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England's Football Rebel,
NEIL FRANKLIN

BY JOHN LEONARD



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BIRTH OF A REBEL LEADER

ANY football team needs its talisman, needs its leader. Decades even before ecstatic England fans celebrated as the consummate, calm, classy, professional leader Bobby Moore lifted the World Cup, they thought such a leader was already born. In the aftermath of war, Stoke City and England fans' appetite for the return of competitive football had been whetted by the emergence of a rising star, a young defender holding his own with the legendary figure of Stanley Matthews. Neil Franklin was identified as England's future talisman, a stylish leader to help guarantee international football glory for years to come.

Instead, Neil Franklin ended up as the de facto leader of a bunch of British football rebels prepared to turn their backs on club and country, angry young men apparently going to desperate lengths to secure their financial future. Of these, Franklin, the most high-profile star to rebel, also turned out to be the most vocal and the angriest.

From an amateur hopeful in the mid-thirties, Franklin had broken into the professional ranks at Stoke City during the wartime years, then eventually came to the attention of England selectors when playing in wartime internationals. He looked forward to competitive action with relish. In the opinion of many, Neil Franklin could look forward to a long and fruitful career with club and country. To their horror, he turned out to be the leader of a gang of

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mercenary football rebels, unlawfully plying their trade in Colombia.

So just who was this emerging superstar, a young man destined to become one of English football's most infamous rebels? Cornelius Franklin was born in Stoke-on-Trent on 24 January 1922, one of eight children growing up in the Shelton district of the city. His father worked in the local gasworks, his mother staying at home to look after her large family. Neither parent was particularly interested in sport, doing little to encourage their children as they enjoyed kickabouts with their friends using tin cans, rag balls and just from time to time a proper football. He described his young self in his autobiography, *Soccer at Home and Abroad*, as a 'healthy kid, who liked to play'. But he didn't think he was anything special.

All that changed, as with so many sports stars, with the intervention of his games master at school. Neil Franklin went to the Cannon Street School in the largest of the Potteries' six towns, Hanley. He left, aged 14, with few qualifications but, thanks to the guidance of his teacher, Arthur Tams, with a reputation as one of the most promising young footballers in Staffordshire. He had played for both Hanley schools and Stoke-on-Trent schools, but curiously neither of the local professional clubs, Stoke City or Port Vale, came calling at the Franklin household in Shelton.

As far as his mentor Arthur Tams was concerned this was a clear oversight. He encouraged his protégé to approach Stoke City directly, asking for a place on the club's ground staff. Stoke's manager, Bob McGrory, turned him down, the first blow in what would eventually develop into a fractious relationship between the two men. McGrory explained he had enough young players on his ground staff. Neil Franklin, a future England international, was deemed surplus to requirements.

Reflecting on his initial rejection, Franklin had no complaints. 'There can be no criticism of Stoke's decision

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not to engage me on their ground staff, and my future rise to fame does not affect the case,' he wrote. 'It was impossible to take any more lads on the payroll, so the club had to turn me down.'

Thanks to the persistence of Tams, McGrory did partially relent by offering an amateur contract. Franklin accepted. It meant he still had to find a job. Once again, his old teacher proved to be his guardian angel.

Tams went behind the back of McGrory to approach one of the Stoke City directors, David Duddell, the owner of a brickworks in the Potteries. Duddell, whose son would later become the Stoke chairman, offered the aspiring footballer an office job, little knowing at the time it was to prove to be the best but most troubled signing either ever made.

Franklin commented, 'This was a wonderful arrangement for me because Mr Duddell was a great Stoke fanatic. In fact, the entire Duddell family was, so I was able to work hard in a footballing atmosphere and carry on my soccer playing as a Stoke City amateur.'

Initially, he was confined to playing with the third team, and did so with a string of promising other players from the Stoke schools programme run by Arthur Tams. Many would become first-team regulars in the post-war years, players capable of challenging for the league title. As Franklin put it, in tribute to the club's recruitment of teenage players, 'a player who signed for a transfer fee was a rarity at Stoke'.

Meantime they all buckled down hoping for a breakthrough, Franklin praying the club's manager Bob McGrory would relent and offer him a professional contract. As he had impressed his coaches, Harry Cooper and Stan Clough, a member of Stoke City's staff killed during the Second World War, the offer of a professional contract was eventually forthcoming. On his 17th birthday in January 1939 he was summoned to McGrory's office and offered a professional contract.

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Bizarrely, Franklin wanted to accept a part-time contract. He was intent on keeping his job with the Duddell family, a fall-back position just in case a career in professional football failed to work out for him. McGrory turned him down flat. 'Neil, we want you to become a professional player, and as far as we are concerned it is full time or nothing,' McGrory told him. On this occasion Franklin did not argue. The disputes would come later.

He looked forward to a professional football career. Along with the rest of the nation, he knew war was looming. 'I realised that I was on the threshold of a career that would crash any day,' he mournfully reflected. He also realised he was lucky. He was young enough to enjoy a fruitful career once the war was over. On being called up to join the services, in his case the Royal Air Force, he did not see combat, and was still encouraged to play football. It was the policy of the War Office to encourage professional footballers to carry on playing, to do what they did best, thereby providing entertainment for the mass ranks of troops and the civilian population.

Though remaining on the books of Stoke City, Franklin found himself in Blackpool, stationed with the RAF. Among his fellow recruits there was Stanley Matthews. As a consequence, they were seconded to playing for the seaside town's club, Matthews a guaranteed box office draw even in wartime. Franklin, a raw and inexperienced player, struggled to get a game for them.

Once again he was grateful to a mentor. On leaving school, it was his PE teacher. This time he was grateful to an RAF Physical Training Instructor for taking him under his metaphorical wing. Willie MacFadyen, a centre-forward with Motherwell and Huddersfield, told him to go back to the Potteries to fetch his boots. He was to play in a Blackpool 'services' team, ostensibly the professional club's reserve side, alongside him and Stanley Mortensen, another future England star.

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Against the backdrop of war, Franklin's career rapidly progressed. A switch from the RAF base outside Blackpool to a military garrison in Hereford gave him the opportunity to go back to Stoke for weekend games. Bob McGrory finally gave him his first-team chance, albeit in a side naturally shorn of its star players.

He also came to the attention of the RAF selectors. To supplement the wartime friendly leagues, there was a series of matches between representative sides: the army, the navy and the RAF. Young Franklin began to impress. Sports writers began to speculate that he might become the future England centre-half, something the player himself dismissed given that the international captain, Stan Cullis of Wolverhampton Wanderers, was firmly ensconced in the position.

His big break, in his words his 'lucky break', came courtesy of a Potteries derby between Stoke City and Port Vale on 18 November 1944. He lined up in a Stoke team, almost at full strength, to take on their local rivals. Matthews and the England centre-forward, Freddie Steele, both laced up their boots to make a rare wartime appearance together in the red and white stripes of Stoke City. An England selector turned up to watch them. Franklin, though, caught his eye in a 2-0 victory for the Potters. From the now defunct *News Chronicle*, correspondent Arthur Shrive wrote, 'Franklin is undoubtedly the finest young centre-half-back in the country, and it cannot be long before the FA selectors recognise his merit.'

Recognition came in the form of a telegram to Stoke's opponents Coventry City for a league game at Highfield Road on 2 December 1944. It read, 'McGrory, Stoke manager, c/o Coventry City Football Club. Franklin selected play at Bradford next Saturday, kindly telephone me Sunday morning – Rous, Football Association.'

He was selected to play for an FA XI against an army team, packed full of internationals. To his surprise, with the

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first-choice England centre-half, Stan Cullis, unavailable because he had been posted abroad, he was not picked as centre-half. Instead, he played in midfield, a late call-up to cover for his Stoke City team-mate, Frank Soo, who had been given compassionate leave. Soo's brother Ronald, who served in a Lancaster bomber squadron, had recently been killed in a bombing mission over Germany.

The circumstances of Franklin's first call-up for representative honours were tragic. Franklin merely states he was a 'last minute substitute' for Soo. When it came to a replacement for Stoke's mercurial midfielder, the first non-white player to pull on an England football jersey, Franklin dryly noted, 'Happily enough they [the selectors] looked in my direction.'

Franklin, who as a schoolboy played in attack, was not bothered by being played out of position. He was just delighted to receive his first honour as a senior footballer. By calling up someone making his name as a defender and putting him in midfield it was also recognition by Sir Stanley Rous and his panel of international selectors of this promising young player's all-round skills and cultured style of football.

Franklin described the game itself on Saturday, 9 December 1944 at Bradford Park Avenue's ground as 'disappointing', a 1-1 draw contested on an icy pitch, which these days would be deemed unplayable. He acquitted himself reasonably well, viewed by some sports writers present as a star of the future. Another call-up for an FA XI came in the following January, this time in a 6-4 defeat to his companions from the RAF, Franklin among those on the scoresheet. Surely a full international call-up would be forthcoming? It came for a wartime international against Scotland at Villa Park on 5 February 1945.

No caps were awarded for this wartime international, but for Franklin it remained a great honour, not just for him but

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his hometown club, Stoke City. His famous team-mate Stanley Matthews and Frank Soo, Stoke's pre-war captain, also earned call-ups. Soo became the first non-white footballer to represent England. Franklin described Matthews and Soo taking charge of him and helping to calm his nerves. Matthews, the superstar footballer of the day, even took him to the Scottish team hotel on the eve of the game for a soiree with their opponents.

More than 66,000 spectators crammed into Birmingham's Villa Park, a thousand of them wounded soldiers allocated seats for free. They witnessed a 3-2 England victory; Franklin fearing he had not done himself justice. 'As I walked off the field, I began to wonder whether this would be my first and last appearance for England,' he later commented. He had no need to worry. Football correspondents in the national press wrote approving reviews; the FA selectors agreed with them.

Only the *Daily Mirror* offered any criticism, blaming him for Scotland's second goal, a back header allowing the Scottish centre-forward Jack Dodds through on goal to equalise. But overall, it concluded the debutant English centre-half had done well. The *Daily Mail* commented he did 'a difficult job with success'. The *News Chronicle's* Arthur Shriver believed he did 'nothing spectacular but was steady and reliable'.

Making the short trip to Birmingham, the Coventry *Evening Telegraph's* man felt Franklin's inclusion was 'justified', noting he rarely lost Scotland's 'bustling' Dodds. For the *Daily Telegraph*, 'Franklin, Brown and [Stan] Mortensen, England's newcomers played themselves into the national side for Hampden', the reverse fixture being played in Glasgow a few months later.

Franklin was duly called up, his place in England's line-up assured. Pundits of the day deemed him a worthy successor to Stan Cullis, who was on his way into management with his club, Wolverhampton Wanderers. Prior to the fixture at Hampden Park, Franklin went on a brief tour of Belgium with

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a combined services team, one led by another player about to go into management, Matt Busby.

The irascible Scotsman took a shine to the young lad from the Potteries, offering him advice he would never forget. 'Just remember Neil,' he told him, 'keep playing football at all times and you'll never go far wrong.' In other words, stick to your cultured style of playing the beautiful game, rather than resorting to thuggery as was so common in the day.

Franklin later commented, in admiration of the man who became a managerial legend, 'Those words should be the motto of all young players and were so typical of a great player, great sportsman and great personality like Matt Busby.'

The trip also included a match for a Football Association XI against the Belgium national side, not an international, but Franklin's inclusion in the team gave him a strong hint that the selectors viewed him as their new England centre-half. For the record, the FA's centre-forward for the match, Tommy Lawton of Everton, helped himself to a hat-trick in a 3-2 victory.

Prior to the game Franklin was able to put his new-found fame to good use, cheekily writing to the commanding officer of his brother Harry's army unit, urging him to give his sibling a leave pass. They had not seen each other since the start of the war and wanted to meet up at the game against Belgium. To his delight and surprise, the commanding officer agreed, a gesture the Franklin brothers acknowledged as remarkably generous.

A fortnight after the Belgian excursion Franklin lined up for his very first ever international appearance for England against Scotland at Hampden Park, a severe test of temperament for any young player. A buoyant crowd of 133,000, baying metaphorically for English blood, fell silent before the game in memory of the American President, Franklin D Roosevelt, who'd recently died. Once the whistle went for the kick-off, wartime alliances were put to one side. On the football pitch

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usual hostilities were reconvened between the two 'auld' enemies.

Scottish debutant Tommy Bogan was carried off with only a minute played after colliding with the England goalkeeper Frank Swift. It incensed the crowd, their mood darkening further as the ten remaining men of Scotland capitulated in a 6-1 defeat. Franklin commented that the Hampden crowd had to be 'seen and most certainly heard' to be believed.

On the eve of England's final home international of the season against Wales, Franklin firmly ensconced in the side, VE Day came, victory in Europe declared. 'Naturally, we had a tremendous celebration,' Franklin remembered. It included stripping out their hotel's blackout blinds, and ensuring its floodlights were switched on for the celebrating crowds on the street outside.

For the English players the celebrations continued with a fortuitous 3-2 victory over Wales at Ninian Park in Cardiff. Much to the embarrassment of Franklin and his fellow defenders the man of the match happened to be their goalkeeper, Bill Williams. His antics between the sticks gained as much attention as Raich Carter scoring a hat-trick up front. Yet despite defensive frailties in the English defence, Franklin's place in the side was safe.

He could not believe his luck. On being selected to play for the first time for England at Wembley he commented, 'In those hectic days there was hardly any close season. I could hardly believe that I had played my first international on February 3rd and within three and a half months here I was turning out for the fifth time.' The game against France ended in a 2-2 draw.

Even missing a penalty for a combined services team against the Irish League did little to dent Franklin's rising fortunes. 'I had always believed that a player should never miss from the spot and I had often voiced my belief,' Franklin

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embarrassingly explained. 'So, I had to hang my head in shame when their Irish goalkeeper saved my kick and we went on to lose 1-0.'

As the England players gathered at Croydon Airport to fly out to Switzerland, the young Stoke City player considered himself as something of a veteran. He was also about to taste defeat for the first time at international level.

Much to the players' relief they were instructed to leave their service uniforms at home. The Swiss FA had reminded the FA's boss Sir Stanley Rous that Switzerland was a neutral country and Britain was still at war with Japan in the Far East. Army, air force or naval uniforms were not to be worn. 'How happy we were to forget our uniforms for a time,' Franklin reflected.

Thousands of Swiss fans turned out to greet the England team on arrival at Zurich Airport. Their enthusiasm left the man from the Potteries stunned. He commented, 'I got my first insight into how seriously the continentals take their sport.' For their first game in Berne Franklin wished he had never played. It was stifling hot and England lost.

He pointed to three factors contributing to the 3-1 defeat: firstly the heat, secondly Switzerland, at the time, being England's bogey team and thirdly his opponents' flexible tactics, especially his opposite number being given the freedom to roam the field.

English football operated a rigid tactical system at the time, stubbornly and arrogantly holding on to it until the mid-fifties. Players held fixed positions, a pair of full-backs, a centre-half, a pair of midfielders known as out-halves, a pair of wingers, a pair of inside-forwards and a centre-forward. There was no flexibility.

Only when, first, a team of American amateurs knocked England out of the World Cup in 1950, and then, three years later, the fabled Hungarian team, the Mighty Magyars,

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humiliated them at Wembley in a 6-3 victory did any delusional notions of automatic English superiority come to an end. For both those games Franklin's name was absent from the team sheet, his international career infamously by then at an end.

In the summer of 1945, Franklin appeared to have a bright future ahead of him. He was an established England international playing in all the remaining 'Victory Internationals'. These included defeat to Scotland, 1-0 at Hampden Park, and in May 1946 a revenge victory over Switzerland, 4-1 at Stamford Bridge. Then came the first setback of his international career.

For the game against France in Paris, Franklin was dropped. Stan Cullis had been on active duty with the army in Italy. With the war in Europe now over he became available for selection, his plans for retirement from playing the game put on hold. Cullis was handed back the England number 5 shirt for a forthcoming international against France in Paris, Franklin selected for an RAF team to tour Scandinavia.

He had no complaints. For Cullis, he had the utmost respect. However, on reporting for England duty, Cullis was declared unfit. It left the FA haggling with the RAF for the services of young Franklin. It was agreed he could play for England in Paris before meeting up with the RAF team in Scandinavia. Franklin probably wished he had gone straight to Oslo. England lost 2-1.

Immediately after the game, Franklin and Matthews, along with Bert Brown and George Hardwick, donned their RAF uniforms to fly out to Norway. The RAF tour of the summer of 1946 was to be their last as service personnel. With war at an end, players looked forward to returning to their clubs and the resumption of competitive league football.

Yet in Franklin's case there had already been the first signs of unrest, a hint of his rebellious streak. Along with his teammate Frank Soo, he seemed none too keen to return to Stoke

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City, despite it being his boyhood club. As the 1945/46 season began, they had quite remarkably put in a request to play for Stoke's Potteries rivals Port Vale.

Soo's case attracted more headlines than his young England team-mate Franklin. Soo was the bigger star, the club's captain at the outbreak of war. He, like Matthews and Franklin, was a true local hero. All three clashed with Stoke's manager Bob McGrory. Matthews had done so before the war but backed down, withdrawing a transfer request. Now, Soo actively agitated for a move, fans alarmed their rising star Franklin might follow suit.

Not just at the Victoria Ground in Stoke, but at grounds across the country fans were flocking to grounds in tens of thousands, the beautiful game seeming more popular than ever. Even with war over, austerity remained in place. Football proved the perfect escape. As gates bulged so did club finances. But the strict, archaic and time-honoured restrictive method of paying players remained in place. The maximum wage tied players to their clubs, unable to move freely, subject to the whims of chairmen and managers.

Given the popularity of the game and burgeoning finances, player unrest seemed inevitable. It began bizarrely with Frank Soo and his young accomplice cocking a snook at their club Stoke City with the bombshell request to play for Port Vale.