

ALEX WADE

# A SEASON ON THE MED



RIVIERA FOOTBALL IN ITALY AND FRANCE  
(WITH A TRIP TO ATHENS FOR STAN)

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**August 2021***Out of the Soup*

IT WOULD be a season on the Med, but it would begin in England. Covid meant we hadn't seen our families and friends for months, so we needed to return to the UK as soon as Maud's summer term finished. This ended up being a six-week trip, taking up the latter part of July and all of August 2021. I missed the game I'd had in mind to kick things off, fortuitously because that's exactly what happened when Nice hosted Marseille on 22 August. It was mayhem. Total chaos. An encounter that might have made me think life isn't so chilled on the Med after all.

Instead, I saw two games in England that warmed my heart.

\* \* \*

On a less-than-Mediterranean day, with passing cloud and occasional showers, I'm in Exmouth, East Devon. I guess the temperature is touching 14°C. I was brought up in Exmouth and its nearby town to the east, Budleigh

Salterton, and have returned not just to see my parents but a friend from the past. Rob Cox, a local builder, runs Lypstone Amateur Boxing Club – which, despite its name, is located in the middle of Exmouth – but I’m not here for boxing. Rob and I will be heading to the lesser-known St James Park in the afternoon, home of Exeter City rather than Newcastle United. We’ll be there for Exeter v Bradford City, the opening game of the League Two season. The Grecians v the Bantams.

But first, it’s a drive along Exmouth seafront. It’s a world away from the place I knew as a teenager. Then, there was a sense of faded Victorian grandeur teetering towards dilapidation. Now, trendy beachside bars and shops serve the hordes of kite-surfers who’ve transformed the town. Rob’s house – light, airy, modern – is on a hill overlooking the action. Inside, Rob and I talk boxing. His is a family of serious boxing pedigree. His grandfather, Jack Cox, was a pro boxer from 1925 to 1934; at one point, he was the West of England heavyweight champion. Rob’s father, Chris, was on the undercard of the first of the two great Henry Cooper v Muhammad Ali fights, at Wembley Stadium on Tuesday, 18 June 1963. In those days, Ali went by his given name, Cassius Clay.

Like father, like son: Exeter-based Chris was boxing as a heavyweight. It would prove to be his 12th and last professional fight, against Leicester boxer Mick Basten (spelt Bastin in the flyer for the event). The fight didn’t happen on the night of Cooper’s memorable fourth-round left hook to Ali’s jaw, a pulverising punch that lifted him off his feet and sent him, via the ropes, to the canvas. But for the cushion of the ropes, would Ali have been out for

the count? Possibly. Should Rob's father have called time on his career when, in a rescheduled bout at Wembley Empire two days after Clay won in the fifth round against Cooper, he lost on points?

Rob himself never turned pro, instead racking up multiple amateur bouts. Today, aged 53, he is genial, courteous, hospitable, but he oozes strength and power. Not even in my own, far more modest, boxing heyday would I have fancied sparring with him. But if it was boxing all the way for Rob, his father and his brothers, Rob's son has a different future.

Sonny Cox – tall, lithe, black-haired, athletic – sits on the sofa, watching sport on TV, as Rob, his wife Amanda and I talk. Sonny has been playing football since he could walk. He radiates calm. Confidence, too. No wonder: a year earlier, a couple of days before we set off for Menton, I'd seen him score a hatful of goals for Exeter City in an Under-15 match against Taunton Town. On Exeter City's books for the past few years, Sonny is a goalscoring machine. He can play with either foot. He's quick-thinking, skilful, fast. And lately, he's gone from strength to strength. Premier League clubs want to sign him. He has a trial coming up with Manchester United. Then there's another one with Brighton & Hove Albion; yet another with Chelsea.

Sonny is tipped not just as a future Premier League player, but an England player too. 'I like boxing, but prefer football,' says Sonny, picking up the tail-end of my conversation with his father. I tell him this is a sensible preference. 'Boxing hurts too much,' I say. Sonny laughs. He can't come with Rob and me to City today.

‘Covid restrictions,’ he says. How does he feel about the top clubs circling? Will City let him go, or hold on to a prize asset? Sonny smiles and shrugs. ‘Let’s see what happens,’ he says.

On the drive from Exmouth to Exeter, I tell Rob I’ve rarely met a more laid-back 16-year-old. And I’ve definitely never met a teenager with the self-confidence to look ahead to Premier League trials as if he was nipping out for a gentle stroll along Exmouth seafront. ‘Nothing fazes him,’ says Rob. ‘Nothing at all.’ It’s almost as if he’s as proud of his son’s sangfroid as his ability on a football pitch.

St James Park has a healthy attendance for City’s clash against Bradford; 5,605 fans have turned up to the 8,696-capacity ground that has come a long way from its ramshackle former self. Beginning at Sonny’s age, I’d take the train from Exmouth with a friend called Rich and cheer on the Grecians on most Saturdays over a couple of seasons. It was a great day out, and an easy one too, given that St James Park train station is a stone’s throw from the pitch. Tony Kellow was our hero back then. I ask Rob who to look out for today. ‘The captain, Matt Jay,’ he tells me. ‘Decent player.’

And so, as I sit near the touchline in the IP Office Stand (a name that’s not a patch on The Cowshed, its moniker as the terraced home of City diehards when I used to go to games), it proves from Jay’s first touch. He’s a clever player who’s been with City since 2003. Aged 25 as we watch, Jay made his professional debut in 2013. He’s an attacking midfielder with a healthy approximate ratio of a goal for every three games. At 5ft 6in, Jay is small, but

he's ultra-fit, reads the game well and pulls City's strings. But if Jay is City's heart, the team's new keeper, Cameron Dawson, keeps them in it with an outstanding double save midway through the first half, denying first Callum Cooke and then Sheffield Wednesday loanee Lee Angol. Moments later, Dawson is again a match for Angol.

It's 0-0 at half-time. I take a look around St James Park. Like Exmouth seafront, it's been redeveloped. Opposite the IP Office Stand is the impressive Adam Stansfield Stand, opened in October 2018. Rob tells me the Cowshed went a long time ago: the IP Office Stand – all-seater, covered, running the length of the pitch, was opened in 2001. Even before then, the old Big Bank, behind the home fans' goal, had changed. Opened in February 2000, with a capacity of 3,950 and covered, it's the largest terrace left in the English Football League. I'd been to a couple of QPR away games at City since my teenage years, but hadn't clocked the changes. Pleasingly, the old away end on St James' Road seems as rickety as ever.

At one of those City v QPR games, a League Cup clash on 11 August 2009 won 5-0 by the Hoops, an ageing man shuffled the length of each touchline. I recognised him at once. It was Norman Shiel, who taught classics at Exeter School. For a reason I no longer recall, I opted for Ancient Greek A-level when at the school. I was useless at it, achieving what was probably a sympathetic E grade, but, as the only pupil in Norman's class, I won the school's Ancient Greek prize two years running. A Geordie, Norman had been a football nut; when I was at school, there were rumours he'd played for Blyth Spartans. He'd fallen in love with the Grecians upon moving to



Exeter in the late-1980s, and has contributed a lifetime's memorabilia to The Grecian Archive. If anyone would know the origin of English football's quirkiest nickname, surely it would be Norman.

I didn't speak to him as he wandered past the QPR fans, 12 years ago. Now, I look in vain. There's no sign of Norman. I never knew what he was doing walking the length of each touchline, but it would be good to see him today. In Norman's absence, I defer to checking the Exeter City website on my phone. This is tantalising rather than conclusive. I learn that City began life in 1901 as St Sidwell's United, given their origins in Exeter's St Sidwell's area. They adopted St James Park as their home ground in 1903, when they joined the East Devon Senior League. Then, on 31 May 1904, it was decided to change the name to Exeter City Association Football Club – with the proviso that the club nickname, the Grecians, would be kept.

As the club's website has it: 'People from the St Sidwell's area of Exeter traditionally referred to themselves as Greeks or Grecians as they live outside the old walls of the city.'

It took further scrolling to discover more. Apparently, according to a book called *Exeter Past* by Hazel Bond, a fair took place in Exeter's Southernhay district in 1726. At this fair, there was a re-enactment of the siege of Troy. Those who lived within the city's old Roman walls played the part of the Trojans, those beyond – in the St Sidwell area – were the Greeks.

Is this true? I look again for Norman. He is nowhere to be seen. The second half ebbs and flows. Both sides play passing football, looking to play the ball on the ground

even from the depths of defence. Years ago, it would have been hoofed into the stands.

The game ends in a 0-0 draw, one that genuinely merits the adjective ‘entertaining’. Dawson is the man of the match. Rob and I drive back to Exmouth, talking football, boxing and Sonny. What’s best for this prodigiously talented 16-year-old? Even if City were to release him – which is a big if – might he disappear amid the scores of players on the books at clubs like Manchester United and Chelsea? If he stays at City, how far away is he from being a first-team regular? Could a non-league loan spell be a good idea?

Neither Rob nor I are sure. But it’s a fair bet Sonny will shrug and say, ‘Let’s see what happens’.

\* \* \*

It’s the end of a hot August day in London. It’s as warm as the Med. I’ve had a day of meetings, it’s humid, I’m tired, and enthusiasm for tonight’s QPR game has waned. We’re at home to Oxford United in the EFL Cup. Not a must-see game. I ring Caroline, who’s with our daughter at her father’s place in Wiltshire. All is well. I mutter about not bothering with QPR tonight. I have more meetings the following morning and will be staying the night in London; maybe I should retreat to my hotel and get some rest. Caroline is insistent, ‘You love QPR. What else are you going to do? Sit in your hotel room, staring at the walls? You’ll love it when you’re there.’

Caroline is right. I’ve racked up 40 years of going to Loftus Road (I wish I could get used to calling it the Kiyani Prince Foundation Stadium, but the Loftus Road

habit is hard to break) and every time I go there, it feels like home. I've never had a season ticket, always been just a club member (and have let that lapse since we moved to France). So instead of what I imagine is a deep joy – sitting in the same spot, week in, week out – I'll end up anywhere: in either the Lower or Upper Loft, in the South Africa Road stand, in the Ellerslie Road stand, in the West or East Paddocks, even in the School End if I have to (the School End is the away end, though sometimes it has an area for home fans). Tonight, I plump for the Ellerslie Road, and as I push through the turnstile there's that familiar tingle in my spine. This is the place. I'm back. This is home.

Oxford United are in League One, and while I bear them no animosity, the club always prompts a couple of peculiar associations. The obvious one is QPR's loss to Oxford in the 1986 League Cup Final. I watched the game in the common room at the University of East Anglia, with my QPR scarf and girlfriend at the time, Stephanie. Oxford were the underdogs, and I was the lone QPR fan. We didn't turn up that day and lost 3-0. It was embarrassing.

Then there was an away game at Oxford's ground one Saturday in September 1998. I met a friend there, Richard – like me a lifelong Hoop. I'd brought along my elder son, Harry. He was just over three then. He had a Matchbox car, I can't remember what kind. As we were walking to the game he was driving it along walls, along shop windows, up and down shop doors. A benign enough activity, but I should have stopped him because he decided to post the car through the letterbox of a shop. The shop

was shut. It wouldn't reopen until Monday. We did not live near Oxford, and wouldn't be coming back to the shop on Monday. Or any other day. Harry tried but couldn't process the eternal loss of the car. We plodded on to the game. By the time we reached the queue at the turnstiles, Harry was inconsolable. The QPR fans were sympathetic. 'Does he know something we don't?' said one.

Perhaps he did. The Rs went on to lose 4-1.

To this day, the fate of Harry's car pops into my mind. What happened to it? What did the shopkeeper think when he or she saw it there on the floor at the beginning of Monday's trade? I like to think a lucky – so lucky! – child was the beneficiary. I don't like to think of the car being tossed in a bin. What with the traumatic loss of his car and the team his dad supports shipping four goals, maybe it's no surprise that Harry didn't go on to be a football fan.

Tonight, though, the Rs are on form. As for the Grecians v the Bantams, I watch football that's radically different from that which dominated the English game when I was growing up. Both sides are well organised and keep their shape. Neither looks to play long balls. Even defenders under pressure want to play their way out of trouble. It's a treat, and even more so when, in the 26th minute, Rob Dickie hits a screamer for Rangers' first goal. Surging forward in the middle of the pitch, the former Oxford man unleashes a rocket, à la Ronnie Radford's famous strike for Hereford United against Newcastle United in the FA Cup third-round replay tie of 1972. Like the Radford rocket, not a keeper in the world could have kept out Dickie's bomb. The Rs ease 2-0 ahead in the

40th minute thanks to an Oxford own goal. They cruise through the second half to a healthy win.

I leave, happy, but not just because my side won or because they played crisp, passing football. The former is always welcome, the latter has, save for occasional lapses, been the club's way ever since the great Dave Sexton side of the early- to mid-1970s. No, it's the panache of each of Exeter City, Bradford City and Oxford United. English football has changed. Is it – whisper it quietly – a little continental nowadays?

\* \* \*

The mud was outrageous. Dense and soupy, it sucked the ball into its dank, dark creases. Both sets of players were confounded, time and again. They'd expect the ball to bounce, but it wouldn't. They'd think it would skim off the surface, but it refused. Phil Parkes, the QPR goalkeeper, had it bad. A high ball loomed overhead, and he took a step or two backwards, watching it all the way. Rather than bounce and angle upwards into his giant hands, the ball thudded into the brown quicksand of Parkes's penalty area – and stayed there. With a shake of his head, the big man stooped to pick it up.

Nowadays, a professional game wouldn't happen in the mud-bath that was Ashton Gate, Bristol City's ground, on 19 March 1977. Not in the Premier League, anyway. Today's stars wouldn't risk their superannuated ankles in such appalling conditions. But this was the First Division in the 1970s, and things were different then. Very different. Truth is, too, that I didn't care about the mud. I didn't care about the cold and the wisps of rain in the air,

either. I didn't care about the crush of the crowd on the terrace, and although I noted it – it was impossible not to – I didn't care about the language of the fans around me (more obscene than anything I've heard since, anywhere).

All I cared about, as a boy of ten, was seeing QPR and Stan Bowles, the club's resident genius, play in the flesh.

It was a birthday treat. In nine days, I'd turn 11, and Dad was taking me and two friends to see QPR play for the first time. The night before we set off for Bristol, I barely slept. I was awake at 3am, looking at my radio alarm clock, sighing that it wasn't time to get up. Awake again at 4am, I got up and went downstairs, as if I might hasten the dawn. No good, nothing for it but to go back to bed. Soon it was five o'clock, but as dark as ever outside. But then it was 7am, and with the faintest half-light slipping through the curtain I could justify getting up. I had a football-sized foam dice in my room, a legacy of Christmas. I would use it as a football, scoring goals with shots angled under an old desk, or, at the other, away end, if they swept in under the window ledge. I was usually Stan Bowles, sometimes Gerry Francis or Dave Thomas, two other QPR stars. Strangely, there was an imaginary opponent called Gonzalez. Where he came from I don't know. That morning, bedroom football was more urgent than ever. I was Stan Bowles, tricking Bristol City's defenders (sans Gonzalez – he didn't feel right for this game), shimmying back and forth, nutmegging them for fun, scoring with impossible back-heels and netting a hat-trick so perfect that the only words needed were, in ITV *Big Match* commentator Brian Moore's voice, 'Stanley Bowles.'

The way Moore said it, it was as if those words were complete in themselves. Nothing else was necessary. Any other language was as futile as the efforts of so many of the defenders of the 1970s, when they were pitted against Stan. It was just Stanley Bowles, the words, the man, the skill, the flair: the statement of genius as constant as it was casual.

My friends, Elliot and Peter, knew nothing of this. Football, whether in a bedroom with a foam dice, at school, in parks or on TV, wasn't their thing. But I'd convinced everyone – well, my dad, my friends, and my friends' parents – that QPR playing away at Bristol City was as good as it gets. This would be the best birthday treat, ever.

Exmouth was a long way from Loftus Road, QPR's ground in west London, but a fairly short hop up the M5 to Bristol. That was the good news for me as a QPR fanatic and for my dad as the person in charge of getting me and my friends to the game. The bad news? Dad had never been to a football match in his life. Now here he was, about to ferry three pre-pubescent boys up the motorway. He felt apprehensive.

'I wasn't sure what to expect,' he told me, years later. 'The papers were full of stories of violence and hooligans. But you wanted to go to that game at Bristol as your birthday present. You'd become obsessed with football. And with QPR.'

Obsessed I was, despite my parents being blind to the game's charms. They're weren't sporty types, though if anything Dad was a rugby man. But around nine, going on ten, playtime for me was about one thing, and one thing

only: kicking a football. I watched *Football Focus* avidly, bought and read every issue of *Shoot!*, never missed *Final Score* and, on Saturday nights, I would beg and cajole my parents into letting me watch *Match of the Day* (usually unsuccessfully). I loved Sundays, Brian Moore and *The Big Match*. And like kids all over the world, I gravitated towards success. Liverpool! How could I follow any other team? They won everything. There's little so alluring as reflected glory when you're a child under ten.

Later in life, Mum and Dad completed a genealogical trawl of their ancestors and discovered that Dad's family had helped found Everton.

To think: if Dad had known that, if the football gene deep in his background hadn't skipped a couple of generations, I would have had an eye not on Liverpool's fortunes but on those of their sworn rivals from Goodison Park. But as it was, Grandad Harry set me on the path to Loftus Road.

I loved Harry. He was small, wiry man with endless patience and kindness. Better yet, he loved football. He was a Carlisle United fan and a tidy winger in his day. Family mythology had elevated Harry's skills to professional level. Later I learned this was untrue – that Grandad Harry might have *come from* Carlisle, but he hadn't *played football for* Carlisle. No matter. One wintry afternoon Harry walked into the sitting room to watch *Final Score* and was surprised to find me already there, glued to the teleprinter. He was even more surprised when I told him I was a Liverpool fan.

'You can't support Liverpool, Alec,' he said. 'You have to support the club you were born closest to.'



I liked this idea, and I liked that it came from Harry. A Maths teacher by profession, he soon saw an opportunity for me to learn something arithmetical. I was told to go and fetch a ruler and the London A-Z. And then, having found my place of birth – Chiswick Maternity Hospital – Harry made me measure the distance from it to Brentford, QPR, Fulham and Chelsea. I was born closest to Loftus Road, the home of Queens Park Rangers.

The day I discovered this was Saturday, 15 November 1975. QPR drew 1-1 away to Ipswich. Don Givens, capped 56 times by the Republic of Ireland, scored. It was to be one of many Givens goals in an illustrious QPR career, and it was scored in the club's greatest-ever season – 1975/76.

We so nearly won the league that year. We played continental, passing football. We had a poetry-loving manager who was way ahead of his time. We sparkled, we shone, we dazzled. And in a team of first-rate footballers, there was one who wore the number ten shirt.

Ten. The shirt of creativity. Of possibility. Of bewitching talent and bewildering skill. Of dreams made, and dreams shattered.

Stanley Bowles.

\* \* \*

Many years later, a friend gave me Bowles's phone number. By this time, having begun my professional life as a lawyer, I was a freelance journalist. I'd scored a piece for a lads' mag on Bowles, a jokey interview on his life, times, winners, losers and all-round mishaps. I was thrilled. All these years later, and I'd finally speak to my childhood hero.

A quiet, indifereent voice answered the phone. I explained who I was and what I wanted, adding, 'It's such an honour to talk to you. You were my hero as a kid. I spent hours trying to do what you could do with a ball. I just wanted to be you.'

Stan didn't say anything. I blurted out a bit more undiluted praise, 'I just thought everything you did was amazing, and that you were the best footballer in England.'

'That's nice,' said Stan.

He said yeah, sure, he'd be up for an interview. But then added:

'What about the dough?'

This threw me. There'd been no word from my editor about paying Bowles for his time. And given the slim pickings I was being offered, I knew there'd be nothing on the table. It'd be pointless to ask.

Stan said he wanted £350.

I said I'd see what I could do.

My editor said, 'Nothing doing.'

I never got to interview Stan, and we never spoke again.

It didn't matter. I realised, a few years later, that Stan had done enough for me when I was a boy. His job was complete by the time I reached my teens. Stan, and Queens Park Rangers, had by then already taken me away from a path that was otherwise neatly laid out. It was a path that was never intended to involve football, but my life has been bound up with it ever since. I've seen great games, I've seen awful ones; I've played a lot and I've met people on the pitch who've become lifelong friends; I've suffered, I've been in ecstasy. And, like every fan, I think there's something special about *my club*.

Perhaps there is, maybe it's all an illusion. But I know one thing for sure. QPR, and football, is a broader church than people imagine.

In fact, the game is the broadest church of all.

I have Grandad Harry to thank for QPR, Stan Bowles and the joy, beauty and despair that has flowed ever since. My grandad, who got out the A-Z and a ruler, and made me do a simple bit of maths. My grandad, who I fancy would have loved a season on the Med. And who would have deplored what happened in the game I missed because of our trip to England.

The trouble began shortly after the 7.45pm kick-off on Sunday, 22 August 2021. Nice v Marseille pits two of France's biggest clubs against each other, and there's local pride at stake given they're separated by some 125 miles. More than that: if Marseille is traditionally associated with left-wing politics, not so much Nice. A spicy encounter is always to be expected, but the optimists among us felt this one might pass off peaceably. After all, this was the first game in 18 months at Nice's Allianz Riviera stadium which would be attended by fans. Some 32,000 arrived, and you'd be forgiven for thinking there'd be a fanfare of post-lockdown *joie de vivre*.

Not so. Bottles were thrown at Marseille players by fans in Nice's Populaire Sud end – the home of the club's most hardcore ultras – from early in the match. The stadium announcer asked them to stop, to no avail. Eventually, in the 75th minute, and with Nice leading 1-0 thanks to a superb goal by Danish international Kasper Dolberg, one hit Dmitri Payet, the former West Ham United striker who returned to Marseille from the Hammers in 2017.

Payet hurled it with as much force as he could muster back into the crowd. Not content with this, he did the same with another bottle. You can expect a number ten to be a bit different, but despite the provocation Payet broke a golden rule: never meet fan violence in kind. Predictably, Nice's ultras did not fall into stunned silence, one of regret, shame and self-mortification. They invaded the pitch and confronted the Marseille team, two of whom, Arsenal loanee Matteo Guendouzi and defender Álvaro González, had been quick to join Payet in making their own feelings known. For good measure, González blasted the ball with his left foot at the incensed Nice supporters.

The ensuing chaos made for astonishing scenes. Fans fought players. Players fought players. Marseille manager Jorge Sampaoli had to be restrained and led away, not just by his coaching staff but also, ironically, by Payet. Photographs later emerged of injuries to Marseille players, most notably scratch marks on Payet's back and a bloody cut to Luan Peres's neck. Amid the mayhem, Nice's captain, Brazilian veteran Dante, tried to reason with the ultras, ushering them back to the stands. Nice's president, Jean-Pierre Rivère, appealed for calm. Another outbreak of aggression occurred between the players as they left the pitch. It continued outside the dressing rooms. Then, Sampaoli was spotted wearing a backpack, clearly intent on leaving the scene. Bizarrely, the game restarted, a full 90 minutes after the pitch invasion, with only Nice's players on the pitch. Cue the referee's easiest decision of a tumultuous night: to abandon the match.

The aftermath was dominated by the blame game. Pablo Longoria, president of Marseille, criticised Ligue 1.

‘We need to set precedents for French football,’ he said. ‘The referee was with us. He confirmed to us that safety was not assured. His decision was to abandon the match, but the LFP decided to restart the match. That is not acceptable for us.’ Rivère had a different view. For him, ‘the reaction of two Marseille players’ had ‘instigated things’. He added, ‘It’s disappointing that it ends like this. Things are quite clear. Marseille’s security should not have come on to the pitch and hit our players. I don’t really understand why Marseille didn’t restart.’

The upshot, within two weeks, was a two-point penalty for Nice (one of which was suspended). Nice would also have to play three games behind closed doors. González was suspended for two games. Pablo Fernandez, Marseille’s physio and a particularly enthusiastic member of their aggrieved coaching staff, was suspended for the rest of the season. Despite his prominent role, France’s governing body for football, the Ligue de Football (LFP) felt a one-match suspended ban for Payet was enough.

As the governing body put it: ‘Meeting this Wednesday, the Disciplinary Commission of the LFP ruled on the incidents which punctuated the match of the third day of Ligue 1 Uber Eats between OGC Nice and Olympique de Marseille.’

‘After reading the investigation report in the presence of the two clubs, the Commission decided to replay the match on a relocated field. In addition, two penalty points were imposed on OGC Nice, including one suspended point.’

‘Regarding the players, defender Álvaro González received two games of suspension. As for his team-

mate Dimitri Payet, he was sanctioned with a suspended match.'

Nice v Marseille was replayed on Wednesday, 27 October 2021 at a neutral ground. It ended 1-1. By then, my season on the Med was well under way. I'd come to realise that Uber Eats, doubtless contractually entitled to its positioning in the LFP's statement, had a rival when it came to OGC Nice. '*Burger King: Le Restaurant Préféré Des Aiglons!*' screamed an ad in a Nice programme, '*Les Aiglons*' (The Eaglets) being Nice's nickname. I struggled with this, conceptually, because yes, Nice's fans might like a Whopper or two but the club's players? Surely not. But there was nothing to puzzle over in the first game I saw, on land reclaimed from the Mediterranean Sea. It was a belter.