

PRIDE IN TRAVEL

A TITLE-WINNING SEASON
EXPLORING THE WORLD OF
MANCHESTER CITY

DARRYL WEBSTER



REYKJAVIK
15 MAR 2014
DEPARTED
(0123)
IMMIGRATION

IMMIGRATION OFFICER
(765)
21 SEP 2013
CHICAGO

IMMIGRATION
ARRIVED
3 APR 2014
AIRPORT
123B
UAE

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10 FEB 2014
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INTRODUCTION

First Advice

I AM not from Manchester.

Let's get that out of the way. I grew up in East Gwillimbury, Ontario, Canada, a little farming town 45 minutes north of Toronto. My childhood was one of hockey in winter and baseball in summer. In 1994, when I was 17, the World Cup came to North America, the German team training just outside of my small town. An introduction – as it was for so many in our part of the world – was all that was needed to fall in love with the beautiful game.

With the World Cup taking place just once every four years, I quickly needed to find a club team to fuel my new passion. But who should I support and where would I start?

If I were to follow family bloodlines, the choice would be Glasgow Rangers or Hearts. I tried the former on for size for a season or two, but the two-team dominated Scottish league, the aggression, and the religious divide weren't things I was used to, nor did I find them at all appealing.

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After Rangers, a girl from Catalonia introduced me to the world of Barcelona. And while I would go on to enjoy watching Barça for many years, the link just wasn't there. Perhaps Barcelona were simply too successful to speak to a person who'd grown up cheering for hockey's most famous underachievers, the Toronto Maple Leafs. Whatever the reason, in both cases, Rangers and Barcelona, something was missing.

In the autumn of 2004, my sister Kimberly made the bold decision to pack up her things at the age of 22, move to Manchester and take a chance on a man she'd fallen in love with. Unable to afford a ticket home during her first Christmas away, she rang me up and asked what gift she might send back to Toronto. An avid collector of jerseys from all sports, I asked Kimmy for a shirt from one of the local clubs. 'Send me City. They wear blue and I look better in blue. And besides, everyone over here has a United shirt,' I told her.

When Christmas day came I tore excitedly into my package, which arrived via Royal Mail. 'How fancy,' I remember thinking. I aggressively separated wrapping paper from gift, revealing my prize, and immediately my excitement turned to disappointment. A jersey of red and black bars stared back at me, no sky blue to be seen.

'Shit, she got it wrong, this looks like United,' was my initial thought. But upon turning the shirt over, I discovered a sleek canal ship, framed majestically by an eagle with three golden stars above its head. The words 'First Advice' were emblazoned across the front, apt words for my first taste of City. I had a lot to learn about my new club, beginning with the significance of these red and black bars.

As I began to follow City – which was difficult for a Canadian in the days of dial-up internet – I began to

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draw parallels between them and my boyhood hockey club, the Toronto Maple Leafs. For my entire existence, I had supported a losing hockey team, never once seeing them lift a trophy. Toronto's biggest rivals, the Montreal Canadiens, on the other hand, wore red and were the most successful club in hockey history. Sound familiar?

If a gift from my sister got me into City, it was my second trip to the Etihad that cemented my allegiance. My first match was in 2006, when I was nearing the end of a ten-year stretch as a starving indie-musician and found myself in Manchester for my band's first and only tour of Britain. The drummer, myself and my sister's then boyfriend – the man she'd moved to be with – attended a chilly Monday night affair versus Middlesbrough. Richard Dunne smashed one in off his head to bury Middlesbrough by the crushing scoreline of 1-0.

That match, though memorable, wasn't the one that made me City 'til I die. City lost the next one I attended, but it was the manner in which the supporters handled the loss that endeared this unique club to me.

My second game was a 3-0 loss in the pouring rain versus Nottingham Forest. The January night was freezing cold, even by Canadian standards. City didn't even have a decent chance at goal against a club flirting with relegation a full league below them.

Everything about City's performance on that night should have sent me running for a new club. But it was never going to be the players on the pitch who captured this storyteller's imagination. The beating heart of Manchester City Football Club is the supporters; unlike any others on this spinning mass of confusion we call Earth. On that evening I heard a song called 'MCFC OK' and officially fell in love with the passion, the loyalty and the self-deprecating humour that is Manchester City. After

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years of searching for success, a flailing football club and its supporters' unique ability to laugh at disappointment, finally felt right.

By 2009 I'd had all the rejection I could take from music. After years of ploughing every dollar I had into a slowly sinking ship, it was time to move on. Sensing I was penniless and in need of mental respite, my sister invited me to come and live with her and her boyfriend for a while.

One grey, raining January day, Kim and I decided to walk over to the new stadium for a tour. Despite their rich history, and recent purchase by Abu Dhabi billionaires, City were still Premier League middleweights, and as such there were only four people on the tour: me, my sister and a couple visiting from Australia. Immediately, Kimberly and I recognized our tour guide was a musician. Something about being one yourself, you just know.

This was Chris Nield. He would be our tour guide for the day and in time, one of our very dearest friends. At my leaving do a couple of years later, Chris taught me the lyrics to the song I'd first heard in a loss to Nottingham Forest.

By 2011, feeling refreshed and up for a new challenge, I moved to California to take a series of writing classes offered by the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). I was there for screenwriting, and only signed up for short-form non-fiction as an elective. My instructor in this class was Norman Kolpas, and just like World Cup '94 and my first electric guitar, he would alter my path in life.

When the course was finished Norman told me I should write a book. Recording albums, attempting film scripts, sure. But a book? What did I know about writing books? I ignored Norman's advice for another year. My life to this point had been a series of abject failures and instead

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of pushing my artistic limits, I retreated to the safety of my hometown and a job I'd held for many years.

Every aspiring musician needs a day job, and from the time I was 23, mine was managing a local sports shop. When I returned from Los Angeles, the owner and close friend Chris Reilly offered me a chance to buy into the shop with him. I chose safety, and for the next year scarcely wrote a word.

It would take a Manchester City supporters club, located in Toronto, to pull me out of retail purgatory and become the impetus for this book. The more I attended matches at the Toronto supporters club the more I began to realize there was a real story here. I began to believe that Mancunians might be interested in hearing how revered their club and culture was, 3,400 miles across the Atlantic, in Canada's largest city.

I reached out to my old friend Chris Nield; no longer providing the stadium tours, Chris had moved up the City ladder to become one of their social media directors in a social media department very much the envy of world football. I told Chris and his team about a story I wanted to tell, about how big and crazy the supporters club in Toronto had become.

As I researched the story I found myself wondering if there were other international clubs who were this mental for City. Was this happening in other corners of the world? My story on the Toronto supporters club ran over two issues in City's matchday programme, and I didn't want the story to stop there.

When Reilly decided in April that 20 years of being an independent owner meant he couldn't adjust to life with a business partner, it was the final push I needed. I wasn't angry at being let go; running a sports retail shop was never meant to be my life's work. I sold my small

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portion back to my friend and returned to England for a wedding.

That summer, at my sister's wedding – to the very same man she took a chance on nearly ten years before – with Norman's advice and more than a few bottles of Peroni swirling around in my head, I decided it was time to share my crazy idea with Chris Nield and his fiancée Sophie.

'I want to do a season-long world tour of Manchester City supporter clubs! And I want to write a book about it!' I slurred.

An idea is always at its most vulnerable in that brief moment after your voice has given it life. And the ears that first hear ambitious words are arguably the most important. Chris and Sophie didn't question and they didn't think the idea foolish.

'Get the project started yourself, it will gain momentum. Others will get involved as the idea grows, but get it going now, and don't wait,' was Chris's sage advice.

Which brings us here, to a tiny desk in Toronto, next to a bay window letting in an intruding breeze the maple trees are helpless to stop. It's the evening of 23 July 2013 and I've been sitting here staring at my computer screen for hours now. I've created an online crowd-funding campaign to help get things started. Everything is in place: the PayPal, the banking info, and the YouTube video, all pored over a million times. The only one thing left to do is click 'Go Live'.

The cursor hovers over these two words while a battle rages inside my mind. If I can raise \$3,000 that ought to cover me for North America when I factor in that I can stay with friends and fellow Blues along the way. I'll figure out the international stuff as I go; perhaps a sponsor will come on board. Like Chris said, 'Just get it started.'

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I must be nuts diving back into the artistic abyss. If I stop now, I'll be okay for money. My debts are under control, my rent is cheap, and I'm sure I could find steady work within the month.

The decision I make next will dictate not only the next year, but undoubtedly many years to come. Can I afford to do this? What if I run out of money? What will I do? Imagine at this age having to call home for money; I'm not sure I could handle that sort of humbling. If I click 'Go Live' then contributions might start coming in. And if contributions start coming in, that will be a promise made and a book will need to be written, a world tour no longer a fantasy but a responsibility. There will be no turning back. Deep breath. Here we go.

Click.



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The Caesar Opener

It is Monday 19 August, and I've awoken at the crack of dawn to prepare a proper full English breakfast. The sound of morning robins is balanced perfectly against the crackling of frying bacon. The aroma of hope and pork fat sits heavy in the air and brilliantly captures the potential of a new season. After my hearty breakfast I enjoy a hot brew before heading out my front door and taking my first proud step on this journey, a step that takes me, appropriately, east. I'm 3,414 miles west of Manchester but getting closer by the stride.

IN THE days leading up to City's first match of the 2013/2014 campaign, I couldn't help but imagine our journey together beginning this way. It didn't. So let's try this again.

It's 9.30am on 19 August 2013, the occasion of Manchester City's first match of the new campaign. I've

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woken up late, and if I'm going to make it on time to Opera Bob's 'Caesar Opener' I'll have to skip breakfast, drive instead of walk (which means no beer today) and brew my morning cup at the pub after eating an egg-sandwich-take-away from the Lakeview Diner next door.

For those of you quick with time zones, questioning why I'm rushing out the door at 10am for a 3pm kick-off, the answer is simple: Opera Bob's Public House, the official Toronto supporters club, is holding its first annual Caesar Opener. The Caesar Opener is to be a glorious Monday morning combination of FIFA '13 video-game tournament in which players can only use Manchester City against Manchester City, and consumption of the pre-noon drink of choice here in Canada: the Caesar.

I hop into my modest late-model Nissan, which I still can't afford, parked outside my apartment on Howard Park Avenue. The bright-yellow Toronto parking ticket, which often adorns my vehicle, is fortunately missing this morning, perhaps an omen of a good day ahead.

I'm 3,414 miles west of Manchester and begin this journey by driving eastward. Had I walked, I might have described to you the immaculate front lawns of the residents along Toronto's Dundas Street West, in the heart of what the locals affectionately call Little Portugal. I'll put Portuguese-Canadians head to head with any community on the planet when it comes to pride in their front lawns. My mate Alex Nassar swears he once saw an old Portuguese gentleman vacuuming his grass. I can neither confirm nor deny this account, but it certainly wouldn't surprise me.

Today however, I am driving, battling Monday morning traffic, desperate not to be late. The usually straightforward five-minute drive takes four times that long as I battle my way through taxis, streetcars and slow-

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moving pedestrians, oblivious to the importance of my getting to Bob's on time.

With only minutes to spare, I arrive one street east of Ossington and park my car next to Roxton Road Park. I used to live at the top of Roxton Road, in the smallest basement apartment into which you could ever fit a kitchen, bathroom and bedroom. I remember having to duck to get in the door and I'm not a tall man. The place was absurdly cheap as the landlord was a good friend, and I *still* had trouble paying the rent most months.

Monday 19 August. City v Newcastle. 3pm kick-off

Somewhere in the neighbourhood of 200 excited steps bring me to 1112 Dundas Street West, the home of Opera Bob's Public House and the official Toronto branch for Manchester City supporters. August in Toronto is hot, sticky-hot, and today is no exception. As I arrive at the pub entrance, sweat drips from my forehead in tidy one-second intervals, on to the notebook held in my left hand, sounding almost like a ticking clock.

Arriving at the door I take a minute to study its lines. The harsh Canadian winters and stifling summers, dramatic expanding and contracting over four years, have carved a unique road map into the heavy and medieval-looking door.

Ross Simnor – the 32-year-old son of a hard-working electrician from Wythenshawe – opened the bar in early 2009 along with his two mates, Will Koplin and Robert Pomakov, the latter an accomplished opera singer (who to this day I've still never actually seen in person) and the inspiration behind the name. In the beginning, Bob's

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was a mostly empty pub, Ross often by himself, watching City on a lonely bar stool, a single scarf tacked to the wall behind him.

The other two partners didn't know much about football, so Ross's demand that the pub be a place where supporters of his beloved Manchester City congregate was met with little resistance, apart from questioning the \$500 a month for a television package allowing the bar to show live soccer matches from England, which nobody other than Ross seemed to be watching.

Will and Bob soon began to ask Ross when exactly these 'soccer people' were going to show up, but even Ross himself wasn't sure. Two months after opening and still without supporters, Ross decided it was time to take action. After thinking long and hard about how to attract more Blues, he devised a plan. He would climb up on a bar stool and pin a second scarf to the wall. Brilliant.

Meanwhile, Ted Masuda and Jimmy Cain were waiting for a nearby music shop to open when they decided to look for a pint to kill some time. Curious, they swung open Opera Bob's ominous wooden door, the Springsteen playing over the speakers convincing them to venture further. A few steps into the pub they discovered a short but broad-shouldered man in his early 30s balanced precariously on a bar stool, carefully pinning a Manchester City scarf to the wall.

'Is this a Manchester City pub?' Teddy asked.

As well as being avid Springsteen fans, Ted and Jimmy were also Blues. After introductions, the three men sat down for a pint and discussed Springsteen's *Nebraska* as it played on in the background. A few pints later and it was The Band's second 'brown' album pouring through the speakers. Eventually the music shop opened and Jimmy and Ted were on their way, but not before promising

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to return on Saturday for the City match. Opera Bob's supporters club was about to triple in size.

Will and Bob teased Ross, certain he would be stood up on his date with his new football friends. And in some sense they were correct. The club didn't triple in size that Saturday: it quintupled, Jimmy and Ted arriving with fellow Blues 'Big Danny' Dorey and Eric Tokar. Ted's twin brother, Will, who is to this day the club's expert matchday bartender, later followed, forming the foundation for a Manchester City supporters club in Toronto.

In September of 2010 Opera Bob's was granted official status, members enjoying access to certain perks such as the chance to meet guests from the club, former players, attendance at the Player of the Year Awards, and help with organized travel to home and away matches. Four short years after its opening, Ross has transformed Opera Bob's into what is one of the most successful and admired supporters clubs outside of Manchester.

As I step inside the narrow pub, a wave of memories floods my senses. I see the spot where I dropped to the floor in tears when City beat United in the FA Cup semi-final. Walking past the tiny stage to my right, I can still hear Chris Nield and Sophie performing a set of original songs to an adoring pub of Canadians, so tightly packed together that Chris could have walked from stage to bar for a pint without touching the floor. I can recall the exact way my pint tasted, sipping it back slowly, hanging on every word as Stephen Lindsey interviewed his childhood hero Joe Corrigan.

And of course the day no Toronto Blue will forget as long as they live: I remember the chills that ran down my back when Dan Reynolds and Paul Lake marched through Opera Bob's back entrance carrying the Premier League trophy.

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At 10am on the nose, I saddle up to the last of a dozen stools at the far end of the bar, just under the Heart of the City award. The Heart of the City was a short-lived but important promotion from Umbro and Manchester City that celebrated supporters clubs around the world, by awarding their pubs a metallic blue moon with the pub name stamped proudly on top. Sitting at the familiar bar, I am already in good company, as the following Blues have beaten me to Bob's:

- * Head bartender, twin and dead ringer for Samir Nasri, Bill Masuda.
- * Resident expat heartthrob, Rob Kershaw.
- * Chris Livesey, who has taken an entire week off from work to facilitate the 3pm Monday afternoon kick-off. He also sports the beginning of what will become, over the course of this season, a glorious white beard.
- * David Hampson, who, when I look quizzically at his laptop resting on the bar, tells me he is, 'Working from home today.'

There's no sign of Ross yet, but 'Coach' as he is more commonly known, is a phys. ed. teacher with summers off; there is the likelihood he was into a few beverages last night.

Late waking up, though I may have been, I still managed to rush out the door clutching my lucky 2012 Champions mug complete with tea stains, a few of which have been there since the previous year. Bill quickly puts the kettle on for me, no questions asked; a small detail, but one that makes me feel instantly at home. The markings on the inside of my mug drive my girlfriend mental, but I believe there is a certain measure of character that lies within the stains of one's favourite mug. I like to think Bill

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notices them as he tosses the bag in. I like to believe he feels the same way I do.

At 10.50am, Bob's big wooden door swings open and floods the cavernous pub with painful morning sunlight. Coach comes bouncing into the pub, the gifted sort of man who can shake off a hangover inside of ten minutes. Coach hooks up his PlayStation to a giant theatre screen and the first annual Opera Bob's Caesar Opener begins.

When the clock strikes 11am, the time you can legally begin serving alcohol in Ontario, Bill starts preparing the Caesars and Rob Kershaw's home-kit Blues kick off against the away-kitted City side of Jason Nebelung.

The Caesar is a Canadian staple. It is a drink we annually consume by the millions, but that remains virtually unknown outside of our borders – and perhaps that is what we like most about it.

The rest of the world might tell you it's simply a Bloody Mary with clam juice, but don't ever describe it this way to a Canadian.

The next four hours see a group of ten grown men wage civil war on one another on a Monday afternoon when most of our countrymen are hard at work. I even jump in for a quick match and get shelled 8-1 by Kershaw's Blues. It was 1-1 for a time, but when I over-celebrate my Balotelli equalizer by running around the pub airplane-style, Rob quickly reminds me who's boss, and pours in another seven on the trot.

2.23pm Eastern Standard Time, we're 37 minutes from the start of the 2013/2014 campaign and the Toronto Blues begin to arrive, seemingly by the streetcar load. I'm so excited I can barely write in my John Rylands notebook. It has been an uneventful summer without footy – apart from my sister's wedding in Oxfordshire, of course – but aside from that, summer was as summer nearly always is

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for me: hot and dull. I don't care for the heat and have no interest in tennis.

The chairman of Toronto's official supporters club is Dan Reynolds. Months from now, on a cold and rainy night in Manchester, he will tell me his plans to move to Tel Aviv, leaving the Toronto Blues in need of a new chairman. But on this day, Dan Reynolds is still very much our leader.

'Thought you said you weren't drinking today,' I say.

'I skipped work for this, may as well get drunk.'

'You want that off the record?' I joke.

'Oh, that is very much *on* the record sir!'

'How did you become a Blue?' will become the question I ask people the most in the coming year, as well as the most common question asked of me. Perhaps it is the excitement of opening day, or the fact that Dan and I have felt like old friends since the day we met, but as I stand beside him on this humid August day in 2013, I am entirely unaware of how he found City. For now, Dan is simply a friend and our chairman, anxiously clutching his third pint of stout.

At 2.31pm, the nearly-full pub erupts in unison, 'Woody!' Mark Wood has just entered the pub. Originally from Reddish, Woody, a season ticket holder for nearly 20 years, was offered a job in Toronto he simply couldn't pass up, and in the summer of 2012 he moved his wife and two daughters to Toronto. Woody, Jeanette, Charlotte and Hannah have adored their first year in Canada and it looks like they – much to our country's benefit – are here to stay. Woody's new job at our nation's largest newspaper is very much of the Monday to Friday variety and it begs the question,

'Woody, how'd you get work off?'

'Told them I had an immigration meeting, pal,' replies Woody with his signature wry smile and raised eyebrow.

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Funny, Woody is the third expat through the door with an immigration meeting today.

Woody orders his customary spiced rum with ginger ale and lime wedge before turning to me and asking, 'How have you been, *amore?*'

There's a small chance you're wondering why a 43-year-old married father of two refers to me as *amore*. It's a slightly embarrassing story, but one worthy of a quick telling.

On 13 May 2013 I drove 45 minutes north to my parents' house to watch the most important Toronto Maple Leafs hockey game there had been in eight years. As I sat down to watch the game with my father – this game was far too big to watch with anyone else – my phone began to light up. My traditional hockey friends are, like me, too nervous to be texting back and forth during such a huge game. So who could be sending me so many messages at such an important time?

As it turns out, there were two offenders. The first was my girlfriend, Jess, who was away at university in Montreal. Jess despises sports and was firing off a million texts at once, likely knowing there was a big game on and wanting to test which I valued more, our relationship or a hockey match.

The other offender, you've likely guessed, was Woody. Woody decided to get into hockey when he moved here and loved it from the first drop of blood, but he has trouble understanding the myriad rules of professional sport's fastest game. So there I was, trying to enjoy Toronto's biggest match in eight years with my dad and my phone is receiving five texts a minute from Jess and another ten from Woody. I figured I could get Jess off my back by composing the sweetest, most nauseating text imaginable. Something that professes my undying love, compliments

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her eyes and praises her hair – Colombian women are suckers for a good hair compliment.

Quickly, during a commercial break I tap away a muddled list of ‘I love you’ messages and ‘you mean the world to me’ and of course, ‘Your hair is softer than silk.’ Admittedly, not my best work, but this was an elimination hockey game – lose and we’re finished!

And I only had a two-minute commercial break to work with. I finished off the message with some of those nauseating hearts and smiling faces, and smiling faces with hearts in the eyes and pushed send. And by now I’m sure you’ve figured out to whom it was sent. Woody simply replied with one simple word, ‘Amore!’

Safe to say he’ll never let me live that one down.

By the time Jesus walks through the door, the narrow pub is already pushing its capacity. Dan Reynolds leaps to his feet and quickly welcomes the new arrivals, a vacationing family from Chadderton, their youngest wearing the kit of our brand-new signing Jesus Navas. Danny is a savant at making new people feel welcome at Opera Bob’s; you couldn’t dream of a better chairman.

At 2.45pm the new season is minutes away. I order myself a pint of the local King Vienna and a meat pie – if this isn’t heaven, it’s damn close. As I savour my first pint of what will be a record-breaking number this season, a glass jar behind the bar catches my attention. I haven’t seen it before; a note taped to its front reads ‘C-word jar’. In England, should the appropriate moment call for it, the ‘C-word’ in question isn’t entirely unheard of and given the right circumstances (referee grants seven minutes of added time) is even somewhat forgivable.

But this word in North America carries a little more weight; one simply does *not* say this word in mixed company without reprisal. Few words are more reviled

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here, and so at Opera Bob's, should the word be uttered, the offending supporter must pay a one-dollar fine to the jar in question. This isn't Coach's policy, rather that of his wife, Brittani. And the lads here know better than to question Brit. Dropping the C-word at Opera Bob's is going to cost you a buck; pay up and say sorry.

Before the match begins, City honour their former keeper Bert Trautmann, a man who famously played and won the 1956 FA Cup Final with a broken neck. The current squad all wear Trautmann kits and the Opera Bob's faithful belt out 'There's only one Bert Trautmann'. From there the Bob's Blues launch into 'There's only three Samir Nasris', sung because, as mentioned, Bill Masuda and his twin brother, Ted, and their eldest brother Ed, all bear a striking resemblance to City's number eight.

The 2013/2014 campaign, one which will change my life forever, finally kicks off, and before I'm two bites into my meat pie, David Silva heads a deflected Edin Dzeko cross into the back of the Magpies' net and Bob's goes absolutely mental. From their usual seats just in front of the giant pull-down theatre screen, I watch Coach and Woody share a particularly exuberant hug, the bastards having just won our first-goal-pool. At 5/1 on Silva, Woody is \$25 richer, and due for a few more spiced rums.

Up 2-0 at the half, thanks to Sergio Aguero, City are rolling and the locals are buzzing. I grab myself a cup of tea and it's time to talk with Jesus. Andrew and Wendy Woods were married 19 years ago today. They've come to Toronto to celebrate their anniversary and they've brought along with them daughter Ellie and son Alexander to visit family friends and local restaurateurs Alexandra and Craig Hutchinson. Alexandra – who admits she has never been to watch a footy match in a pub or otherwise – tells me she is quickly falling in love with City, and I'm not the least bit

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surprised. The atmosphere on this Monday afternoon is absolutely on form, and I always say a person only needs an introduction to City culture to become forever hooked. Forty-five minutes in, Alexandra is hooked.

A few minutes into our chat I begin to see the sea of sky-blue jerseys part; it's the youngest of our new arrivals from Chadderton, Alexander, he of the new Jesus Navas kit. Weaving through the packed Toronto pub, a Coke in his hand, and even at eight years old, that confident Mancunian swagger, he saunters up to the table where I am interviewing his parents and tells me in no short order, 'I'm going to be famous. I'll wear number ten for City and drive a Bugatti Veyron!'

Alexander next informs the table City will take this match 5-0 and like that, he's gone, back into the ocean of City blue, high-fives and fist-bumps galore, navigating the strange Canadian pub-waters as though he was born to them. He is the star of the show today and Opera Bob's wouldn't have it any other way.

EN-RI-CO!

Whoa-oh,

En-ri-co, whoa oh-oh-oh,

He comes from Italy,

To cheer for Man City!

Our singing section, better known as 'The Pit', led by Marty Von Wuthenau, Jason Nebelung and Dan Rouse, belts out a pub favourite when Enrico Galati finally arrives on the scene. Manager at Toronto's favourite independent grocer, Fiesta Farms, Enrico is one of Opera Bob's original Blues, and even though Mancini has left us, the pub continues to serenade Enrico with his personal anthem. In a season where so much is about to change, it's good to know some things never will.

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The second half kicks off against a ten-man Newcastle side with an impossible hill to climb. The remaining 45 minutes are simply a party; pints flow, endless hugs are exchanged and true friendship, both new and old, rules the day. City are back and it's a dream start to the campaign. City look so dominant today, I catch myself wondering if this journey will see a City loss at all. Could this be our version of the invincibles? That's how impressive our lads looked today in their debut under a new Chilean leader, manager Manuel Pellegrini.

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When I finally leave, eight hours after arriving, I find Woody outside holding court with some more new arrivals to the Toronto club. They're Canadian Blues and hang on Woody's every heavily accented word. Woody regales the three men nearly half his age with tales of matches in places they've never heard of, much less been to: Macclesfield, Tranmere, Chesterfield. If I know Woody, he is just about at the part of his story where in 1997 he and some mate of his called Tim Bramley started up a supporters branch called the Reddish Blues. The Reddish Blues always sounded like a funny name to me, but more on that gang later.

I say a quick goodbye to my *amore* and walk back down Dundas Street towards Roxton Road, not really having any idea if what I am about to get myself into is a good idea or just completely crazy, another soldier standing at useless attention in my long line of failed ideas. My hometown was always going to be an easy, affordable and welcoming start, but now I must begin travelling to places I've never been, soliciting stories from complete strangers with the hopes they'll give up some of their most personal experiences.

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I am crazy, I'm certain of it.

Just steps away from the pub and already the bliss of a 4-0 win has given way to anxiety and doubt. Then, in the distance, I hear Woody. His voice carries further than the others as I hear him describe me in three simple words, 'Proper Blue, him.'

And with that endorsement I'm off to Washington, DC with my chin up. If a born-and-raised Blue from Reddish believes in me, perhaps my idea stands a chance. Perhaps I can get people to talk.

Perhaps one of my crazy ideas might just be, at long last, a good one.