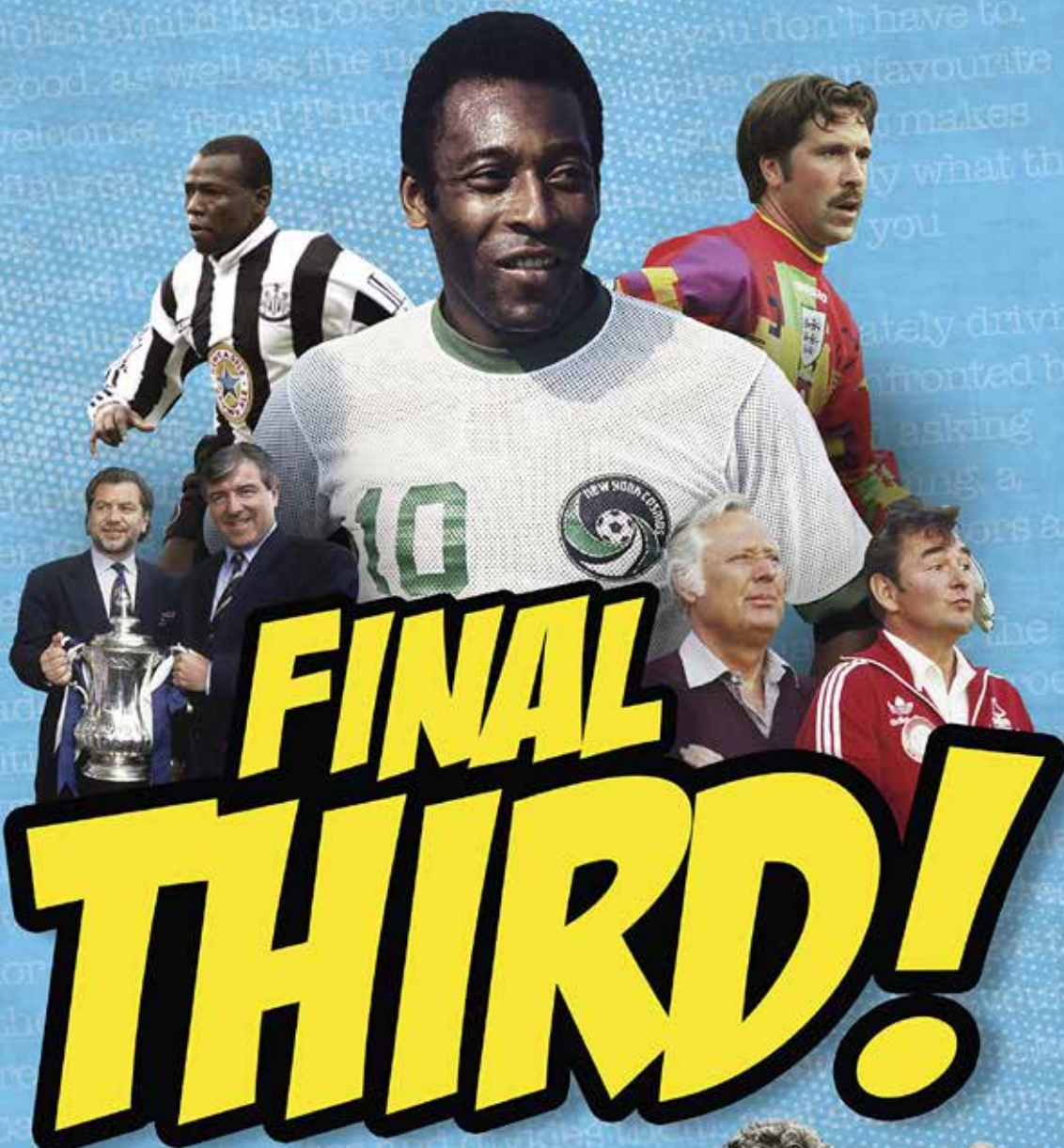


"THIS IS THE IDEAL BOOK FOR FOOTBALL LOVERS,  
FOOTBALLER LOVERS, FOOTBALLERS AND LOVERS.."

ALEX HORNE



# FINAL THIRD!

THE LAST WORD  
ON OUR FOOTBALL  
HEROES

JOHN SMITH



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1.

## Setting Our Stall Out

*'Remote Welsh Station'*

ABOVE ALL other things that we know about footballers, we know that they are, on the whole, sociable creatures. There are very few loners out there. They work in packs and have a special camaraderie, earning the love, loyalty and friendship of team-mates and gaffers galore throughout their career. So, when they put pen to paper for their autobiographies and want a foreword to pep things up a bit and get a sort of stamp of approval, none of them should be struggling to find a willing contributor. Which makes you wonder how some of them end up with what they end up with.

The sort of thing you're looking for is Martin O'Neill saying that his early impressions of Emile Heskey were of a youngster with 'the strength of a titan and the pace of an Olympic sprinter to conjure an incredible performance', or Ossie Ardiles describing Lee Clark as 'my precociously talented midfielder'. Perfect – but as you'll see, such faultless testimonies are few and far between.

One way to guarantee a job well done is to go with a consummate professional, a frequent flyer, a prolific foreword writer from the very top of the tree. If you have the connections and can get either Sir Kenny Dalglish or Sir Alex Ferguson to jot something down for you, you are in safe hands. The pair have such

standing in the game that a foreword from them is like a royal seal of approval or a 'Taste the Difference' label in the supermarket. A guarantee of quality. A mere mention of their names adds gravitas to an autobiography and, the good news is, they are both often happy to oblige.

Dalglish does the honours for the likes of Jamie Carragher, Chris Sutton, John Wark<sup>5</sup> and Nick Tanner, which is good of him considering Tanner admits once trying to chat up Kenny's wife without realising who she was at a Wet, Wet, Wet concert.

For his part, Sir Alex gives a reference for, among others, Paul Parker, Paul Scholes and Graham Poll, of whom he says, 'He has taken some of our big games, and he has been hopeless in some of them!' He is joking here by the way and is very nice elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> but it does open the door to the kind of problems I've hinted at.

Many of those asked to pen a foreword seem to forget what they're there for, either making inappropriate jokes, going off on a tangent or falling into my favourite trap of all – damning with faint praise. For example, the much-missed Jack Charlton, when asked to say something complimentary about Terry Curran, comes up with, 'Whatever else I could write about Terry, I could never take away from him the fact he was a very good footballer for Sheffield Wednesday.' A 'very good' is the least you would hope for on a work appraisal, and why even hint at other, darker things you would like to bring up that might be in the debit column? Just say the nice things.

Arsène Wenger describes Ray Parlour as 'a train who could go at a certain pace – not electric but he could maintain high energy the whole game', which sounds like he's saying he tried hard, when in fact he was brilliant for him for many years. Terry Venables

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5 Among some lovely words about Wark, he plays up his social side and says he 'never went thirsty', which would have no doubt fitted right in with that Liverpool side.

6 Nicier than I'm sure most of us would be, anyway.

was practically a father to Terry Fenwick, dragging him along to almost every club with him, even after he'd retired,<sup>7</sup> but all he can muster is, 'It is fantastic to have stars like Paul Gascoigne and Gary Lineker in your team but you have to have the Fenwicks too. Terry will not attract the public through the turnstiles or lift a game with a touch of genius but he is just as important.' These are both nice in their own way, I suppose, but neither of them are getting carried away are they? Still, it could be worse, Kevin Keegan says of prematurely bald midfielder David Armstrong, 'He just looked old.' We were all thinking it, but just keep it to yourself, Kev. Indoors voice.

Asked to say something positive about Ted MacDougall, Lawrie McMenemy can't quite manage it. Instead, he offers up an anecdote about an intolerant Ted throwing a boot across a room at a young Southampton player who hadn't passed to him at a vital moment. Maybe he means it shows something about the high standards he demanded from those around him, but if there's something positive in there, it's buried pretty deep under the unpleasantness from MacDougall.

Mick McCarthy is, as you might expect, a lot more straightforward, writing for Rodger Wylde that 'I didn't like him', 'actually, I couldn't stand him' and 'I took an instant dislike' to him. He qualifies it by saying he's tongue in cheek, that he didn't like strikers generally and Wylde played for Wednesday while Mick was at Barnsley, but still, this is laying it on a bit thick.

Henrik Larsson makes a better fist of things for Chris Sutton<sup>8</sup> as he starts to talk about 'a very special time for both of us in our careers' at Celtic and says he missed him when he moved to Barcelona. He goes on to say that, 'I had a fantastic time at Barcelona and played in a brilliant team, but I think it would have

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7 Not Barcelona though. That would have been silly.

8 Sutton goes for a kind of Greatest Hits montage with foreword tributes from a number of people.

been even better for me if Chris was beside me. But that just wasn't possible.' The unwritten, unspoken reasoning here is, of course, that Chris might not have been good enough to go to Barcelona and compete for a place with the likes of Samuel Eto'o at that point, but at least Henrik is too polite to say it.

Matt Le Tissier spends a decent chunk of his book being very critical of former Southampton manager Ian Branfoot, so it's only fair, if slightly unusual, that he gives him something of a right to reply in the foreword. Branfoot comes up with, 'You have to ask why didn't the top managers take Matt? Great players play for great clubs. I never had too many enquiries about him when I was manager,' and just about manages to say, 'I liked Matt as a person, there are a lot worse than him around,' while questioning his work rate and commitment. It's odd that Le Tissier goes for this approach rather than find one of many people that would surely have just said what a wonderful player he was and talked about all those incredible goals, but it's hardly the strangest thing he's done, so we'll overlook it.

The best that Lou Macari can find to say about his Manchester United team-mate Gordon Hill is that he 'loved Norman Wisdom and would do the impression up to twenty times a day', and you can almost hear his teeth grinding as he's writing it. Meanwhile, asked to say a few words for his trophy-laden goalkeeper Andy Goram, Walter Smith appears to be reeling that he managed to be friends with Brian Laudrup while at the club: 'One looked like a Hollywood A-list star and the other had teeth like condemned buildings! They were an odd couple.'

Walter also offers a word for former Rangers winger Davie Wilson's autobiography and, instead of praising him personally, he goes with honesty and says, 'My favourite player was Jimmy Millar as I liked the way he played.' Maybe he should have written something for Jimmy Millar instead then. 'Most folk back then probably preferred Baxter, Willie Henderson or Davie Wilson, but

Jimmy was the man for me,' Walter repeats, in case anyone wasn't sure where his childhood loyalties lay.

Howard Kendall does something similar in Kevin Sheedy's book, saying, 'If I hadn't been able to bring Neville Southall to Everton then Kevin Sheedy would rate as my best ever signing.' He claims that he cannot offer higher praise than that, but it definitely feels like he could. Saying someone is your second-best signing, by definition, leaves a bit of room for at least slightly higher praise. The thing is, he used a similar 'second-best signing behind Nev' line about Pat Van Den Hauwe for his foreword. Southall must love it and be constantly blushing when he dips into the memoirs of his team-mates, but it shows that Kendall shouldn't have been trusted with a foreword. For Mark Ward's harrowing tale of his time in prison on drug charges, Howard jokes, 'By pure coincidence, I had just finished watching an episode of the TV police series *The Bill* when Mark's publisher phoned me at home and asked if I would contribute this foreword. How timely!', which might not have been what Wardy was after.

Some players dip into first-hand anecdotes for their foreword, which gives it the personal touch, even if it doesn't necessarily show the subject in the most positive light. Alan Hansen's foreword for Steve Nicol is littered with good-natured pops at him with the centrepiece being a fancy-dress competition on a Scandinavian cruise the pair went on with their wives. Apparently, Nicol got the wrong end of the stick and arrived as a woman in a 'pale green dress carrying a Budweiser', only to realise it was a kids' competition. Hansen never reveals who Nicol was supposed to be in his outfit,<sup>9</sup> but describes the incident as 'absolutely sensational' and claims, 'I've never seen anyone look more dejected in his life.' This is quite something considering that Nicol was the nearest defender to Michael Thomas when he broke Liverpool hearts at Anfield in

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<sup>9</sup> Marge Simpson maybe, but that doesn't explain the Budweiser. Perhaps it was a Duff.



1989. Surely Nicol was more dejected at that point, if only because he'd possibly lined up the same green outfit for the suddenly off-the-cards title celebrations afterwards.

Mark Hughes takes on foreword duties for another Welsh legend Mickey Thomas. Thomas was a star at Manchester United when Sparky was making his way as an apprentice and starts off well by saying, 'Mickey was definitely an inspiration to me at that time in my life.' However, he goes on to say that the indelible impression Mickey left on him was during a lift back to North Wales one day after training. A clearly still traumatised Hughes says, 'I'm thinking I'm going to be dropped at my mum's just outside Wrexham ... But no. Mickey dropped me off at some remote Welsh station that was on his route home to Mochdre. I had to wait on the platform for three hours for a train to get home.' This sounds like what is known in the trade as 'a shit lift' from Mickey, and not the grounds for a gushing foreword.

Bob Wilson was not only a fine goalkeeper, he was also a consummate broadcaster, so you would think he would be just the man for a well-placed word. However, in writing for his good friend Bobby Gould he musters up the following: 'Bobby Moore, Sir Bobby Charlton, Bobby Gould ... ask for the achievements and great feats of these three footballers and you would immediately remember the brilliance of two of them and maybe struggle with the third.'

This seems a bit harsh as there really aren't many who would match up to those two and throwing Gould under the bus just because his name is also Bobby seems a bit harsh. It's like comparing Zinedine Ferhat<sup>10</sup> to Zinedine Zidane, in a book by Zinedine Ferhat. Wilson didn't even give Gould the chance to get his own back by talking about much better goalkeepers in the foreword to his own book – instead he pressed the showbiz chum button and

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<sup>10</sup> Yes, I looked him up. What of it?

got Michael Parkinson to do it. Whether that paid off or not you can judge for yourselves, but he trots out that old chestnut ‘you don’t have to be barmy to be a goalkeeper, but it sure helps’, and I think we can all do better.<sup>11</sup>

Other showbiz buddies to lend a hand include:

Adrian Chiles for Steve Hunt

‘He already had an air of mystery, devilment and the downright exotic about him.’

John Bishop for Dietmar Hamann

‘One, I am not Didi Hamann’s friend; and two, I spent years watching Didi play and if the foreword of a book is like the literary equivalent of a prematch warm-up, I have decided to act as Didi did in every game I saw him warm up for, by putting in no effort whatsoever.’

Ray Winstone for Frank McAvennie

‘Frank the fuck who?’

Dennis ‘Stay Lucky’ Waterman also did the honours for Alan Hudson, possibly even writing and singing him a theme tune for the audiobook version. So, as you can see, it’s a mixed bag of jokes, half-truths and genuine praise.

The good thing about asking someone from outside the world of football to step in is that they are less likely to make it all about them, as one or two fellow pros do. Phil Brown for example, writes something for Dean Windass and dwells on whether he did the right thing bringing such a favoured son back to Hull or not. He says that such a signing ‘could be a threat’ to lesser gaffers but concludes, ‘I was fully confident in my own ability as a manager and as I felt he was the right man for our team then it was a no brainer.’ A ‘no-brainer’ tends to mean a decision taken without needing to

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<sup>11</sup> Emu was right, IMHO.

give it much thought, Phil. The time he spends ruminating on it in the foreword to the player he signed suggests it took a bit more thought than that.

Similarly single-minded is Kenny Sansom who is asked to give a few words to Vince Hilaire's excellent if unimaginatively titled, *Vince*. Sansom skips lightly over Vince himself with a dig about his clothes before dwelling on that fabled 'Team of the Eighties' Palace side and how 'people say that when I left it all fell apart', setting the story straight about how he never really wanted to leave Palace for Arsenal and calling Terry Venables 'a fibber' for saying he did. It feels like he's gone a bit off track here, and it's not like he doesn't discuss such things in full in his own book. Somebody should have reminded him that the book was about Vince Hilaire. To be fair to Vince, he called it *Vince* – he could hardly have been clearer.

Among Chris Sutton's many foreword contributors is former Norwich manager Mike Walker and, given that he takes references from a few different people, including the aforementioned Kenny Dalglish and Henrik Larsson, maybe he could have left this one out. Walker seizes the chance for self-justification, saying about his move to Everton, 'I was accused of being greedy by people at Norwich. It wasn't about money.' He goes on to detail how his contract was running down, the chairman didn't sort it and then the same chairman walked all over his successor John Deehan, leading to Norwich's relegation. You see, it's easy to get sucked in. Even I'm doing it now. None of this has anything to do with Chris Sutton. Maybe it is easy to go off-piste with these things. Your mind runs away from you.

By far my favourite foreword flight of fancy, however, comes from Harry Redknapp. The nation's sweetheart was called upon to introduce Kerry Dixon's autobiography, despite never managing him, playing with him, or even playing against him as far as I can tell. Harry opens up with, 'Kerry Dixon was a great goalscorer, a really good centre forward.' So far so good. However, then it takes

quite a turn. He bemoans the fact that a ‘huge influx of players from overseas’ has left Chelsea, and teams in general, with players that aren’t familiar with a club’s heritage, saying, ‘Half of them don’t know what happened five years ago, let alone the real history,’ before boiling up to, ‘If you talked about Arsenal’s Double-winning team of 1971, or Kerry Dixon at Chelsea, they wouldn’t have a clue. They come in, they play, and they move on in a few years.’ This is astonishing ‘man to move away from at a bus stop’ stuff from Harry. Nobody asked about this, not here anyway. What is supposed to be a few kind words about Kerry Dixon turns into a rant about the modern game and the bloody foreigners. Extraordinary stuff. Still, at least what we can say is that Harry Redknapp never signed a single foreign player in his entire career on principle.

Maybe Kerry should have written his own foreword, like Ian St John did. St John uses his to rant about Gérard Houllier and the row that they had. It was a row that had completely passed me by but clearly had an impact on The Saint, who goes so far as to say that Houllier ‘contributed to the mood that provoked me to write this book’. That’s nice. Always good to have spite as your motivation when writing.

The final word on forewords here goes to John Sitton, the former Leyton Orient manager and star of a particularly entertaining or distressing (depending on your point of view) documentary in the mid-nineties. It’s a subject that Sitton speaks about at length in his book, telling how it left him ostracised by the football community. Perhaps because of that, but hopefully through his own choice, Sitton decides against including a foreword, saying simply, ‘Who the fuck’s going to write one?’ Well take your pick from anyone mentioned in this chapter, John. Or on second thoughts, maybe you’re right.