

ESCAPE

A LOVE LETTER TO A
CULT FOOTBALL CLASSIC



JOHN SMITH

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1.

BLUE TICKETS

An Introduction

I CAN'T tell you exactly how many times I've watched *Escape to Victory* but I imagine that, like many of you, it is more than once or twice. Nor can I tell you exactly when I first saw it but I can remember the circumstances as if it were yesterday.

Our telly came from a shop called Radio Rentals, which always confused me a bit, because I'm pretty sure we owned our radio. Renting our telly brought two huge benefits as far as the childhood me could tell, neither of which was about the cost. After all, as a kid, that was never my department and you wouldn't expect it to be. The first benefit was that if the telly ever needed fixing, they would send 'The Man' round to take the back off and fix it. This was fascinating to me, as a youngster, and I can still see the different colours of the circuit board and smell the soldering iron now. I always found something incredibly reassuring about being in the presence of an expert and probably still do. I also just really liked the telly and, on a much shallower psychological level, when 'The Man' came, it would mean that the telly went from not working to working again. Yeah, it's probably that. Maybe this is what Lou Reed was singing about in 'I'm Waiting for the Man'.

These sorcerers of the circuit board might have wondered to themselves why this weird little kid was watching them do their job but I remain forever grateful for their work – even if my mum still insists that one of them stole her Phil Collins ‘No Jacket Required’ cassette tape on one visit. We’ll never know for sure but, either way, I’d chalk that up as a small price worth paying.

The second benefit was that we seemed to change our telly from time to time, possibly because they kept breaking. Eventually, one fateful day, a TV arrived with a VHS recorder attached to it – and my world changed. Of course, the machine is only as good as what you put into it and that brings us to Videotheque. We all remember Blockbuster Video but before their rise and fall, there was so much joy to be had in your local independent version. Our one was called Videotheque and I loved it, unconditionally.

The shop had a simple system whereby if a tape had a blue ticket sticking out of it, then a VHS was available. If there was a pink ticket, then it was available in Betamax. And if it had no ticket at all sticking out of it, then you’d better find something else to watch.

Our very first selection was the Oscar-laden, if slightly pedestrian, *On Golden Pond*, most notable in our house for the fact that we rewound it once it had finished by taking it in turns to keep our finger firmly on the rewind button on the machine, muttering ‘this can’t be right’ throughout the process. Stop and rewind was a technique that we hadn’t yet quite grasped. Can you imagine the unconfined joy when we did?

In those early, magical days, I remember *Blade Runner* being a big deal and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* being an even

bigger deal. I seem to remember that, early on, we used our membership to watch those Clint Eastwood films with Clyde the orangutan and I can vividly recall a very exciting Sunday afternoon when we watched both *Rocky* and *Rocky II*, back-to-back. Imagine that. How cool were my parents? See what I mean about a whole new world? What a time to be alive.

Given that you're currently holding this book, it won't surprise you to learn that among those films that first caught my eye on the shelves was *Escape to Victory*. There it sat, quite high up as I recall – in my mind's eye, it was next to *Escape from Alcatraz* and sat below *Mad Max* – but I couldn't swear to it. The picture on the front was that now familiar but curious image of Sylvester Stallone, Pelé and Michael Caine seemingly emerging out of one conjoined red mass, each with an arm raised and open-mouthed in defiance.

I knew that the guy on the left was Rocky and I knew the guy on the right from, probably at that time, *The Italian Job*, *The Eagle Has Landed* and perennial Sunday afternoon favourite *Zulu* but what was Pelé doing in between them? He was very definitely a footballer rather than an actor. This warranted further investigation. My parents and my older brother and sister were probably already aware of the film but this was very much my introduction to it. I don't think anyone needed too much persuasion for us to give it a go, so, when the sweet, sweet day arrived that it had a blue ticket sticking out of the box, we took our opportunity.

Here was a war film that bore more than a passing resemblance to *The Great Escape* but with football – and what sort of monster doesn't want that? Add Bobby Moore

to the mix – royalty to our West Ham-supporting family – and, at the age I was, you could not have made a film more up my street if you had precision-tooled it into existence with me in mind. I must have sat there spellbound and my love for the film lives strong to this day, as you can no doubt already tell.

I can only hope that this book maintains some of the wide-eyed wonder I felt as we made the short walk back home from Videotheque and that I've held ever since. Everything in this book comes from a profound love of this film. It's not post-modern and ironic, because who has the time to research and write a post-modern and ironic book about a film that they only enjoy ironically? Not me.

Escape to Victory is a film with flaws, for sure, and there will be a time to discuss those but, overwhelmingly, this book comes from affection. I've enjoyed every minute of contacting as many of the players and actors as I could and listening to the stories they shared with me. I've learned a lot along the way – and not just where to stand for a corner kick.

In talking through the film itself, how it came into being, how the stars came to be the stars and what the film means to people, I hope to do justice to those who were kind enough to speak to me about this unique and special film.