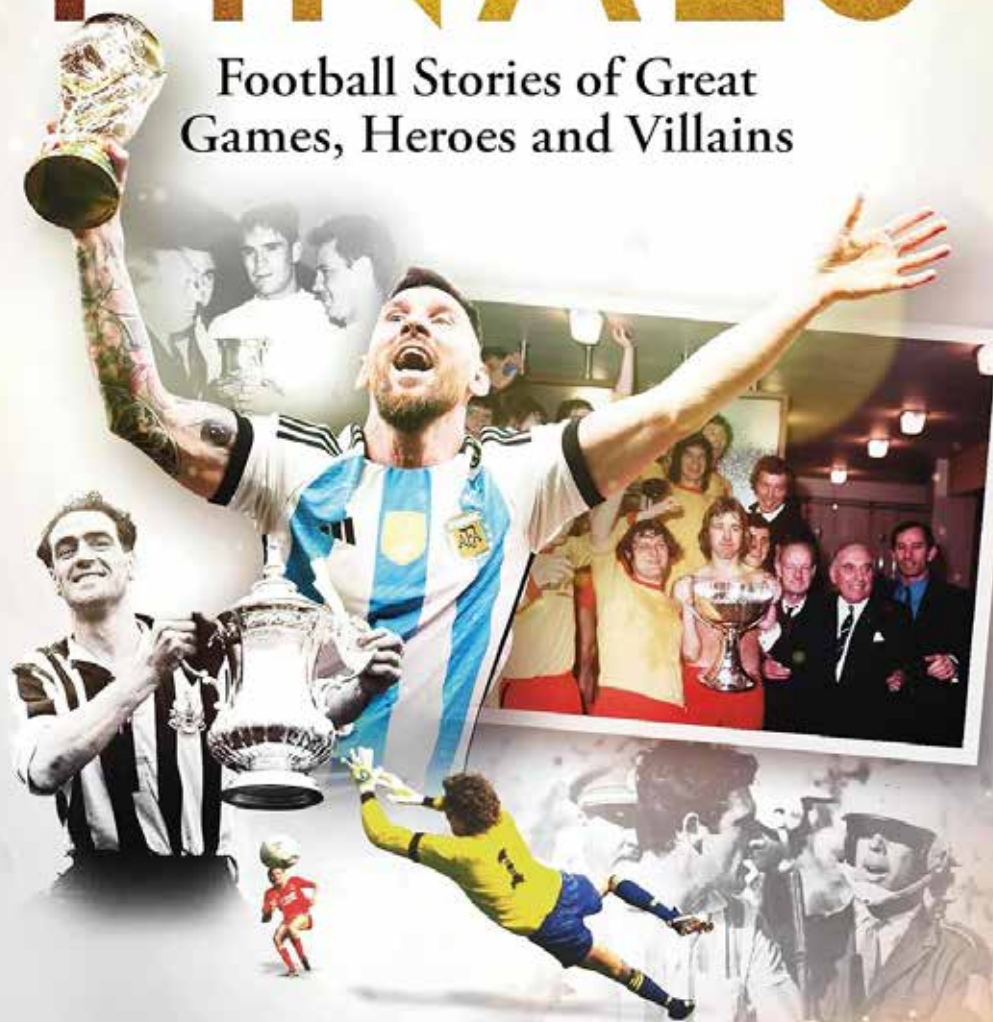


# CUP FINALS

Football Stories of Great  
Games, Heroes and Villains



CLIFF HAGUE

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C L I F F   H A G U E



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## Chapter One

# The Magic of the Cup

*'There are, of course, many, if the whole truth must be written, whom the exciting and manly game has failed to touch by its magic and fascinating influence, but they should not be courted, and fortunately their patronage is neither sought nor needed for they are the men most to be avoided on a wintry Saturday afternoon when one is on his way to see an exciting "cup tie".'*

David Bone, *Scottish Football Reminiscences and Sketches*, 1890.

ONE OF my early memories is listening to the commentary on the radio of the 1952 FA Cup Final in which Newcastle United beat Arsenal 1-0. It was the beginning of my love of cup finals. I was seven years old. We did not have a television. I did not know anybody who had one where I lived in Harpurhey, an area of terraced streets infused with odours from the chemical works and the biscuit factory, in north Manchester.

I can't properly explain why that 1952 cup final moment sticks in my mind. I was certainly playing football in the street by that age – or, at least, a chaotic chasing of a ball amongst a melee of other kids of all ages, with

goals chalked on the gable end of a house or defined less precisely by jumpers piled up at either end of a street. I may even have been to watch a game at our local stadium, Newton Heath Loco, which had turnstiles, nets and short terraces of railway sleepers fixed in ash. I wonder now if those sleepers might have been smuggled out by workers from the nearby railway goods yard? I remember seeing Polish Circle play there, wearing the white and red of Poland and presumably drawing on the Polish refugee community housed in Manchester during, and after, those grim World War Two years. Indeed, there was a 'Polish camp' of temporary, barrack-like huts on some public playing fields not far from us; the huts were not demolished until the late 1950s. Broadhurst Park, the home ground of FC United of Manchester, the fan-owned rebellion against the Glazers' ownership of Manchester United, stands just across the road from where the camp had been.

That 1952 radio commentary is lodged in my memory because it was a cup final. It carried an aura – my first experience of the magic of the cup. It was something special, demanding attention from the routines of a constricted daily life, learning your times tables at school or going to the grocer's with my mum and her ration books or hearing my grandmother incant, 'The boy stood on the burning deck, selling peas a penny a peck', which must have been the disrespectful contortion of the opening of the 1826 poem 'Casabianca' that she had picked up from her own 19th-century school playground.

Newcastle's feat in winning the cup for the second year in succession – and so becoming the first club since Blackburn Rovers in 1889/90 and 1890/91 to retain the trophy – doubtless added to the sense of occasion. The fact that the winner was scored by somebody with the exotic name of George Robledo and that he came from a faraway country called Chile gave it an extra air of mystique. From

an early age, I had a sense of identity with my home city and, more generally, with the north of England, and Newcastle v Arsenal was a classic north v south rivalry. For whatever reason, the cup and the cup competition became a compelling part of my boyhood that stayed with me when I became an adult.

### ***The Boys' Book of Soccer***

My *Boys' Book of Soccer* for 1953 Christmas present carried a report on that 1952 FA Cup Final. Noting that it was Newcastle's fourth Wembley final and their fourth Wembley victory, the annual proclaimed: 'All honour to the United, who played a fine, stirring game. They deserved their goal – and deserved the cup.' However, in those less contentious days, there was still a hint of controversy about the decisive goal. According to my cherished annual, George Robledo had a 'colliding tackle' with Arsenal's Don Roper in the arc on the edge of the Gunners' penalty area. 'Roper went down heavily as the ball went out to Bobby Mitchell, who was unmarked.' Left-winger Mitchell looked as if he was going to shoot, then 'sent in a perfect centre' which Robledo headed in off the post to the keeper's left. The writer surmised that the referee was right to play on after the collision in the build-up to the goal as 'Roper was not really seriously injured' and to have stopped the game 'would have penalized [sic] Newcastle unfairly'. The Pathé newsreel did not capture the collision but did show Roper receiving treatment and hobbling away. Clearly, Roper missed a trick by not screaming in pain and rolling over six times and his team-mates should have besieged the referee, waving imaginary red cards. And what about VAR? Today, there would have been a three-minute stoppage while the 'colliding tackle' was viewed in slow motion from many angles and many times over and the decision would have been ... who knows?

## CUP FINALS

My Christmas present book gave the line-ups, each in the 2-3-5 formation that British football followed like a religion in those long-ago days.

### **Newcastle were:**

Simpson  
Cowell McMichael  
Harvey Brennan Robledo (E.)  
Walker Foulkes Milburn Robledo (G.) Mitchell

### **The Arsenal XI were:**

Swindin  
Barnes Smith  
Forbes Daniel Mercer  
Cox Logie Holton Lishman Roper

Though I was too young to appreciate it at the time, and certainly could not see into the future, there were men playing at Wembley that ‘muggy day’ who were, or would become, legends in their time. Joe Harvey and Joe Mercer had each already lifted the cup and experienced the raw emotion of being carried on the shoulders of their team-mates, bearing the prized trophy, in 1951 and 1950 respectively. When Arsenal were reduced to ten men by an injury to full-back Wally Barnes, Mercer organised the Gunners’ resistance in the face of intense Newcastle pressure.

**Joe Mercer** (1914–1990), the Arsenal captain, had won five England caps whilst playing for Everton before the Second World War and was part of their side that won the First Division title in 1938/39. He was transferred to Arsenal for £9,000 in 1946 at the age of 32 and handicapped by knee problems. He was allowed to remain living and training on Merseyside, where he had inherited his father-in-law’s grocer’s shop. At Everton, he was an

attacking midfielder, but played in a more defensive role for Arsenal.

He was voted Footballer of the Year in 1950, the year he skippered Arsenal to a 2-0 FA Cup Final victory over Liverpool after spending the previous week training with his Wembley opponents! David Fensome, quoted from a match report: 'Joe Mercer played as he always does with a cool, unhurried touch of class and clarity of thought which places him amongst the giants.'

He managed Manchester City from 1965 to 1971. During those years, City were Second Division champions in 1966, First Division champions two years later, won the FA Cup in 1969 and then, in 1970, the League Cup and the European Cup Winners' Cup. Joe Mercer was the first person to win the league championship and FA Cup as both a captain and a manager. He served as caretaker manager of the England team between Sir Alf Ramsey's sacking and Don Revie's appointment.

## Cup final legends 1: Joe Mercer

**Jackie Milburn** (1924–1988) was Newcastle's talisman: a fast centre-forward with good ball control who packed a fearsome shot in either foot. 'Wor Jackie' is commemorated by a statue outside St James's Park, where a stand is also named in his honour. He was born in Ashington into a coal mining family, left school at 14 and worked in the local colliery once he became 16.

He began with Newcastle as a right-winger in 1943 before being switched to centre-forward and scoring 20 goals in 39 league games as his team won promotion to Division One in 1947. Incredible as it seems today, Milburn was working as a miner on Saturday mornings, then riding on a motorbike to play in the afternoon, until his fellow pitmen threatened to strike if he was not given Saturday mornings off.

Though he did not score in the 1952 cup final, he had bagged two in Newcastle's 1951 win over Blackpool, the



first when one-on-one with the goalkeeper after beating the offside trap, the second a powerful shot into the top corner from 25 yards. Then, despite not being a renowned header of the ball, he headed the opener after 45 seconds in the 1955 Wembley triumph over Manchester City. He was Newcastle's leading goalscorer until overtaken half a century later by Alan Shearer. Milburn won 13 England caps between 1948 and 1956, scoring ten goals.

## Cup final legends 2: Jackie Milburn

It was through this same *Boys' Book of Soccer for 1953* that I discovered that there was also a Scottish Cup Final. There were photos and a report from the previous season's final at Hampden Park, in which Motherwell had beaten Dundee 4-0 before a crowd of 136,000. Dundee's star man was inside-left Billy Steel, their Scottish record signing for £22,500 in 1950 from Derby. The Midlands club had paid a British record £15,500 in 1947 to take him south from Morton. The report in my book stated that Steel was tackled by the Motherwell defenders 'often with more force than fairness'. As at Wembley, there was some controversy: Willie Kilmarnock, Motherwell's right-back, made his third goal-line clearance of the match from a shot by Bobby Flavell, but was it over the line? Flavell certainly thought so 'and from the press box it looked as if the ball might have been over the line'. It must be said that the press box at Hampden in those days was so far from the goals as to require the use of binoculars but, then as now, a cup final can hinge on the tightest of decisions. It is part of the drama!

Another cup final was featured in my Christmas present. Dennis Hall scored a last-minute 'goal of a lifetime – a lifetime of Wembleys and cup finals' to win the Amateur Cup Final for Walthamstow Avenue. Hall had played only five first-team games that season and owed his place at Wembley to a cruel cartilage injury to star inside-left

Ron Horsley. Fate, luck, opportunity, disappointment or achievement – cup finals define lifetimes, milestones on the road from youth to senility.

Interspersed amongst these reports were illustrated articles on how to trap a ball while wearing toe-capped boots that covered the ankles and uplifting stories such as ‘The Toff Scores Again’. The Toff was actually a detective but it is significant that the climax of the story is the fictional Milhampton Wanderers winning the FA Cup at Wembley by 4-1. Presumably, the author of the story felt that a cup final ending had more allure to readers than a triumph in the league.

Similarly, another of the stories, ‘Those were the days: An interview with the oldest inhabitant’, illustrated by a sketch of a bald old man with a walking stick and an enormously long beard, has ‘Grandpa Watkins’ recounting the story of the 1903 cup final in which Bury beat favourites Derby County 6-0 at Crystal Palace before a crowd of 60,000. Grandpa says, ‘It was a remarkable game’. The interviewer responds, ‘They usually are’, prompting Grandpa to observe in classic old man mode, ‘Cup finals aren’t what they were’, to which the interviewer replies, ‘I don’t suppose they ever were’.

However, Grandpa’s memory seems to have let him down, unsurprisingly given how ancient he looks in the drawing. In telling his tale, he confused Bury’s forward Charlie Sagar with Ted Sagar, who kept goal for Everton a generation later. Charlie played a crucial role in the 1903 cup final. In the second half, with Bury leading 1-0, ‘Sagar got away and dribbled towards the Derby goal ... so quick you could hardly see his feet.’ The goalkeeper, George Fryer, came out, ‘the two men collided and poor old George went down ... Ted [sic] still had the ball and kicked it easily into the net’ with Fryer still on the ground. Fryer went off, left-back Morris took his place in goal, Bury went three up, Fryer came back on and conceded two more, then went off

again and the Lancashire club made it six. It was not until 2019 that Manchester City equalled this winning margin in an FA Cup Final, when they defeated Watford.

Another section of the *Boys' Book of Soccer for 1953* listed the address and strips (no multiple strips in those days) of 124 English and Scottish league clubs. As the ticks next to many of them indicate, this was the database I used to post a letter, with a stamped and addressed return envelope, begging a copy of their programme. The returns were the basis for my childhood collection of football programmes that I drew upon to write *Programmes! Programmes! Football and Life from Wartime to Lockdown* that was published by Pitch in 2021.

As I grew up, the list of cup finals that climaxed competitions grew longer and longer. There was a World Cup (the first I remember was 1954); then, most notably, the European Cup, which began in 1955/56; and, from 1961, the League Cup, though that carried less glamour. There was the European Cup Winners' Cup, the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup (which would morph into the UEFA Cup), the Anglo-Italian Cup and the Women's FA Cup. The cup idea is so appealing that big business saw it as a way to make money by sponsoring competitions; for example, the Watney Cup, the Texaco Cup, the Sherpa Van Trophy and then, in 1994, the FA Cup itself became the 'FA Cup sponsored by Littlewoods'. Cup competitions in other countries also began to appear on my radar.

### **What makes cup finals special?**

What is it that makes cup finals so special? There is the gripping power of the moment when a game is won and lost. Heroes and villains are remembered for their exploits on that special day. There is a sense of equity and opportunity, as entry is open to many competitors, then excitement mounts as the competition progresses to its climax. Cup

finals can draw on a sense of history, both following the footsteps of past giants (and giant killers) and of history being made. They are rich in routines and myths; if such riches are not available, they can be manufactured. To the fans of the finalists, cup finals at whatever level of football are spectacles and become memories imprinted with place and time, milestones on life's journey. There is something about a cup final; kids playing with their pals in the park or playground imagine they are in a cup final, not a league game. Indeed, playing a kickabout with a grand-nephew who was about eight at the time, he imagined himself as the first Wolverhampton-born player to captain and score a hat-trick for Brazil in the World Cup Final, a dream he looks unlikely to realise, despite rattling goals past me that afternoon.

To appreciate the special nature of cup finals, consider Manchester City's treble-winning season of 2022/23. Across all competitions, they scored 151 goals, with Erling Haaland netting a phenomenal 52. Lots of great moments then, but I would wager that, as the years roll by, two will last in the memory more than any others. Ilkay Gündoğan scored after just 12 seconds in the FA Cup Final. That goal will be recalled as the quickest ever in an FA Cup Final: the occasion is what makes the goal special. The goal was also special because it was such a spectacular long-range volley and was against arch-rivals Manchester United: but all these attributes were enhanced by its being in a cup final.

**Ilkay Gündoğan** (1990–) was born in Gelsenkirchen in the Ruhr, where his Turkish father was working as a miner. An attacking midfielder, he made his debut for Germany in 2011 and caught the eye with his performances for Borussia Dortmund in 2012/13 when they reached the UEFA Champions League Final. He was Pep Guardiola's first signing for Manchester City in 2016.

In 2022/23, he had a stellar end to the season, captaining City as they successfully pursued the treble of the Premier League, FA Cup and Champions League. He scored twice against Leeds United, then twice against Everton, as City pulled away from challengers Arsenal to win the league title. At Wembley, he scored after 12 seconds to dramatically put City ahead in the first ever Manchester derby FA Cup Final, then restored City's lead with another in the second half. The final score was 2-1 and Gündoğan was named man of the match. He joined Barcelona in 2023, only to return to Manchester City the following year.

### Cup final legends 3: İlkay Gündoğan

The other goal that Manchester City fans will never forget was also scored in a cup final. The third leg of the pursuit of the treble in 2022/23 saw City face Inter Milan in Istanbul. Rodri was the man whose goal won the match and earned him legendary status. Winning that Champions League Final – and, with it, the treble – was the driving ambition both of manager Pep Guardiola and of the investors from Abu Dhabi, who took majority ownership of the club in 2008. City fans had endured some hard times, with the club relegated to League One, the third tier in England, at the end of the 1997/98 season. They will never forget that Rodri winner.

**Rodri – Rodrigo Hernández Cascante** (1996–) joined Manchester City from Atlético Madrid in 2019. The Spanish international's performances as a commanding defensive midfielder won him the accolade of player of the tournament in the 2022/23 UEFA Champions League. He was then named player of the tournament at Euro 2024, as Spain won the competition.

In the final, Inter Milan played a defensive game and City suffered the loss, through injury, of Kevin De Bruyne, who so often had unlocked stubborn defences by his incisive passing and precise crosses. With the game

still goalless after 68 minutes, Rodri smashed a drive from the edge of the penalty area after Bernardo Silva, on the right, had cut the ball back from the byline. It was the only goal and Rodri was named man of the match. He won the Ballon d'Or in 2024.

## **Cup final legends 4: Rodri**

One reason why cup finals have such significance is because they play out the kind of stories that have transcended cultures and eras. They provide us with suspense, hope and despair, triumph and tragedy at the end of a long journey, compressed into brief decisive action. They have epic qualities, and in the intensive trivia of modern sport they parallel themes from ancient scriptures, myths and legends, tales of rivalries and giant killers.

One of the joys of football cups is what comes next: who will be the opponents in the next round, as minds plot routes to a cup final. Fans of non-league sides hope for a home draw against a top team; others look forward to, or dread, a pairing with local rivals; one step away from a final, who do you want to avoid in the semis? So, dear reader, having made it through the first chapter, what might lie in store as you progress?

## **Memories and stories**

The book aims to explore the finals of cup tournaments from different eras, levels of competition and places, celebrating the stories and the people whose exploits created those stories. Some finals disappoint but many are long remembered. Cup final stories are just that: stories. They are passed on down the generations and within them are miracles and morality, heroes and villains, parables as well as penalties. Enjoyment and entertainment are my priorities, not an encyclopaedic list; people, moments and memories, not statistics. I am trying to capture the dramas, some familiar, others less so.

No book on cup finals can be comprehensive, as there are so many. Early national cup competitions have endured; not just the FA Cup but, for example, the Welsh Cup, in which Wrexham, the 'Dragons', beat Druids 1-0 in the first final in 1878. Druids is a small town in North Wales, but Dragons v Druids at football conjures some nice images in the mind, just as does the more recent dominance of the New Saints in that same venerable Welsh competition. In contrast, some commercially sponsored cups had a short life. The Scottish FA would not allow sponsors to put their name on the cherished Scottish Cup, so the Drybrough brewery company invented the Drybrough Cup in 1971. It involved the four top-scoring sides from Division One and from Division Two and trialled an experimental offside law. All the ties were played in one week, pre-season. Legendary Celtic manager Jock Stein was not a fan and the competition went into cold storage from 1975 until 1979, was revived briefly and then shelved permanently.

Chapter Two is about the beginning of the FA Cup, 'The Creation' of knockout cups. It is a story about wealthy men with whiskers, who wore knickerbockers and fearsome boots. The reader's journey continues in Chapter Three, with 'The Pilgrimage', the long, devotional route leading to a sacred place and a cup final, building faith and hope along the road, though many fall by the wayside. Chapter Four celebrates 'Heroes and Glory', who are followed, in Chapter Five, by 'Villains'. Cup final day can also bring 'Tragedy', as Chapter Six relates. 'Wow!' (Chapter Seven) celebrates those spectacular finals that changed our very understanding of the game. Stories of 'Underdogs', such a compelling part of cup competitions, are in Chapter Eight. Then, as extra time looms and then the tie goes to penalties, there is 'Suspense' (Chapter Nine). Finally, we are left with a few 'Souvenirs' in Chapter Ten.