

BOTTLED

ENGLISH FOOTBALL'S BOOZY STORY

ALCOHOLISM



Taking it to

EXCESS

A CULTURE



Footballers

**ALCOHOL
ADDICTION**



BENJAMIN ROBERTS

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I
THE BREWING & THE SESSION

1.

LIKE PULLING TEETH

'If you play for England you don't need to drink wine or beer.' – Sven-Goran Eriksson

'He is accused of being arrogant, unable to cope with the press and a boozier. Sounds like he's got a chance to me.' – George Best on Paul Gascoigne

IT'S easy now to see where it all went wrong: a dimly lit bar with low ceilings, famed for nights of debauchery. A drink called Multiple Screaming Orgasms on the cocktail menu. The England team's hotel was practically next door too, in the Causeway Bay area of Hong Kong. When Terry Venables had told his players to go out and enjoy their last night in the city-state following their pre-Euro 96 tour to the Far East, had he really expected them to head out for a few lemonade shandies?

In an adjoining room to the bar of the China Jump club was the dentist's chair, where participants were instructed to

lie back in the seat and open their mouths as tequila, vodka and Drambuie were liberally poured down their gullet. Several of the team's stars, including Teddy Sheringham, Steve McManaman and Paul Gascoigne are said to have partaken. When David Cameron's Conservatives came into government 14 years later, one of the first measures his government introduced was to ban such games and 'equipment' across the United Kingdom in an attempt to address the country's apparent binge-drinking epidemic.

Venables did have the foresight to send a chaperone of sorts along to keep an eye on his rowdy players. The fact that it was Bryan Robson, known for his fondness of a pint or ten and by now one of Venables's team of coaches, suggested that the group would not be adhering to a strict two pints and home for a cocoa regime. When they arrived at the venue, Robson had arranged for a corner to be cordoned off for the visiting party where Gascoigne – marking the night before his 29th birthday – and Robbie Fowler playfully fought. The latter had asked a young woman if she 'came here often', much to the Rangers man's dismay.

Pints splashed over heads and shirts were torn to pieces. Robson was left with just the collar round his neck, an act that necessitated a journalist with the team to purchase him a replacement garment from behind the bar. The obligatory pints flowed, topped up with Flaming Lamborghinis – made up of Sambuca, Kahlúa, Baileys and Blue Curaçao – set alight and then downed in one through a straw. A bowl of punch was also available to the players to thirstily sip from. Robson later wrote of how they went from 'near enough sober to absolutely wrecked' in the space of 20 minutes.

The team met their manager-imposed 2.30am curfew, though several had been tucked up in bed for hours already. David Platt had advised Gary Neville and Nick Barmby, young men of 21 and 22, that this would be ‘one to miss’, while David Seaman had dozed off watching a repeat of the 1993 FA Cup Final. One man, Tony Adams, would have gone along with bells on but for what he knew it would portend if he did so. McManaman and Fowler had tried to persuade him to come along, but he had resisted, telling them ‘When we win, I’ll have a drink.’

This was, of course, an era before camera phones. It *could* have been possible for the high jinks of that night to have gone unreported. Perhaps there were many more nights like this, lost in the mists of time. But it would be the events of the following day that brought details of the night’s exploits out into the open. Gascoigne was given the morning off to celebrate his being a year older, but it was largely moot anyway since training had been cancelled due to an outbreak of bleary-eyedness among the squad. Gascoigne returned around lunchtime from a nearby, smaller hotel and was found by the rest of the players clutching a bottle of champagne in one hand and a cigar in the other. Venables quietly hinted that he needed to put the brakes on.

The flight back to London Heathrow was scheduled for that evening. When it departed, the players were allowed to monopolise the upper deck of the Cathay Pacific flight in the Marco Polo executive section – partly to confine their boisterousness – a decision greeted with chagrin by a number of the FA suits who instead took the players’ seats in standard class. This time it was an FA doctor, John Crane,

who was tasked with keeping a watchful eye over the young men. Sat next to Gary and Phil Neville, he fell asleep after a couple of drinks.

As those around him played cards, Paul Gascoigne had fallen asleep. That was until Alan Shearer decided to whack him across the back of his head. Rudely awoken from his slumber, Gascoigne roamed up and down the aisles of the plane, on a mission to identify the culprit as he tossed cushions around the cabin. Suspecting Robbie Fowler, Steve McManaman or Rio Ferdinand might be responsible, he struck their back-of-the-seat TV displays until the picture cut out. A disgruntled FA official emerged from downstairs, alerting them to the fact that the commotion could be heard on the deck below. Gascoigne told him to 'fuck off', expressing in no uncertain terms where he saw the official's place in the footballing food chain as he did so.

Eventually, matters aboard flight CX251 were calmed, at least for as long as it took the plane to reach its destination. There it was met by the police, called to investigate the damage that had been done to the aircraft, which was later estimated to be in the region of £5,000. Because the plane was registered overseas, there would be no criminal charges but the airline did seek financial compensation for the harm done to the interior of its 747.

Within days, the press inevitably got wind of events on board. Gascoigne was the subject of a string of tabloid front pages suggesting he should be jettisoned from the squad, if not for football reasons then because of the example he was setting the nation's children. Meanwhile, Venables's

recruits had the rest of the week off before reporting to the Burnham Beeches Hotel.

When they convened in Buckinghamshire a few days later, it was decided they would take 'collective responsibility' for what had taken place on the aircraft days earlier. Exactly what, and to what extent, they were admitting culpability to is another question. Gordon Taylor of the Professional Footballers' Association attempted to deflect at least some of the responsibility away from the players for their actions, declaring that, 'If it's drink, the airline must take some responsibility for giving young kids too much.' In several later retellings, Venables himself would continue to deny that anything had even happened on the plane, at odds with the FA's own press release. Still, at least according to one player, their stay at Burnham Beeches was a relatively dry one.

Venables went on to navigate England to a semi-final exit at their home tournament. A disappointing 1-1 draw with Switzerland in the opening game of the competition (during which an apparently unfit Gascoigne was substituted after an hour) was followed by a 2-0 victory over Scotland, during which the same player scored *that* goal and celebrated by having water sprayed into his mouth by Shearer as Jamie Redknapp and McManaman stood by in mimicry of the dentist's chair incident. In the final group fixture, the Dutch were on the wrong end of an unlikely 4-1 thrashing. Misgivings about the players' behaviour and professionalism gave way to the idea that maybe football *could* be coming home. When the quarter-final against Spain was still tied at 0-0 after 120 minutes, David Seaman and Stuart Pearce emerged as heroes

of the resultant penalty shootout. All that remained between England and the final was Berti Vogts's Germany.

When that game remained level after another 120 minutes, penalties would provide the answer once more. England's first five takers – Shearer, Platt, Pearce, Gascoigne and Sheringham – had all put theirs away, and so the nation turned to Gareth Southgate, chosen because he appeared enthusiastic about the spot kick despite only ever having taken one before, which had hit the post. This time, Southgate side-footed his effort with his right boot, low and to the left, as the German goalkeeper, Andreas Kopke, dived to block it with his right hand.

During the tournament, the players had been given two days off and Sheringham, Sol Campbell and Redknapp were photographed coming out of a nightclub in Essex at 2.30am. When asked about it, Venables said, 'The Italian players drink wine every day,' adding, 'these boys have sat in a corner and had a couple of beers.' Although other countries had brought beer with them, it had gone largely untouched by their playing staff. Christophe Dugarry viewed the nightclub story with incredulity: 'I simply cannot believe the England players were in a nightclub,' he said, 'you do these sorts of things afterwards, on your holidays.'



It was a nadir for English footballers' representation in the media. Beyond this, it had happened during a widespread moral panic about the nature of the nation's relationship with the bottle. English football fans were seen to have brought

shame to the country, leaving a trail of destruction behind them on away trips. This led some to wonder whether the English – or perhaps the British – had a uniquely ruinous relationship with the bottle.

There is a perception that the British are more reckless, destructive drinkers than their European counterparts but, in terms of consumption, we actually imbibe less – the equivalent of 408 pints a year – than our Portuguese (443), French (429), Irish (418) and German (415) counterparts. This would seem to suggest that the issue is not how much we drink, but the *way* we do it. Our continental European neighbours will spread their drinking out over a whole week and, within that, infrequently throughout each day. Yet we condense the large majority of ours into one or two nights a week, during which we guzzle it down as if our lives depended on it.

The difference, it seems, is between ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ cultures. In ‘wet’ cultures, found around the Mediterranean, people drink little and often. They see no immorality in having a small drink with breakfast and another one with lunch. Drink is everywhere but is consumed sparingly. An Italian might have a limoncello with his first meal of the day and another aperitif at lunch. In ‘dry’ cultures – the UK, US and the Scandinavian nations of northern Europe – alcohol is compartmentalised, found only in certain locations, and is strictly controlled. To have it outside those confined spaces is mostly seen as abnormal and to be avoided. Drinking beyond the two or three nights a week (during which we become explosive boozehounds) is the cause of many a furrowed brow and sideways look.

Lager, today seen as the favoured drink of the stereotypical lout on tour, was introduced to the United Kingdom in the late 1950s. The most popular brand, Skol – originally brewed in Scotland – was aimed at a younger consumer looking to break away from the drinks of their father. If the 50s had been about its introduction, the next decade set the stage for its popularisation: lager had just one per cent market share in 1961, but in the same year it accounted for 19 per cent of advertising spending.

By the mid-1970s, alcohol consumption in the United Kingdom had reached levels not seen since before the First World War. Per-person consumption nearly doubled in the 25 years after 1950. By 1975, lager accounted for 20 per cent of alcohol sales, and in 1996 it made up more than half of all drinks sold in the UK. During the same period, spirit consumption had doubled and the quantity of wine drunk had trebled. As the austerity of the 1950s had faded, the rapidly growing economy of the next few decades meant that the average person had more disposable income. Though pubs still did a solid trade, off-licences and supermarkets sprang up to capitalise on this. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that in the two decades up to 1970 convictions for drunkenness rose by 50 per cent.

It was an alarming development. In 1979, the Royal College of Psychiatrists published *Alcohol and Alcoholism*, arguing that the government of the day should aim for the goal of ‘per capita alcohol consumption ... not increas[ing] beyond the present level, and [...] by stages brought back to a lower level ...’ on the basis that it ‘can be asserted that if the average man or woman begins to drink more ... then the

number of people who damage themselves by their drinking will also increase.' The aim was to bring about a change of attitudes through tax increases on alcohol products and the setting of safe drinking limits which, at the time, were determined to be 56 units for men: a staggering four pints of beer, or more than one bottle of wine, per day. A unit, for context, is measured as a small glass of wine, a small measure of spirits or half a pint of fairly weak beer.

A German mathematician, Walter Ledermann, had presented a thesis in the late 1950s – which became known as the 'Ledermann curve' – suggesting the amount a country drinks per head of population is closely correlated with the proportion of alcoholics – or 'heavy drinkers', depending on your view – it produces. According to Ledermann, it naturally follows that the way to reduce the number of alcoholics in a given nation is to reduce the amount that the country drinks as a whole. Ledermann's findings indicated that even a small increase in per-person consumption has an outsized effect on the number of alcoholics. When moderate drinkers become a little less moderate, the problems they caused to themselves and others did not increase proportionally but actually quite dramatically.

Within five years, those eye-wateringly high recommended daily maximum limits emerging from the RCP report had been more than cut in half. The numbers had never been determined scientifically in the first place. Instead, they were about drawing a line in the sand where one had not existed before, on the basis that any figure was better than no figure at all. The next decade under Margaret Thatcher continued to see a concentration on tackling

consumption per capita, which had risen by a shocking 23 per cent between 1971 and 1981. Activities perceived as being enjoyed by the working class were scapegoated as part of this blunt-instrument strategy. Football hooliganism – which certainly existed – was held up as the motif of a degenerate, feckless horde to justify punitive legislation restricting alcohol sales at football games, but not other sporting events. Alcohol consumption was even restricted on transportation *to* those games.

After 25 July 1985, alcohol could no longer be consumed within sight of a football pitch and the income from corporate boxes of some bigger clubs, notably Tottenham and Manchester United, is said to have fallen by £500,000 in the first season after implementation, which eventually led to a review of the legislation, exempting those well-heeled spectators. Yet attendances at football matches fell ten per cent during the season following implementation of the alcohol ban, which was, at least in part, linked to this perceived vilification.

In 1989 another legislative change – the so-called ‘Beer Orders’ – made the sweeping changes that rippled throughout the 1990s a near inevitability. The Beer Orders had the effect of restricting the number of pubs a single brewery could own, which meant those firms who held more than 1,000 properties had to sell off their excess. By the time the legislation was revoked in 2003, a profound transformation had already taken place. Breweries had sold off a large number of their branches to satisfy the competition authorities, who reckoned that Allied, Bass and their fellow brewers had a stranglehold on the market

which allowed them to dictate which ales were stocked and price their independent competitors out of the market.

As a result, the 1990s saw a boom in what were termed 'youth pubs'. These were chains that would play music, offer generous discounts and market themselves to those in their 20s. It was the crystallising of a process that had seen licensed premises shift from being community hubs to retail outlets. In 1950 pubs were so numerous that the average journey time to one was five minutes. The 1960s witnessed a move towards more amateur football being played on Sundays in England (as Sabbatarian instincts waned) with matches often scheduled to end just as pubs opened so players could complete their exertions then roll in for a few pints. In that same decade, a football match or a race meeting were the fifth most common place to travel to the pub *from*. Since then, the purely sporting role of the pub has declined, save for the fact that, for many without access to the various subscriptions, it is the only way to watch their team on television.

The youth pub paradigm of the 1990s saw the rise of the likes of O'Neill's, Wetherspoons and Yates's across city centres. Though this new liberalised era still forbade the advertising of drunkenness itself, it did allow for 2-for-1 promotions, the use of strong mixers and the utilisation of rave culture within advertisements via bright colours and imagery. Where it had once been five, by the time Southgate fluffed *that* penalty it would take 13 minutes for the average person to reach a pub on foot.