

W A Y N E B A R T O N

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James Robson,
Evening Standard

BECKHAM

THE MAKING OF A MEGASTAR



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Contents

Too Good to be True	7
Fated	18
Education	27
Winning Nothing, then Everything, with Kids	44
A Star is Born	63
Seven	79
Evita	92
Effigy	102
Naughty Boy	127
Practice Makes Perfect	167
Leaving Home Again	187
Galactico	213
Spotlight	225
Reputation	235
Out of the Wilderness	254
Top to Bottom	275
Impression	291
Vogue	301
The Beckham Redemption	327
The Sequel	343
One Last Challenge	350
Reinventing the Wheel	361
Epilogue	374
Acknowledgements	380

Too Good to be True

MOST STORIES about a player signing for a club as a youngster follow a similar pattern: a young lad is spotted by a scout whilst playing for a local team; there is possibly some competition for his signature and a decision to make. Maybe the story has a little more flavour if some skulduggery is involved – incentives that would be frowned upon today, and indeed would have been back then if they had been made official or public. Sometimes it is the identity of the scout, a legendary talent spotter – and goodness knows, Manchester United had a few – who finds and identifies a rare gem destined for greatness. David Beckham was not so much discovered as he was served up by himself on a silver platter, donned in the red, white and black of Manchester United.

This is not to say that his path to professional football was remarkably different to that of any other aspiring young boy. The things that in hindsight are seen as fated are probably not so exceptional when considering what was normal at the time. David Robert Joseph Beckham was born in Leytonstone, north-east London, to Sandra and Ted on 2 May 1975 – his middle name after one Bobby Charlton, the then-recently retired Manchester United legend. This was because his father was a huge United fan.

BECKHAM

According to Ted, young David was almost too good to be true: never in trouble at school, the best at every ball sport. To the thrill of his father, the son excelled at football, and loved it from the second he was introduced to it. He also shared his love for Manchester United, and the pair would go to see their team whenever they were in the capital. When he was six, David went on a summer course organised by Spurs legend Cliff Jones (Jones, incidentally, had been one player the former Manchester United assistant manager Jimmy Murphy had tried to sign when he was interim manager after the Munich air disaster). He showed tremendous promise, earning the ‘top badge’ award for completing various drills better than other young players who were ten years older.

David would accompany his father when he was playing for semi-professional side Kingfisher. They trained at Wadham Lodge, and the waif-like child found that the adults were happy to allow him to play in five-a-sides – so long as he could take the bumps that came with it.

The following year, Beckham was spotted playing on the park across the road from his house – Chase Lane Park – by Stuart Underwood, the coach of local youth team Ridgeway Rovers. Ted recalled his son running home excitedly to tell him that a man wanted him to try out for a youth team. An alternative recollection of this story, presented here for completeness, was that David attended a trial after an advertisement had been placed in the local newspaper, the *Walthamstow Guardian*. It is long enough ago for the specifics of the arrangement to be lost from memory, although the coach was clearly left with a vivid impression.

‘He was a football nutcase,’ Underwood remembered in 2003. ‘His life was football. He wanted to be a pro aged seven ... he looked a professional from day one ... he could hit the ball from every corner of the pitch. His timing was incredible.’

Underwood was regarded as a ‘sergeant major’ type: a hard but fair leader who was not shy in telling children as young as Beckham

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

was that they needed to improve, or that they'd had a bad game. Ted was sometimes hesitant – like most reasonable parents, he was not always comfortable with his son, who could be sensitive to criticism, being scolded in front of other kids – but David was in fact very responsive to the leadership. Perhaps that's because, despite the generation gap, there was a kindred spirit between him and Underwood. David was a very tidy child, according to his parents, and liked everything to be neat. Underwood was also a stickler for the perfect preparation, be it ensuring the pitches were good, or even demanding that the young players wear a shirt and tie when turning up for an important game like a cup final. The coach also instilled discipline: if a youngster was late for training during the week, they wouldn't be able to play at the weekend. The high calibre of organisation provided the perfect platform for young players to shine.

Ridgeway's talented side were winning games handsomely; it was a regular occurrence to hit double figures. Ted had joined the coaching staff there, working alongside Underwood and assistant coach Steve Kirby.

In the summer of 1985, after Manchester United had won the FA Cup, David enrolled in the Bobby Charlton Soccer and Sports Academy, attending for the residential summer classes after seeing a feature for it on the television programme *Blue Peter*. The boy who had grown up in a red-and-white kit did not initially take to life in Manchester University's halls of residence.

'Mum and Dad came up and stayed with relatives near Liverpool, and I was on the phone to them every evening,' Beckham admitted. 'I had toothache. I was homesick. And the week just passed me by a little.'

Many children might have given up after such a setback. David might not get his dream of playing for United, but getting a chance to become a professional footballer was at least something within the realms of possibility.

BECKHAM

Local professional clubs like West Ham were sniffing around the Ridgeway Rovers players, though the coaches such as Underwood were advising that it was best for their collective development to stay where they were to improve for the time being. They did just that, but there was no doubting even at that stage that there was one name which stood out. The present day Ridgeway Rovers website boasts that over two years, Beckham scored around 100 goals.

Ted and Sandra had been sufficiently tempted by the prospect of West Ham to take David to watch a game there; however, they too were sensible enough to not bite the first offer, taking Stuart's advice that offers would continue to be forthcoming. The Hammers had offered ten-year-old David a trial.

No concrete decision was taken on his future, so Ridgeway were blessed to retain his talents, but the talented young midfielder did enjoy some training sessions at top London clubs like Arsenal, and his maternal grandfather's club, Tottenham Hotspur. With David approaching his 11th birthday, it was decided that the time was right to commit to a professional club, and so the names of the fierce north London rivals were put into a hat. Thankfully for the sake of family relations, Spurs were picked out, and he joined their school of excellence.

In the summer after he turned 11, David went back to the Bobby Charlton school in Manchester, desperate to make a better impression. He did, excelling on all the skills courses through his week, and advancing to the 'Grand Final' which was to be held in Manchester in December 1986.

Ironically enough, on the weekend of this final, United were entertaining Tottenham. In the morning, David had to go to The Cliff, United's famous training facility in Lower Broughton, Salford. There was a competition in the indoor sports hall and David won through, impressing with his short passing, ball-juggling and target shooting.

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

‘In addition to his natural ability, David displayed a fantastic work ethic and a great deal of determination, which meant he was continually practising his individual skills,’ recalled Bryn Cooper, the director of the courses. ‘It was clearly evident to the coaches that David was completely focused on becoming a professional footballer.’

The second part of the final was to be staged before the game at Old Trafford, which was being aired live on the BBC.

Almost 36,000 supporters were in attendance to witness a moment that would forever be remembered by the Beckham family, although it passed without any significance to most who were there.

‘He looked so tiny and the stadium seemed so enormous around him,’ Ted recalls of seeing his son walk on to the Old Trafford pitch for the very first time. Not for the last time, there was a sense of occasion and dramatic tension, although on this introductory stage, it came with the traditional pantomime feel that football ‘banter’ often carries. Young David was introduced as hailing from Leytonstone – cue cheers from the Tottenham fans – before being revealed as a ‘massive United fan’ – prompting a retaliatory roar from the home crowd.

What a galvanising lift for the young boy, who had already shown such confidence in the morning’s event. The drills in this portion of the event were dribbling and long passing. Of course, in years to come, both of these skills would often be used in different evaluations of David’s ability, but here he excelled at both, winning the competition. The first reward seemed more for Ted – the presentation of the award in the Europa Suite at Old Trafford was by none other than Sir Bobby Charlton himself. The prize, however, was definitely for David – two weeks training with Barcelona at the Nou Camp, to take place in early 1987. The youngster was more interested in watching his team play, however, and settled down to witness a frenetic 3–3 draw, as the first few

BECKHAM

weeks of Alex Ferguson's era as manager continued to be bumpy. David's heroes were Gordon Strachan – he modelled his hairstyle after him – and Bryan Robson. Both were influential as the home team stormed to a 2–0 lead, but Spurs turned it around in the second period, and looked set to win 3–2 before Peter Davenport levelled with two minutes left. (Incidentally, on the Spurs team that afternoon was one Glenn Hoddle.)

Barcelona were capturing the attention of the British press due to the fact they had Terry Venables and Gary Lineker as manager and star striker respectively. They also had the attention of the Beckham family thanks to the presence of former United striker Mark Hughes. David travelled with two other winners – aged 15 and 19 – and Ray Whelan, from the soccer school. They stayed in a converted farmhouse in the Catalan club's La Masia complex. It was an education on and off the pitch for the young Londoner, who described the training as 'amazing', but also recalled some of the older boys whistling at prostitutes who were walking around the other side of the railings on the training ground. 'The football was an experience,' Beckham later said. 'And so was the rest of it.'

Despite this heady experience, the youngster did not forget his roots, and initially had reservations about going to Spain at all. Ridgeway Rovers had a cup final against Forest United on the middle Saturday of the planned trip. To top it off, the game was being played at White Hart Lane. David was desperate to play in it. His grandfather, Joe, the Spurs fanatic, was as well. So much so that he paid for a flight to get his grandson from and back to Spain to play in the game. (Incidentally, Joe had also paid the £130 registration fee for the Charlton soccer school.) Ridgeway lost 2–1: no fairy-tale ending this time.

The mid-trip break did nothing to make his Spanish hosts think any less of him. Venables, in fact, could not have sung David's praises any higher. 'I knew from the first time I saw him

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

that David Beckham would be something special,' Venables said. 'The way he looked, the way he played and the way he conducted himself on the training pitch around international stars. Becks, then ten, came over to our training ground as part of his prize for winning a competition run by Bobby's soccer school. He had apparently been his star pupil in the half-term and summer holidays training camp – and when he arrived at our training base it was not difficult to see why. A quiet lad, we showed him around and posed for the usual photos. Then he watched us train and we invited him to take part in a couple of sessions. Blimey. He raised a few eyebrows that day. I must have watched thousands of kids in my time but as we said goodbye I made sure I would not forget his name.'

The same could be said for Manchester United, who had apparently now got the hint, and had their London scout Malcolm Fidgeon watching Beckham more closely. United would invite the Beckham family to attend some of their London games, and to spend time around the squad at the hotel. David would arrive with gifts for his heroes – hair gel for Gordon Strachan, a pen for Alex Ferguson. Ferguson took the pen and informed the boy he would one day use it to sign him for the club. David had been invited to train in Manchester during school holidays.

In late October 1987, United were down in London at West Ham. Fidgeon informed the Beckham family that they had been invited to dinner with Alex Ferguson the night before the game at the team hotel. The manager told the boy to go and get the autographs of his heroes, who were all eating on nearby tables. David was invited to be the team mascot for the game and was even able to kick the ball around with the likes of Bryan Robson and Gordon Strachan. When the game started, Ferguson insisted that the young boy should sit next to him for the duration of the game. The game was live on ITV, a fine memory for the family to look back on.

BECKHAM

Now his name was becoming more prominently known around the soccer circuit. The precocious 12-year-old was coveted by many clubs, with some more keen than others to take a chance and snap him up before someone else came in. Norwich City were one. Then-Canaries manager Kit Carson recalled observing the young midfielder at close quarters, describing him as ‘highly professional’. ‘We all thought he was a brilliant person and polite and thoughtful,’ Carson said. ‘He was always clean and smart on and off the ball and asked questions and listened. At the end of the week I knew that David was exactly the type of boy we wanted in our very successful youth policy at Norwich City.’

David, however, said no to going back. He rejected a trial at Nottingham Forest, concerned that it took place during a week when he was supposed to be training at United. He was still able to play for Ridgeway, and his school team at Chingford High, and consequently for the district side for Waltham Forest, also representing the Essex county side. David likened being selected for Waltham Forest to being picked for England.

At county level, David was coached by a man by the name of Martin Heather, a contrasting character: well-spoken and studious, so when he was stern, you knew he meant it. It was with Heather that a young David went over to play in the Dallas Cup, a prestigious but rarely acknowledged world youth competition in Texas which had recently seen former Queens Park Rangers and Millwall boss Gordon Jago join its board. The Dallas Cup welcomed teams from all over the world, and in later years, clubs like Manchester United would send junior sides over and introduce them to working with the media as part of some early-stage development in the early 1990s. This was a unique tournament: the organising committee also operated a homestay programme where visiting players could stay with volunteer families whilst they were in Dallas. David stayed with a Mexican family and enjoyed McDonald’s ‘for breakfast every morning’.

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

He returned from the US with a renewed focus to sign schoolboy terms with a professional club. The dream remained to sign for United, but there was a realistic alternative in Spurs. It would not have been a dreadful scenario. David enjoyed training there and had a good relationship with the youth development officer, John Moncur. When new Tottenham boss Terry Venables was discussing prospects with Moncur, he was delighted to discover that the boy who had impressed him in Spain was a candidate.

David remembered John introducing him and his parents to Terry for a meeting just before his birthday, where it was more or less straightforward that Spurs would offer terms. First impressions clearly count for a lot: Terry asked John what he 'had to say about this young lad', and the Beckhams got the distinct impression that the Spurs manager was not as familiar with the youngster as they had hoped. And definitely not as familiar with him as Alex Ferguson at Manchester United seemed to be.

'I got the impression that, although I'd been training at Spurs for a couple of years, the manager didn't really have any idea who I was,' Beckham recalled. 'I couldn't help thinking about the times I'd been up to Manchester. Alex Ferguson knew all about me. He knew all about every single boy. He knew their parents, he knew their brothers and sisters. That seemed important to me. Important for my future. It always felt like you were part of a family at United.'

If Venables seemed aloof, well, that certainly was not the case when it came to the offer on the table from the club. It was, in effect, a six-year proposal offered by Tottenham. Two years as a schoolboy, two years on the Youth Training Scheme apprentice programme and two years on a professional contract. There was also the promise of a signing-on fee of at least £70,000. 'I could buy a Porsche,' Beckham remembered thinking, but he showed a calmness that belied the situation by asking for time to think about it.

BECKHAM

His head had been turned by the promise from Ferguson that he would be signed for United, and there was a meeting scheduled for around three weeks later at Old Trafford. That meeting took place on 9 May 1988, one week after David turned 13.

In his first full season, Ferguson had steered United to second place in the First Division. A comfortable second – not close enough to challenge Liverpool, but too far in front of Nottingham Forest to be frightened about dropping down a position. A run of eight draws from the first 15 games had really hampered serious talk of title ambitions, but United had finished with seven wins from their last eight, including the end-of-season game that the Beckham family attended against Wimbledon.

When they arrived at Old Trafford, Ferguson left the team, who were having lunch, to greet the family and to tell them he would see them after the match. Who is to know how events might have transpired if Spurs had shown the sort of personal touch that United showed? On the drive to Manchester, Ted had discussed with his son the various options, and urged him to think long and hard about the security of the offer in London.

He needn't have worried. United showed just as much commitment to his son's future as Spurs were willing to. In addition to the red carpet, it made for a memorable day. At 5.30pm, around half an hour after the game had ended, Joe Brown, United's youth development officer, took the family to the manager's office. Also present was Malcolm Fidgeon, the London headteacher and United scout who had driven David to and from his training sessions in Manchester. Les Kershaw, one of the senior scouts, was there. To make the boy feel more at ease, Ferguson remarked that he felt David had enjoyed a growth spurt since they'd last met, though he joked that he didn't like his new spiky haircut. The discussion became more formal as Ferguson sat at his desk.

'He has everything it takes to become a United player,' he said to Sandra and Ted, 'and everything it takes to become a United

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

legend. We've kept a dossier on him for the last couple of years. He's an incredible player who we believe is getting better and better. He's a credit to you. He has everything we're looking for and we want him to become a Manchester United player.'

The manager then said he was offering 'two, two and two': the same structure as Spurs. Ted asked his son what he wanted to do. 'I want to sign,' David said. And, using the same pen he had given Ferguson as a gift, he did just that.