



THE BALD FACTS

THE DAVID ARMSTRONG BIOGRAPHY
PAT SYMES

FOREWORD BY KEVIN KEEGAN

Tribute From Jack Charlton

DAVID ARMSTRONG had not played very much for Middlesbrough when I took over as manager but I could see from the first pre-season friendly or two that he was a hell of a good player. David sealed the left side of our midfield from day one and gave the club tremendous service over many years and, like a lot of that team, did not get the individual recognition he deserved.

We had a great team and played to our strengths and the weaknesses of our opponents. We had in Alan Foggon a striker who might have made a living as a sprinter. He was that fast. Teams in those days played offside and our aim was to get David and the great Bobby Murdoch to find the gaps behind defences for Alan to run in to. Alan was not so good with the ball but if we did all the right things he could get on the end of those through balls and put them away.

David was a great passer and a little quicker than people think. He also got more than his fair share of goals from midfield. He was an intelligent player but not a big lad and that might have counted against him in England terms. They always want big lads.

I think back to the lads we had like David Mills, Foggon, John Hickton, Willie Maddren, Stuart Boam and John Craggs and, like David, they either played little for England or not at all. In

my view they were all good enough but maybe Middlesbrough didn't capture the imagination of the national media.

David was an important part of an outstanding team and it didn't change much at all from year to year. We should have won a trophy or two. We were certainly good enough.

Looking back, I think I should have stayed as Middlesbrough manager for one more year. It is easy to say that now but when I left we were not far away from winning honours regularly. I left behind a great team and some fine players. David was one of those.

David had a top class domestic career and should have played many more times for England. He was easily good enough.

JACK CHARLTON

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Robson's Dogged Bench-Warmer

FOUR HOURS after playing for England against World Cup finalists West Germany in front of 68,000 at Wembley I was attempting to clean a sheepdog's diarrhoea from a shagpile carpet at my home on the outskirts of Southampton, still clad proudly in my England blazer and tie, the roar of the crowd a distant and dream-like memory. Jevvy, the guilty incontinent dog, appeared unrepentant as I got on my hands and knees, scrubbing furiously while my wife Maureen shouted, 'He's your dog. You clean it up.' The children were upstairs fast asleep, oblivious of the whole horror.

But just as England had been beaten earlier that night, I too was forced to admit defeat. The carpet was never going to be restored by my despairing efforts and a few days later I was forking out £1,500 to replace it. This was October 1982. I was 27, at the peak of my career, an international footballer enjoying the attention and recognition that comes with playing against and with the best players in the world. And yet the

shagpile carpet incident was somehow symbolic of my failure to establish myself among the elite. Just when it seemed I had cracked it, something seemed to go wrong and I was always brought tumbling back to earth.

On this occasion, one minute I was playing against Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, Pierre Littbarski and the great Lothar Matthaus at that wonderful sporting arena, the next I was on all fours, covered in dog excrement. I suppose I can say that at least I played for England, albeit a paltry three times. In my, admittedly extremely biased view, it should have been 33 and maybe even more.

Over 16 years, mostly in the top flight, not many players could have matched me for consistency in league terms. I went seven years, all but one in the First Division, at Middlesbrough without missing a game and then spent another six at Southampton where Lawrie McMenemy assembled a side laden with big names that came desperately close to achieving a league and cup double. But a regular England place always eluded me, and to this day it bugs me. From midfield and spread over my time in the game I scored 146 league and cup goals and yet my international appearances at all levels to include a handful of Under-23 and B caps were handed out almost apologetically.

Even the way I gained my first cap was bizarre. It was 1980 and I was flying for Middlesbrough with 14 league and cup goals and getting top-class reviews up and down the country. That year I was named Football Writers' North-East Player of the Year at a ceremony at the Three Tuns in my home city of Durham and it remains one of the proudest nights of my life. To be in the same hall as such North-East football giants of the past like Wilf Mannion, Len Shackleton, George Hardwick and Jackie Milburn was an honour in itself while McMenemy, Southampton's manager but a North-Eastern lad, presented me with my prize.

The flattering clamour for me to be given my England chance grew louder with every performance and the football writers did their part in making sure my name was at the forefront almost on a daily basis. In the end their cry 'Armstrong for England' could not be ignored any longer. There was a B international at Roker Park in March 1980, for which I was chosen, and I would like to think this was on merit, not because it was being staged in the North-East. We won 1-0 and the match itself was uneventful except that I recall the Spaniards made us run around a lot more than I had been used to in the domestic game. There was no doubt that John Neal, the Middlesbrough manager, and before him Jack Charlton would have been pushing my cause but I have a feeling Ron Greenwood, the interim England manager after Don Revie's unseemly departure, didn't rate me in quite the way Revie had done before.

Two months later in May, as England prepared for the European Championships, Greenwood was obliged to select in effect two international teams simultaneously. There was a fixture with Australia to be fulfilled, which became the first full international between the countries after they had asked for it to be upgraded from B status. Middlesbrough were due to fly to Japan to take part in the Kirin Cup and since I was one of the club's major players, Neal asked the England management if I was also likely to be wanted by them in Australia. Much to be my great delight they said I was. The two events clashed but arrangements were made for me to catch up with the rest of the England party in Sydney once my Middlesbrough commitments had been completed.

In fact they weren't completed because we reached the final of the tournament after beating the Chinese national side in the semi and I had to leave almost as soon as the semi-final had been played. I was told instead to get an overnight flight from Tokyo to Sydney where I was to be met and taken to the

hotel in Rushcutters Bay. I duly arrived, bleary-eyed early the next morning, a solitary balding Englishman in a plane-load of small Japanese, only to discover there was no one there to greet me. Having waited around long enough to know I had either been missed or forgotten I made my own way to the hotel, arriving there at 8.30am with half the squad nowhere to be seen. At this point a taxi driver, the man deputed to bring me from the airport, showed up to say David Armstrong had not been on the plane. Not exactly a great start, then, and it got worse.

With Greenwood organising the main squad, Bobby Robson was placed in charge for the trip to Australia. Robson was later to become one of the more successful England managers and his achievements at Ipswich, where he had transformed a provincial side into one of the best teams in Europe, were huge. The following year Ipswich won the UEFA Cup and the England hierarchy were obviously testing his credentials in the same way as they were testing mine. Bobby Robson told me I was rooming with his namesake Bryan Robson but not to go to the room yet because he was having a lie-in and was not to be disturbed. So I hung around the foyer until 11am until I was at last able to take up my bags, Bryan having woken and come down for some breakfast. Bryan was a lad from Chester-le-Street, almost my neck of the woods, and with our similar backgrounds we got on well but this was a strange introduction.

Bobby was also from the North-East but that didn't help in any way. I don't think he wanted me there. My selection had been Greenwood's and from that chaotic arrival to the moment I left to go back to Japan, I never felt part of this particular England set-up.

Bobby had this habit of forgetting people's names. To some this would be an endearing trait but to me it was just plain rude. I am told he spent a decade at Ipswich referring to Eric Gates as

Eric Sykes and in our team meeting later that day he welcomed me as 'Chic'. My nickname at Middlesbrough was Spike for reasons I shall explain later and when he said 'Chic has joined us from Japan', I thought he was talking about someone else. But then came the big put-down. 'Chic has come all the way from Japan so I'm going to have to play him,' he said in front of his assembled squad. One minute he tells me I'm in the team, about to make my England debut, surely one of the proudest moments in any player's career, the next he's telling me he is obliged to play me. As the new boy I wanted the security of knowing that I had been picked on merit, because he thought I could do a decent job, not because I had made a big effort to get to Australia. Sympathy was the last thing I needed.

As the meeting broke up Robson beckoned me over, perhaps I thought to give me a few words of much-required assurance as I was about to embark on my inevitably nervous debut. 'By the way Chic,' he confided, 'I have taken your bloody England suit halfway round the world in my suitcase. Come and get it.'

I played on the left of midfield, my club position, and while the Aussies were not as good as they are now they made life difficult enough so that we only won 2-1 with Glenn Hoddle and Paul Mariner getting our goals. We were two goals up in the first 25 minutes with Russell Osman, Terry Butcher and Alan Sunderland also making their debuts and Peter Ward coming on for his first appearance in the 85th minute. I didn't last the whole match, as was the case in my other two internationals, being replaced by West Ham's Alan Devonshire near the end when we were leading 2-0. But at least I could now call myself an international and at 25 I had reason to suppose I could be on the threshold of an exciting future at this level once I had put behind me this awkward start.

Nagging away at the back of my mind though was the feeling that I was not part of all this, that I was not wanted. I kept thinking, 'What am I doing here?' At the end of the

game, hands shaken, bath taken, there was no response from Bobby Robson, good or bad, making my sense of being an outsider, my isolation, all the sharper. I don't think they needed me there. My selection, however merited in my own view, was a sop to Middlesbrough and the North-East. Later I thought back to the game and felt I had done an efficient, un-showy job, the sort I did for Middlesbrough every week, but in the absence of any comment I would never know for sure.

The next day was a rest day and the lads did all the tourist bits; trips around beautiful Sydney harbour, buying souvenir toy koalas and kangaroos for kids back home, before the main party departed early the following morning. I was left behind for a flight that evening to Tokyo to resume my club's tournament and was told officials from the Australian FA would see me to my plane. I voiced the concern that my visa may have been used up coming to Australia but the English management were convinced all was in order. They were long gone by the time I sat down to lunch with the Aussies who, when I pressed my point, kindly checked and came back with the news I feared, namely that my visa had indeed expired and with my flight due to depart at 7pm I had about three hours to get another. I had to reach the Japanese embassy by 4pm, which I just managed, so that I could get my passport stamped. I remember running through the streets to the embassy, thinking, 'Is this international football?'

That evening, with my new visa in place, I left Australia believing I had been enduring a nightmare, ending only when I was able to rejoin my Middlesbrough 'family' in time for us to beat Espanyol on penalties in the final, so all was not so bad. There had been no presentation of my first tasselled England cap in Sydney, as I had supposed there might be, no formal recognition of a step up. In fact the cap arrived in the post some time later with a handful of household bills.

To add to the oddness of the whole episode and as a cricket fan, it was curious to be required to play the international on the turf of the famous Sydney Cricket Ground. I looked at the notorious Hill and thought of all the stick England's cricketers had taken over the years from Aussie fans stationed there but in a way it only heightened the surreal aspect to the whole strange adventure.

From then on until the West German match two and a half years later I flirted with the international scene. Flirted is the right word because there was more promise than there was action. I played for England B at Old Trafford in October 1980 against the USA, a match in which Derek Statham got the only goal. It was always a little hard to believe B internationals actually led to anything and have largely now been abandoned. But another major disappointment was still to come.

In 1981 I switched from Middlesbrough to Southampton and began playing in a side which looked as if it might win titles and cups. Alongside Kevin Keegan, Mick Channon, Alan Ball and other big names and internationals, I think it became clear, if it had not been before, I could hold my own with the very best players.

It got to 1982, I was playing as well as at any time in my life in a top class club team and suddenly the World Cup in Spain was upon us. Everyone wants to play in a World Cup and I was certainly no different and I felt my chances of doing so were excellent after my first season at Southampton in which I got 15 league goals and another in the UEFA Cup. I really thought I stood a great chance of going and, as importantly, being able to make a difference. Everything pointed to my inclusion, not least there being a dearth of left-sided midfield players who could score goals. The papers were tipping me for a squad place.

A squad of 40 players was named and two key players, Keegan and the left-sided Trevor Brooking, were struggling

to be fit to play in the tournament. There is no doubt Keegan and Brooking were absolutely vital to England's chances of winning, so they were given every chance to get themselves fit. Also in the 40 after much lobbying and touting in the papers was one David Armstrong. And yet when the squad was reduced to 22 I was one of those left out, a terrible blow after my hopes had been raised because I was convinced my time had come.

I had by then served the best part of ten years in the First Division, played in European competition and I like to think I was regarded by team-mates and opponents alike as one of the better left-sided midfield players around. Instead in my position England took Brooking, who was not fit until the last match against Spain, on the basis of his greater experience and I went from elation at my original selection to something approaching disillusion. Graham Rix played on the left and, as we know, England failed to impress, reaching the last 12. I watched every match, genuinely wanting them to win. I am a true patriot and not even my own hurt could change that.

Allowing for the fact that Brooking was a high class player and was deservedly in front of me I still didn't know what I had to do to get into the international squad but I soon discovered I had not been completely forgotten. I have a strong feeling that after the World Cup the influential Lawrie McMenemy had been extolling my capabilities, as Neal and Charlton had done on my behalf before at Middlesbrough. With Bobby Robson now in charge, I was picked in the squad to face Denmark in a European Championship qualifier in Copenhagen. Even then Robson found a way of omitting me when it came to picking the starting 11.

Football is all about opinions of course but I'm bound to say I should have started in Denmark. Danish crowds can be hostile and intimidating to opponents but it would have made no difference to me and I'm afraid it was another opportunity

lost. I so nearly got on. Robson at one point told me to get stripped, ready for action but as I hovered around the touchline, indulging in a few warm-up exercises, the moment came and went and I never did get over the white line. Ricky Hill went on instead in the 83rd minute.

There was one major social consolation anyway to having missed out on the 1982 World Cup. The previous year John Oakenfold, a North-East businessman, ran a cricket team in which celebrities such as Allan Wells, Alan Minter and John Conteh took part, each receiving some little recompense for their trouble. We were playing at Corbridge and after I had got 50-odd, John asked me what I wanted and I knew he always had a hospitality box at Royal Ascot. Never having been to a race meeting, I told him a day there would be nice and he agreed.

So in 1982, and me by now being a Southampton player, John was as good as his word and Maureen and I were invited for three days at the famous course to sample one of the grand occasions of the English summer. What was so fortunate was that we met three couples who were to remain our closest friends over some difficult times ahead. There were John and Maureen Wheeler, Harry and Eve Saunders and Roberto and Sheila Mangoni.

Roberto, or 'Bertie' as we came to know him, brought a television to the hospitality box so he could watch Italy in the World Cup and we soon became regular visitors to his restaurant in Camberley, Surrey. When I was a Saints player he used to sponsor me, new shoes after every two goals or maybe a case of top quality Italian wine. He quickly taught me the glory of a good red wine but what I liked about all these people we had met by chance was that they saw through and beyond the fact that I was a prominent First Division footballer and after those days faded forever they stayed loyal. Maureen and I have not forgotten that.

As for the generous Mr Oakenfold, managing director of a company that made false ceilings, the ceilings proved not to be the only thing false about him. So too were his accounts and I went to visit him at Pentonville prison when his embezzling finally caught him up. John 'The Horse' Wheeler stood surety for him but Royal Ascot seemed a long way off.

After the nearly appearance of Copenhagen, I was called up at last for a really big match, that against West Germany a month later. It may have ended a few hours later with me, cloth in hand and a bowl of soapy hot water, but the match itself was an education. A few months earlier the Germans had been playing in a World Cup Final and all their players were high calibre but I have never been worried by big occasions or big players.

For once the management had got it right, I was playing on the left of midfield with Devonshire outside me and Luton's Ricky Hill making his full debut. I was in my best position and involved, I thought, in all our better moves, doing much the same job I had been doing for Southampton, covering our defence when needed, probing for gaps in the German rear-guard and covering plenty of ground. For the only time in my brief international career I felt at home, comfortable in what I was doing and being able to achieve.

I did have one lucky break. In attempting to pass back to Peter Shilton, the ball was intercepted by a German forward only for Shilton to make the save. That sort of fundamental error could have blown the confidence of some players but I soon got over it, refused to hide and got on with my job. I may not have played much at this level but I was not an inexperienced player and it was not as though I had never previously made a mistake in a big match.

As usual, sad to report, I failed to see the match out. We were losing 1-0 when Graham Rix replaced me and we eventually went down 2-1. The incredible Rummenigge, one of the best

players in the world at the time, got both German goals and Tony Woodcock scored ours.

Unfortunately the team was not announced until the morning of the match which meant my parents could not get down in time from Durham to see it, which is something I shall always regret because they were as proud as I was and had supported me throughout my life. Maureen and a friend came up from the South Coast so I had some support and at the end of the night we were told by FA officials we could stay overnight at the Hilton Hotel near Wembley. We were already committed to going home to the children and the dog, an action I was of course to regret just as bitterly after we had driven through the night.

At last I felt like an England player and looked forward with optimism to many more opportunities. We may not have won an important friendly but there was no question from any quarter, as I looked at the papers, that I had contributed fully and I went back to Southampton training expecting much more to follow. Instead I had a long, long wait. It was some 19 months in fact before I got my third and last cap.

In the first few months after the West Germany game I was still involved peripherally, enough to keep me encouraged. I was called to the squads to face Russia at Wembley and Scotland at Hampden Park so that I was able still to label myself an England player, rather than a former one.

Maureen and I were married in September 1982 but we had to change the date on one occasion because of my involvement with England, which was slightly ironic, but it was not until May 1984, when I was 29 and beginning to think I had missed my chance, that I got another, final opportunity. Once again, on the basis of the opinions of others, I had been outstanding at club level, scoring 19 goals in the 1983/84 season, making what I regarded as an irrefutable case for inclusion. For once Robson bowed to statistical pressure.

I was convinced I was playing better than ever but convincing others in key England positions was an altogether different task. My template for a good international manager had been Revie, whom I first encountered in my England Under-23 days. At all levels, Revie, now an often derided figure for snatching Arab gold ahead of the England manager's job, had the gift of good man-management, always keeping players involved, always talking to them, inviting them to get-togethers and thanking them for attending. Revie liked me, of that I have no doubt, because he told me he did and even tried to sign me for Leeds when I was a schoolboy. I think I might have been a key player in any club side he managed as an old style inside-left and had he stayed as England's boss I have an inkling that I might have made a much smoother transition from Under-23, to England B and then full international. Mine was instead peppered with setbacks. Jack Charlton, John Neal and McMenemy were always kind enough to say publicly that I was just about the first name on the team sheet and even the reluctant Robson paid a sort of compliment by going on record to say I worked the left side very well.

By the time I was selected to play Wales at Wrexham on 2 May 1984 I was part of a big group of experienced internationals at Southampton, top players like Mick Mills, Mark Wright and Frank Worthington. The big three of Ball, Keegan and Channon had gone but through McMenemy's incredible capacity to attract the best players, Southampton were still thriving and yet, time after time, in those intervening 19 months when England international squads were announced I was being left at home when they all went off to play for their country, like a footballing Cinderella.

The match itself was little short of a disaster, and not just for me. Bobby Robson chose me to play wide on the left, which he should have known was simply not my best position. I am no left-winger and never have been, being short of the pace

required for that position, but being a left-winger was pretty much what he asked me to do. Bryan Robson may have been predominantly left-footed but he was a central midfielder and my preferred position was being occupied by John Gregory who I have to say was fortunate to play for England as often as he did. I often wondered why with Bryan Robson's injury record, I was not given the chance to play in his position.

From my point of view this particular match was best forgotten, the debut-making Mark Hughes scoring the only goal, and by the time I came off to be replaced by Luther Blissett we were already losing and I was feeling I could have contributed a lot, lot more. Neither Bobby Robson nor his assistant Don Howe said a word at the end, they did not need to.

Back at Southampton, going about my club business, I thought my international career was over before it had properly started but no, it lingered for another year of hoping and failing, expectations raised and quashed, which leads me to the tour of South America in the summer of 1985.

I still can't think about this particular jaunt without a shake of the head, the sheer disbelief about what happened to me as raw today as it was then. Maybe Bobby Robson wanted to recognise my part in a great season for Southampton, 1984/85, when we had finished fifth. Maybe he was having second or third thoughts about me as a player at the highest level or maybe I was just making up the numbers. I think I was chosen because Bobby was worried about Bryan Robson's perpetual injury problems and he wanted to see if I could handle the tough opposition we were sure to engage in Uruguay, Brazil and Chile.

The prospect of playing those countries on their own pitches in front of their legendarily passionate fans caused me great excitement even after another long hard domestic season at Southampton. To play at Brazil's Maracana Stadium was a schoolboy's dream come true – Pele had been a hero – and

after the long flight to Rio de Janeiro I reasoned that I must get another cap somewhere along the line over the three matches.

The sight of the yellow shirts of Brazil will live with me forever but the match will always be remembered as John Barnes's for his fabulous individual goal, weaving past defenders from the halfway line to score. It is shown again and again on television and little wonder. It made the reputation of Barnes and cemented the reputation of Robson in the hearts of the ruling classes at the FA. I often wonder if Robson had wanted me to play like Barnes but he should have known that I was no forward in the accepted sense despite my scoring record. At the end, as an unused substitute, I went on the pitch to swap shirts, coming home with a number 14, although without a name on the back I had no idea to whom it belonged.

And so to Uruguay who were probably the best team in South America at the time and here we lost to much the better outfit. I sat there on the bench wondering if I was going to get a chance, as I had done against Denmark, but Bobby did not so much as look in my direction and another opportunity passed. This led me to believe, not unnaturally, that I was bound to play a not-very-good Chilean side down in Santiago. Robson could surely not omit me for a third time. But he did.

Again I was on the bench, this time itching to get on. Late in the game it was 0-0, a tepid match was going nowhere and time was ticking away. I kept looking at him, thinking that any second he was going to let me have a little run-out if only to justify my air fares. But Robson just sat there on the bench, soaking up the sun and staring ahead. The final whistle blew and I realised I had travelled thousands of miles for nothing. Barnes, on the back of his wonder goal, played every minute of the tour. Baffled and perplexed I headed home to England, my international career over at 30.

A few years later and by now on Bournemouth's books I was at Lilleshall attempting to overcome a serious ankle injury

which was to end my playing days. I noticed Bobby Robson was in residence and decided to confront him, something I might have done earlier I suppose, to find out just why he never picked me in my best position or so infrequently. England never saw the best of me and I wanted to know what it was he had against me or what sort of player he thought I was. Did he see me as a lesser Bryan Robson? Or as a flying winger? He must have known I was none of those and yet my domestic record stood comparison with any.

In my view, and I know it was shared by knowledgeable people within the game, a meagre haul of uncompleted international appearances, a few squad selections and that ludicrous tour of South America was poor reward for what I had to offer. I wanted an answer. When I caught up with him I just hoped he wouldn't preface his response by calling me Chic. Admittedly he didn't do that but he quickly dismissed my argument without providing any real clue as to his thinking. 'I gave you your chance and you did not take it,' he said. I beg to differ. I don't think he ever did. So there it was; three caps and a shagpile carpet later, England was unfulfilled history for me.