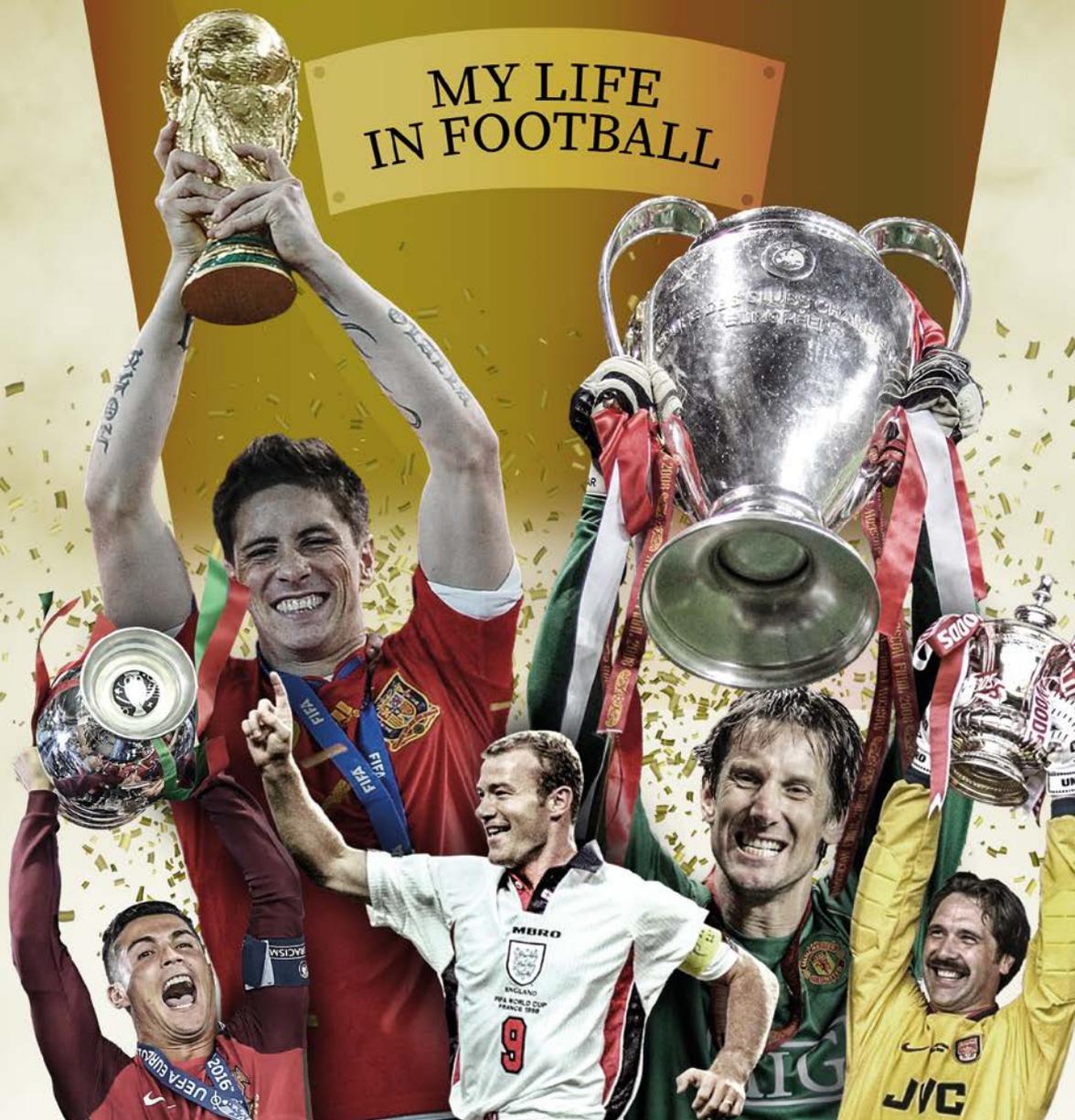


NICK COLLINS

# FIFTY CUP FINALS

MY LIFE  
IN FOOTBALL



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# Foreword

## by Steven Gerrard

**D**URING my career with Liverpool I was lucky enough to win eight cup finals, many of which are featured in this book – so it is a pleasure to be asked to write a short foreword. I did lose a couple of finals to Chelsea (the least said about them the better!) and one to AC Milan in 2007, but for me personally a cup final tended to be a happy experience, none more so than in 2005 when we lifted the Champions League trophy thanks to the Miracle of Istanbul.

The last FA Cup Final in Cardiff in 2006 was another unforgettable experience – another three-all draw after extra time, another amazing win on penalties – scoring twice in that game is a very special memory for me.

Nick Collins became an increasingly familiar figure during my time with England. He was the man with the microphone (and moustache!) in the front row of the press conferences on the day before the game. He interviewed me many times, especially when I was captain, and I found his questions were usually pretty fair. I got the impression he was an England fan and was willing to give the players the benefit of the doubt. Like us, he would look for the positives.

Three times with England I lost in the quarter-finals of a major tournament after a penalty shoot-out. Being interviewed afterwards is never easy, but I did feel Nick managed to keep a sense of perspective. In the mixed zones around the world he was often the first person we would see as we left the dressing rooms to face the massed ranks of the media.

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I was very happy to win 114 England caps, so I can imagine Nick is proud of his achievement of reporting on nearly 300 England games.

Talking of honours, Nick says he's named me third on his list of all-time favourite England players. Thank you – though I am gutted to lose out to Becks and Lamps!

So I wish him luck with *Fifty Cup Finals* – the last 25 years have been a hugely exciting time for our game and I hope we will be able to say the same about the next 25 as well.

# Live on Air When the Axe Fell

**W**ELL, almost! I was live on air at the Sky Sports News studios as a guest on the *Premier League Daily* morning show. Tom White was hosting with ‘Galey’ – my good friend Tony Gale – and George Boateng, when I felt the vibration of the mobile in my back pocket. We were discussing Gareth Southgate’s imminent appointment as the permanent England manager and his potential backroom staff.

It was a good discussion and George provided some valuable insight about Southgate’s early management career at Middlesbrough. Galey, as usual, brought a naturally witty sense of perspective about recent events. At the time I remember thinking, ‘I’m really enjoying this, the concept is working well.’

It seems a little daft now, but I also thought this could be my future at SSN – going on set to reflect on recent events and to put into context exactly what it all meant. My area of expertise was mainly England and the Premier League, but I could cover European stories as well.

When I finished my piece and left the set I checked my phone. There were two missed calls from my line manager Brendan Henry, at 10.23am and four minutes later. Then the phone buzzed again. It was 10.39am and it was Brendan Henry once more.

‘I need to speak to you, Nick. I’ve been calling you – where are you?’

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'I've just come off air,' I said. 'Couldn't you see that from your desk?' He did, after all, sit just a few feet away from where our studio chat had taken place.

'No, I'm over in Sky Central,' he replied. 'We need to have a chat. Come across and up to the second floor. I'm in Area 3.' He hung up.

Sky Central? Area 3? Now I was puzzled, and I was also more than a little concerned. Sky Sports had seemed to be awash with redundancies in recent months, and we knew the cuts would be coming to Sky Sports News soon.

The changes were called 'Transformations' and mapped out Sky Sports' path forward in this digital age. The reality was that the company was struggling to cope with the absolutely vast sum it had paid out for the latest Premier League rights (for 2016 to 2019) – 11 million pounds a game! The perceived wisdom (certainly among many of the Sky Sports staff) was that Sky could have paid a billion pounds less than it bid and still won the rights. That could have safeguarded an awful lot of jobs.

But back to Sky Central. It was a vast building and I had never been inside it before – it was almost like a new world. Looking back, I suppose it is a reflection of the fact that Sky Sports and Sky Sports News are no longer the 'Be All And End All Of Sky'.

The company these days seems to be much more about operating on a lot of different fronts, so that it is no longer as dependent on sports rights (and the Premier League football broadcast rights in particular).

On the way up in the lift I was thinking that, if Brendan was with Sports News boss Andy Cairns, then I was definitely on my way out. Sure enough, when I reached Area 3, there was Brendan and Andy.

I said something like, 'This looks ominous!' Andy replied, 'Yes it is, Nick, it's all bad news I'm afraid.'

For the next two minutes Andy read from a prepared printed sheet and that was it. After a quarter of a century I was being discarded. Redundant at the age of 59. Not a good feeling. I was being put on gardening leave – effective immediately – and my final day was just a month away; 31 December 2016.

Andy and Brendan suggested I go straight home, but I wanted to see out the week. And like all good reporters I needed to go back into the office to do my expenses!

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It had not come as a complete shock. I remember having a chat with some of the reporters in the August after I had got back from covering EURO 2016 and we all felt that our numbers would be reduced. We simply were not filming as many edited reports (or ‘packages’) as we used to, and knew that somewhere down the line there would be cutbacks.

Many of us believed that would happen at the end of the 2016/17 season. We imagined that the 18 London-based reporters would all be interviewed for about 12 available jobs, so we were expecting half a dozen or so redundancies. We just did not expect it to be as ruthless as it turned out.

The walk back over towards the newsroom felt totally strange. My head was full of a thousand thoughts, but priority number one was to appoint a good employment lawyer. I stopped off at the car park and climbed inside my company BMW (while I still had it!), so that I could study the redundancy package in detail – and in private.

On the surface it appeared reasonably generous. My one concern was that it did not take into account the fact that I had been employed by Sky since 1991, but had only been on the staff since 2002.

Back in the newsroom the first person I told was David Miles. ‘Milo’ was also under threat of redundancy and had been appointed the spokesperson for those facing the process. He was a senior producer and a top bloke, with nearly 20 years of service at Sky. His reaction was one of utter astonishment, but then he stunned me by explaining that Tim Abraham (our England cricket reporter), Phil Edwards (our England rugby reporter) and Pete Colley (Sky’s ‘Mr Midlands’) had also all just been made redundant. We learned later that the experienced Peter Staunton and Fraser Robertson had gone as well.

‘This is a crazy day,’ he said, sadly, ‘and I just don’t know what to say.’

‘Nothing to say,’ I shrugged. ‘I reckon the bullet-to-the-back-of-the-head technique they used today is better than the slow drip-drip Chinese water torture treatment you guys are facing.’

Milo and some of his colleagues – including my England producer Gemma Davies – had been under threat of redundancy since early September. Nine jobs were going, with only three replacing them – so

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that meant another six facing the scrapheap, and it would be several months before their fate was finally decided.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Milo and Gemma chose redundancy once their tortuous process had finally played out. I think by then they had just had enough – and I don't blame them.

Sat at a desktop doing my expenses helped to take my mind off what had happened, but word was spreading fast. Many colleagues came over to express their sympathy, surprise and anger. Around 6pm I called it a day, telling the news editor Nick Seymour that I was perfectly willing to come in the following day and talk live with the presenters about Gareth Southgate. His appointment was due to be ratified that next afternoon.

'I'll get back to you on that one,' he said, uncertainly. 'If it was up to me I would say definitely yes, come in.'

'But I'll have to run it past the powers that be, so leave it with me.'

The journey home round the M25 back to Kent was a long and difficult one – in keeping with the day. An accident near junction ten led to huge delays so I had plenty of time to work out how to tell my family that, after 37 years in journalism, I was about to be out of work.

Next morning I found myself pacing up and down, waiting to see if Sky would let me back in to go on set when the Southgate story was due to break.

Complicating the issue slightly was the fact that the papers had got wind of our redundancies. Charles Sale ran a story in his Sports Agenda column in the *Daily Mail*, entitled 'COST-CUTTING AXE FALLS ON SKY FOUR'.

Reproduced below is part of the article – for legal reasons it's perhaps best I make no comment, other than to thank Charlie for what he wrote about me:

'SKY SPORTS' brutal cost-cutting following their £11million-a-match spend on Premier League rights has claimed four more casualties including chief football reporter Nick Collins.

'The moustachioed Collins was best known as Sky Sports News's indefatigable England reporter. Such was his

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standing, he was given the opportunity to ask the England manager five or six questions before anyone else was allowed a turn at TV broadcast interviews. Gareth Southgate's first TV media conference as the newly appointed England boss tomorrow will be a strange affair without the ever-present Collins behind the mic.'

It seemed that no one really wanted to make the decision about my presence one way or the other, but full credit to Nick Seymour. My news editor forced the issue and just after midday he rang to say it was okay for me to come in to the Sky Sports studios.

I arrived at two o'clock and was told I would be able to go live on air that afternoon, once I had spoken with Brendan Henry. I was also informed that I would lead the Southgate news conference at Wembley the next morning. I think Brendan just wanted to make sure I was in the right frame of mind, and in a funny kind of way I almost felt sorry for him.

He was not comfortable with the turn of events, though he had given me a foretaste of what might be to come when I had reported back to Sky after those European Championships. He had informed me that I would not be getting a pay rise for the following year as there was a slight issue with the 'consistency' of my performance. After busting a gut at EURO 2016 I felt office politics might be at play here, so I bit my tongue and said nothing at the time.

Despite all this I felt elated that common sense was allowed to prevail. No way after 25 years at Sky was I going to 'go rogue' live on air and say something inappropriate. There is absolutely no point in feeling bitter, I told myself, because I had been lucky enough to have an amazing career at Sky that spanned three decades – many didn't even last five years!

Once the Southgate appointment was ratified I joined David Garrido and Hayley McQueen on the SSN set to discuss the issues and implications. It turned into a 15-minute interview as (unknown to me) there were a couple of technical issues behind the scenes which forced the running order to be scrapped. We discussed England past, present, and future until the ad break at the top of the hour came to our rescue.

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It was quite an emotional afternoon, because many more colleagues came over to commiserate with me over losing my job – after a while I just did not know what to say to them, other than to offer the hope that there would be no more redundancies – unlikely.

I also went over to Sky Central to do a piece for our counterparts at Sky News about Gareth Southgate. It involved appearing in ‘The Cube’, a futuristic suspended glass studio where Kay Burley was presenting the early-evening news bulletins. It was a slightly strange experience but I must admit I did enjoy it – and I also got a sense of why Kay has remained at the top for so long. As an interviewer she is very sharp and slightly mischievous, but also sympathetic.

My final day of live broadcasting for Sky began early. We were live from outside the Bobby Moore statue at Wembley from 9am, to tee up the day and explain what would happen. It seemed very appropriate that Wembley would be my last on-location job for Sky as I had been there so many times over the previous three decades.

There is always a real sense of anticipation when a new England manager is unveiled. True, Gareth had been caretaker boss for four matches, but now he had a four-year contract with the mandate to take England to the 2018 World Cup and EURO 2020.

We screened the news conference live and I opened proceedings by asking Gareth about his hopes for England, Wayne Rooney’s future and a host of other topics.

To my surprise, when the conference was about to end, Gareth took the mic and said some very kind words about my years covering England. It was a proud and humbling moment, but we had no time to rest on our laurels because there was still a lot of work to do. More filming, several live stand-ups and an edited piece to reflect the day.

My last piece to camera for Sky was filmed beside one of the goals as I explained how Wembley had provided Gareth with the worst moment of his playing career (when he missed a penalty in the semi-final shoot-out with Germany at EURO ’96), but that if everything went according to plan Wembley could also provide him with his best moment as a manager – because this was where the final of EURO 2020 would take place.

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I admit it's a long shot, but when you cover England you have to try and look on the bright side.

After that it was off to the Wembley Hilton for a quick glass of Prosecco and a final goodbye to some of my favourite colleagues. I won't deny this is when it really started to hit home what had happened over the last 24 hours or so.

When you cover England you form great bonds with your colleagues – it is the peak of your profession in my opinion, because it gives you the biggest highs, the biggest lows and the biggest challenges. Those people I have shared tournaments with are, inevitably, the ones I like and respect the most among my Sky Sports workmates.

I kept my emotions hidden but it did feel really sad knowing this might have been the last time I worked with a lot of them. Gemma Davies was a particular case in point. We started working together on England in 2012 and Gem was undoubtedly one of the rising stars of Sky Sports News.

She was an incredibly bright and bubbly girl who just implicitly understood the pressures and rewards of doing the England job. We formed a great bond (some would say an unlikely one), but I think what we both appreciated was that each one could help the other to become better at our respective jobs.

The fact that she also chose to take redundancy in March 2017 was also a bit of an indictment about what had happened. She was precisely the kind of person Sky should have been trying to keep.

The next day the *Daily Mail* again showed an interest in my story. This time a piece appeared with the headline 'BOSS HAILS SKY'S AXED REPORTER'.

'New England manager Gareth Southgate ended his first broadcast media conference at Wembley yesterday with a tribute to Sky Sports News' lead football reporter Nick Collins. Collins has been a familiar figure reporting on England but as Sportsmail was first to reveal on Wednesday, he is being made redundant as part of Sky's cost-cutting. To the applause of the media corps, Southgate said, "On behalf of the FA, I just wanted to acknowledge Nick Collins and the way you've covered the England team. We're grateful for how you've dealt with us – it's been a pleasure personally working with you and we all wish you well."

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As a footnote on a different page in the paper, Charlie Sale also wrote, ‘Nick Collins, the Sky Sports News lead football reporter made redundant this week, was given rather more respect by his TV colleagues at Gareth Southgate’s first broadcast conference as England manager. Collins, who came off gardening leave, asked the opening 14 questions. No one was going to interrupt his England swansong!’

Actually it wasn’t quite my England swansong. A few days later I was back at Sky to record a one-to-one interview with former manager Roy Hodgson – it was the first one he had given to TV since he’d stepped down after EURO 2016. Roy is one of my favourite people in football so it was a great way for me to bow out. He may not have been the most successful of bosses, especially when it came to tournaments, but I can’t think of another who helped me more during his time in the hot seat.

We discussed what went wrong at EURO 2016 and the game against Iceland in Nice. I genuinely hope his England career is not defined by that match, but I fear it might be. We should not forget that he is also responsible for England’s ‘Perfect Ten’, when they won all ten qualifiers (a feat they had never achieved before) on the way to qualifying for the tournament in the first place.

Roy is one of football’s gentlemen. He never forgot how Sky Sports helped him out when he lost his job at Blackburn Rovers and as a result was always very co-operative. There are plenty of others who have been down the same route and aren’t, so I will always have massive respect for him.

On 19 December I attended the Football Association’s Christmas drinks reception at the St Pancras Renaissance Hotel in London and was blown away to receive a framed England shirt, signed by all the players. The inscription at the bottom read:

272 England matches  
11 England managers  
1 Nick Collins  
Thank you

It was the perfect early Christmas present and it hangs in pride of place on my study wall.

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Two days before the new year I dropped off my security pass, company mobile and laptop, as I bade farewell to Sky for the last time. I really did not want to make a big deal of it but it was nice to say goodbye to a couple of the backroom staff – like my boss Andy Cairns’s secretary Dawn Ellis, who had always been very helpful over the years.

Driving away I realised I had plenty to reflect upon: some amazing memories, a whole host of extraordinary events and countless matches from my 25 years at Sky Sports.