

S P E N C E R V I G N E S



ERIC & DAVE

A Lifetime of Football and Friendship



Two goalkeepers, one jersey and a
lifelong friendship, in a gem of a football story

Paul Hayward

ERIC & DAVE

A Lifetime of Football and Friendship

S P E N C E R V I G N E S



CONTENTS

Introduction	13
1. We'll Meet Again	21
2. A Matter of Life and Death	26
3. The Third Way	48
4. Mr Consistent	71
5. The Best of Times, the Worst of Times	87
6. Summertime Blues	112
7. Our Friends in the North	127
8. Frozen Out	147
9. 1966 and All That	170
10. A Place Without a Postcard	190
11. Time, Gentlemen	213
12. Shameful	230
13. Autumn	247
14. 'We Wunt Be Druv'	267
Eric's Pearls of Wisdom	277
Dave's Pearls of Wisdom	278
Acknowledgements	280
Bibliography	283
Index	284

WE'LL MEET AGAIN

'Not liking the look of this.' – Helen Branswell,
science journalist specialising in infectious
diseases, 2 January 2020

IT'S WEDNESDAY, 12 February 2020. Britain is 40 days away from being locked down in a bid to combat the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. At present, the majority of new cases being reported are inside China. But the situation is changing by the minute. It takes just one international air flight to transport the virus to the opposite side of the globe. Today, the skies pretty much everywhere are full of commercial airliners. It's Hollywood disaster movie stuff with cherries on top.

And yet, at Denton Island Indoor Bowls Club in the English port town of Newhaven, none of that matters right now. Why? Because it's time to play bowls.

Denton Island's team for this morning's inter-club match consists of three people. Playing lead and second, step forward Eric Gill and Dave Hollins, respectively, two men accustomed to performing inside some of the most

famous sporting arenas in the world, albeit as association football goalkeepers rather than bowlers.

Between 1951 and 1970, Eric and Dave ran out in front of many millions – yes, *millions* – of spectators packed inside stadiums such as Old Trafford, Anfield, Hampden Park and Rio’s Maracanã to pit their wits against the likes of Stanley Matthews, George Best, Jimmy Greaves, Pelé, Garrincha, Vavá, Denis Law, Jack Rowley, Tom Finney and Bobby Charlton, not to mention their shared nemesis, Brian Clough. They didn’t always come out on top – we’re talking some of the finest attacking talent ever to set foot on a football field here – but they gave their level best on every occasion. As Dave himself admits, ‘When you share the same blades of grass with people like that, it’s an honour. You can only admire high skill.’

Of course, it wasn’t always that glamorous. There were also Tuesday nights in January away to Torquay United and Barrow and Swansea Town, guarding goalmouths peppered with flint against journeymen centre-forwards hell-bent on sending them to the nearest infirmary at the earliest opportunity. But then the idea, dear reader, is to try to ‘sell’ you this book in the early pages, not to put you off. We’ll get to the warts and all in due course. For the time being, let’s give the pearls top billing.

Today, there’s no crowd at Denton Island. There rarely is at inter-club bowls matches. Yet, as far as Eric and Dave are concerned, the discipline remains the same as it did throughout all those afternoons and evenings spent guarding goalmouths in far-off towns and cities – absolute concentration.

'You get to meet a lot of great friends playing bowls,' says Eric, north London accent still resolutely intact. 'It's a very social game. But it's also very competitive. Don't let anybody tell you otherwise. And I've always been competitive. Gotta win, that's me. Gotta win.'

With that, Eric adopts his game face, takes hold of the first of his woods (bowling parlance for the actual bowls), eyes the yellow jack at the far end of the rink, and goes to work.

Fast forward 23 months ...

With hindsight, Covid must have been much closer that morning than either Eric or Dave realised. The clues were there in plain sight: only one person allowed to touch the jack; only one person allowed to touch the mat; chairs arranged six feet apart for players to sit on while changing their shoes; face masks to be worn right up until the point of bowling (although Dave, asthmatic since childhood, remained exempt). All just precautionary measures, nothing serious, you understand.

How little they, we, knew.

As for the identity of the opposing team and the result? Neither Eric, Dave nor Irene Taylor, Eric's partner in real life and the third member of the team that day, can remember. All three have excellent memories but the events of 2020, 2021 and 2022 have simply sheared what's important in the mind from what isn't. Bowling is a serious business, but it's not that serious.

The one thing they're all agreed on is this: it was the last time any of them went bowling for a long, long time. It

was also the last occasion that Eric and Dave, close friends since the days when Marilyn Monroe was just plain old Norma Jeane Mortenson, saw each other face to face for almost two years.

The first of England's lockdowns, when it finally came on 23 March 2020, had brought with it a terrible sense of foreboding for Dave bordering on *déjà vu*. In 2017 his brother, John Hollins, himself a former professional footballer, returned from a pre-season tour of China by Arsenal, one of his ex-clubs, with a peculiar virus. Within days all his main organs had shut down. John was kept alive by doctors at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital in London, where he remained in intensive care for three weeks. The road to recovery was a long one but he survived. Just.

Dave had no idea whether this new virus was what had befallen his brother. Probably not, considering Covid-19 wasn't officially identified until two years later in the December of 2019. All he knew was it came from the same part of the world and the symptoms were remarkably similar. That was enough to scare the bejesus out of him and take all the health warnings seriously. To hell with the Covid deniers – the drawbridge to this English born and raised Welsh international's castle was going up for the foreseeable future.

Over the weeks and months that followed, many leaders, heads of state, commentators and journalists fell back on wartime metaphors to describe the challenges mankind was facing. Doctors and nurses became soldiers. People breaking social-distancing rules became traitors or deserters. 'We will meet again,' declared Queen Elizabeth

WE'LL MEET AGAIN

II in a broadcast to the UK and Commonwealth on 5 April 2020, drawing on the 1939 song made famous by Vera Lynn to evoke the Blitz spirit of the Second World War.

It was a language both Eric and Dave were only too familiar with, having survived some of the worst of what the Second World War had to offer. But they were words that also stood them in good stead. On that occasion Eric and Dave had come through the mire as children. This time they were determined to come through it again as old men.