things as best you can, on matters over which we don't really have much choice, that's not right. I was scared, upset and tearful. The consultant handed me a piece of paper and told me to give it to reception. He'd see me in three months, he said. I did as I was told, and then headed out of the hospital.

It seemed odd that things were just carrying on as normal as I emerged into the cold autumn air. My life felt as though it was suddenly on hold, yet the Costa Coffee shop was pretty busy, and a group of people were smoking at the bottom of the steps leading to the entrance to the hospital. A line of cars slowly snaked their way past towards the crammed car park. I headed past A&E and towards the bus stop, pulling my coat around me. I thought about going and getting drunk but I didn't have the will for it. I just didn't know what to do with myself.

It's been a few years since that day. As is self-evident, I'm still here. The consultant was right about the pace of change in the treatment of myeloma, though it's still infuriatingly incurable and there are few signs of that changing any time soon. I've done my best to cope with the uncertainty, and handled the difficult days with as much fortitude as I can muster from within. I've been blessed with the love and support of friends and family, and a good few strangers too. I've made new friends who will be with me for life, and things don't get much more precious than that. But I've also been depressed, sick and almost always tired. There's no story here of great and inspiring courage. I haven't particularly seized the day, or found great reserves of positivity to keep me going. I haven't learned how to tap dance, or built an orphanage in sub-Saharan Africa. I haven't been at all brave, and at times I've wondered about the point of all this. The best I can say is that I haven't given up.

Throughout it all I've been particularly thankful for what happened one Saturday in 1973, the day when I climbed into the back seat of my parents' mustard-coloured Austin Maxi for the short trip up the road to Middlesbrough, the biggest town in the area where we lived. I was wearing shorts, as always back then, but it was autumn so there was little risk of the car's bumpy plastic upholstery burning my legs as it did on hot summer days. We drove up towards Stockton-on-Tees before picking up the A66, coming off just by the Newport Bridge, one of the architectural masterpieces which provides a memory of Middlesbrough's history as an industrial powerhouse, and then turned into a warren of terraced streets a little way from the town centre.

Visiting Middlesbrough felt like a wonderful adventure in those days. Usually that was because we would be going to Linthorpe Road, home of both Romer Parrish, a magical toy shop with an eye-watering range of Subbuteo accessories, or Binns, the seemingly massive department store with a dazzling staircase, which was once owned by anti-slavery campaigner Henry Binns. Sometimes we would go to the sports shop set up by the former Olympic swimmer Jack Hatfield on Borough Road. But today was different. As Mum searched for a place to park in what was for me an unfamiliar area on the edge of the town, I stared up out of the windows of the Maxi, transfixed by the four pylons rearing up ahead of us. The streets thronged with groups of mainly young men heading together in the same direction, sights and sounds new to me but etched into the lives of thousands for decades. We got out of the car and walked up towards the main road, past corner shops and busy pubs. Mum bought me a little rosette to pin on my coat, a little man in red in the centre of the red ribbon with a piece of card bearing the name of the town stapled to it. I couldn't stop staring at it. We got a programme too. We were going to a football match. From being fairly ambivalent about it all a few hours earlier, it had become exciting beyond words.

I was six years old and rather like that day at King's, it was a life-changing experience. But for much better reasons, because on 13 October 1973 I fell head over heels in love with Middlesbrough Football Club. You can make your own jokes about my devotion being another unhelpful affliction in my life – it's certainly incurable – but to have had this passion close at hand during the difficult days of the last few years has enriched my life

NOT ALL DOOM AND GLOOM?

beyond words, sometimes as a distraction, sometimes a grave disappointment, but always enjoyed with a possibly unhinged level of commitment.