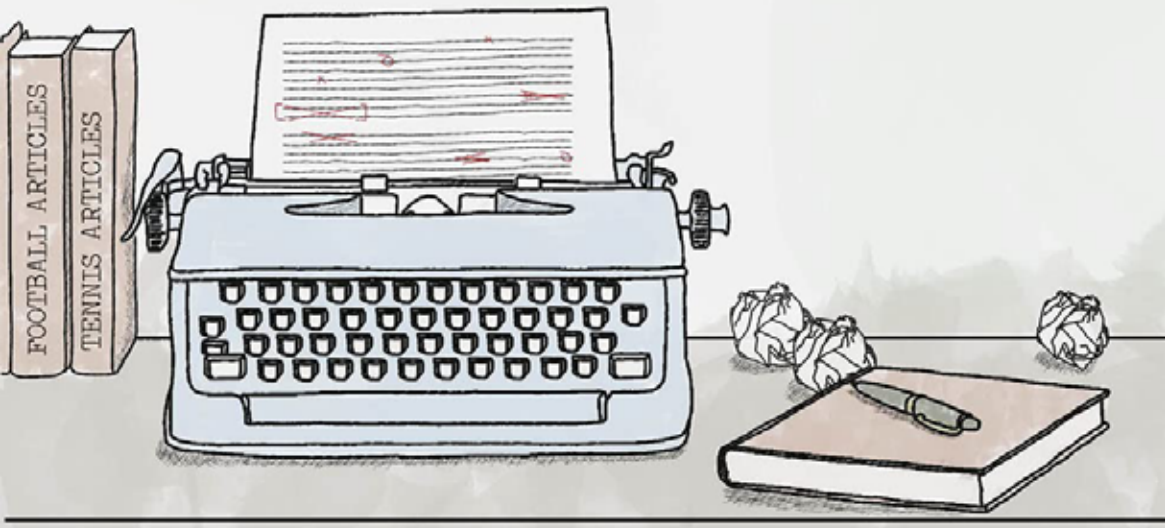
All My Own Words

The Sportswriter who was author of his downfall



Neil Harman

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Contents

1

The Beginning and the End

IN EARLY spring 1964 I had turned seven years old and attended class nine at the Fairways junior school in cosy Leigh-on-Sea, Essex. 'Rag Doll' by Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons topped the UK charts, you could feed the birds for tuppence a bag with Mary Poppins and I was addicted to television programmes as widely diverse as *Crackerjack!* and *Z Cars* where Fancy Smith and Jock Weir led the fight against crime under the fearsome leadership of Detective Inspector Charlie Barlow.

I wanted to be a policeman when I grew up and the previous Christmas my parents had bought me a PC 49 uniform from the popular fictional character on the *BBC Light Programme*. It came complete with whistle and chain, helmet and truncheon and through sheer embarrassment I wore it only as far as our front gate.

That May, West Ham United beat Preston North End 3-2 in the FA Cup Final at Wembley, a match to which I was able to hitch a ride thanks to my father's latter-life conversion to London's East End and forever bubble-blowing. I was dressed for the occasion as if I was going to Sunday school: clean white shirt, jacket, smart tie, pressed pants.

The last of the country's steam engines had been phased out two years earlier, so the trains on the London Fenchurch Street line – if not as awe-inspiring as the locomotives – felt clean and elegant. The passengers boarding at Leigh station clambered into compartments

that extended the train's width to squeeze together on either of the long, facing seats. The thrill was almost too much to bear.

When we arrived on Wembley Way thanks to a ride on something called the underground, I'd never seen so many people in such an overwhelming space. The stadium itself with its two turret-like towers appeared to touch the sky. Most of the men wore suits and ties and though there was no pushing or shoving, Dad clasped my hand tightly to guide me to our seats.

A lot of the fans of Preston were wearing peculiar round hats made of card with the club's name on the sides, which I'd have been embarrassed to wear to a kid's birthday party and certainly not out in full view of the public.

They didn't seem to mind being pointed out and laughed at. In fact everyone that afternoon seemed deliriously happy with life. My dad especially, as he had managed from meagre earnings to afford the tickets for us on a corner to the left of the Royal Box about halfway up the first tier. I was asked quite a few times if I could see over the bodies in front of me (I was a bit of a tiddler). Football crowds were very different way back when.

An upright defender with short-cropped blond hair named Bobby Moore stood out on the pitch and I appreciated fully that football could be played in all the colours of the rainbow rather than the fuzzy black-and-white of our 12in living-room corner Rediffusion.

West Ham – looking so fresh and neat in their claret and blue shirts – won with a late goal by Ronnie Boyce at the opposite end of the ground to our seats, and though I couldn't see at all then I didn't particularly care. I just jumped up and down like everyone else going mental around me.

Dad went on and on about Bobby Moore. Who would have thought that a good deal later in life I would befriend four of that cup-winning side – the wonderful Bobby included – and the most talked-about player in the Preston team that day, 17-year-old Howard Kendall? And that I'd have a seat with my name on it at Wembley for seven extraordinary years?

My school report in that awakening summer of 1964, when Peter and Gordon's 'A World Without Love' and Billy J. Kramer and the Dakotas with 'Little Children' were the British pop rage, marked me as 'excellent' in English Language, Spelling Comprehension, Handwriting, as well as Mathematical tables and Mental Arithmetic.

Form teacher Peter Hemmings's assessment presaged my future career as if he was a clairvoyant, 'Neil maintains an excellent standard in all subjects and takes pains to produce work done to the very best of his ability. However, on some occasions, a desire to be "first to finish" has resulted in careless work; care must not be sacrificed for speed.'

* * *

The room was small and anaemic. I recalled thinking that if this was to be the end, what an ignominious place it was to go out, an office so markedly lacking in spirit it was probably home to the obituaries' editor.

Four decades from a callow 16-year-old to nearing 60 were spent inside newspaper offices and press boxes of theatrical atmosphere, overflowing with frenetic, fractious hubbub, noisy equipment, noisier people, unrestrained emotion, shouting matches, surges of adrenalin and that thumping in the head that accompanied the on-rush of a deadline with an empty notebook on your desk. Was it really to finish in this nondescript cubicle with these strangers?

I was sitting across from two women I knew only by name and who had neither a clue about me, my career and my life nor remotely cared. I had worked with incredible zeal and a decent degree of success for *The Times* – which I considered the doyen of British newspapers – for a dozen years and now for the second occasion in my career I was dispensable.

Six months earlier I had been highly commended as a specialist correspondent at the Sports Journalists' Association (SJA)

awards. *The Times* won Sports Team of the Year at the British Press Awards and retained its Newspaper of the Year title. As an individual and as a team we were flying. But the fallout from a News International inquiry into my use of other writers' work in books to promote the Wimbledon tennis championship without the proper acknowledgement needed clearing up.

The paper's deputy editor Emma Tucker, whom I'd met briefly when clinging to the hope that she might offer me a reprieve, shuffled her papers and said it was over. There was to be no coming back.

Thankfully I didn't have a desk in the office otherwise I'd have probably been asked to empty it before being frogmarched off the premises by a couple of muscly security attendants. That's what happened to offending journalists.

I was dismayed that editor John Witherow hadn't the balls to condemn me in person. He had moved 18 months earlier from the *Sunday Times* to *The Times* and I was among several members of staff he invited to his home in Fulham in the spring for a few drinks to get to know each other.

According to his company profile, Witherow had been sent on the aircraft carrier HMS *Invincible* to cover the Falklands War for *The Times* in the early 1980s. It said he survived Exocet attacks that destroyed HMS *Sheffield* and was put ashore at Port Stanley, the islands' capital, with the 5th Infantry Brigade.

He came under bomb attack while on an ammunition ship and was 'close by' when Argentine aircraft struck RFA *Sir Galahad*, killing 48 servicemen, the biggest single loss of the war. He was clearly a brave bastard.

It didn't, therefore, require exceptional courage to come and tell a man for whom I thought he had some degree of professional admiration that he was now unemployed. This was one bullet he needn't have dodged.

The two previous editors I served at *The Times*, Robert Thomson and James Harding, would have met me face to face and perhaps

found the means not to have sacrificed me at all. I had enormous respect for them.

The other figure present on judgement day was NI's director of human resources, Amy Graham. When her eyes met mine, I just knew she wanted shot of me. What a ghastly job it had to be that required the occupant to show not a jot of human empathy. Harman out. Box ticked.

Tucker asked if I needed assistance – in the orienteering sense – to find my way out of a building I'd only been in the one time after the report on my two hearings at the old *Times* office in Wapping landed across her desk.

Instead of politely thanking her and being escorted away, I blurted, 'I know my way out, thank you,' which was absolute bloody rubbish because I had to ask three different people how to operate the doors and someone else to press the buttons that worked the lift. They all possessed shiny lanyards. My 'guest' pass was singularly useless and come to think of it, who had ever been invited to be a guest at their own funeral?

Sucking in gulps of fresh air, I stepped on to the draughty concourse across from London Bridge station. I remember my legs felt as if they had frozen. The famed red double-deckers were forming an orderly queue as black cabs patiently waited for custom. All else was typical London hustle and bustle near a major terminus and here was I, completely motionless.

I looked up to where I estimated *The Times*'s editorial floor was housed – I never got to see it after the paper's recent relocation – and supposed I might catch someone's eye. There was to be no thank you note, no leaving party, no reaching out, no nothing. All those bloody wasted years.

My timing was shit too.

NI was obsessed with keeping its noses clean in the light of the phone-hacking trauma that cast a deep shadow across the company and the industry as a whole. It had closed down the mega-successful *News of the World*, and its sister paper *The Sun* was front

and centre of a still unfolding drama. I suppose, in a sense, I was collateral damage.

The reigning Wimbledon tennis champion Andy Murray had asked me only a few months earlier if I had been taught how to hack a phone. 'Come on, Neil, you must know how it's done,' he said, and for a minute I couldn't tell if he was being serious or not. That was the kind of poison pervading our profession.

I had once been invited into Rupert Murdoch's office in New York where we talked for half an hour about tennis and his love for the sport, especially Roger Federer. He said he really liked my work and to 'keep going, mate'. I walked back along Fifth Avenue with a real spring in my step. Now, despite requests to ask if he would intervene in my case, all efforts at communication went unanswered.

The All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club, aka Wimbledon, whose own leadership at the time was, in my opinion, both charmless and hubristic, didn't want me back into the grounds in a working capacity as I had sullied their well-crafted image.

I once really liked the place and worked in harmony with people who saw their role in running the tournament as a joyful opportunity to do good. This wasn't the same club where I made good friends and respect appeared mutual. It would always look nice from the outside but so did the Houses of Parliament.

For two such mighty establishments, the sacking of a sports hack was a necessary convenience. This time care had been sacrificed for speed to crushing effect.

The single consolation I held on to was that neither of my parents had lived to see this happen.

* * *

Could any journalist with four decades on the clock say hand on heart they hadn't at one time snitched a line or two, an idea or two or piggybacked someone else's initiative? I doubted it. As my fate registered, what nagged was how I'd been so naive after all my years in the business.

There was nothing to gain – Wimbledon were chipping away at the author's fee year after year – and a good deal more to lose as I crunched the editorial buried beneath a swathe of printed reports and quote sheets, trying to disseminate the best bits.

How difficult would it have been in the context of extracting three paragraphs from a match report in *The Guardian* to write, 'As reported in *The Guardian*'? Would anyone reading it have felt less of me as a writer? Why didn't something in my head click? The book was a rush job but another hour or two spent assembling an acknowledgement page was not beyond my capabilities. I let too much slide.

The sorry misadventure was exposed on a US-based website called Slate, described by Wikipedia as 'a liberal, progressive online magazine known for publishing contrarian pieces'. There was nothing contrarian in its piece about me, headlined 'Unforced Errors'.

The writer was a ferociously ambitious freelance from New York named Ben Rothenberg who was inordinately keen to nail me to a cross. Rothenberg called when I was changing trains at Gatwick Airport on my way to cover the 2014 LTA County Cup Group One finals in Eastbourne, which would become my final outing.

I was being snared into answering questions I should have blanked. More naivety. It's funny how things spring to mind but when I was stumbling around Devonshire Park trying to concentrate that day, Colin Beecher, a coach I'd known for years, asked, 'Are you OK, Neil, you don't seem your usual self?' I muttered something about being fine.

When the Slate article was published, I was on my way to dust. Rothenberg quoted me saying, 'There's a quick turnaround for the book and after [the] Andy Murray [Wimbledon victory] especially, emotions were all over the place.

'I lock myself into a room to try and get my mind back to writing again when that's the last thing you feel like doing. The book is the club book, it's not my book. They've trusted me to do something and clearly, on occasions, I've not done it properly.'

I had interviewed Rothenberg in the US Open's main interview room for my book on the 2012 tennis season, *Court Confidential*, but hadn't used any of his words as they added nothing to the text. Maybe he had the hump about that though I'd found him an unctuous individual which didn't make him unique in the annals of tennis reporting.

I wrote to the leaders of the International Tennis Writers' Association, of which I was a founding father in 1999, to resign my membership, an email sent on the proviso that its content remained between us until I said otherwise but silly of me to ask a group of journalists not to tell anyone anything.

What was a mystery was who had tipped off Wimbledon about these misdemeanours and had both the time or inclination to pore through the pages of the annual and hold them up to the light?