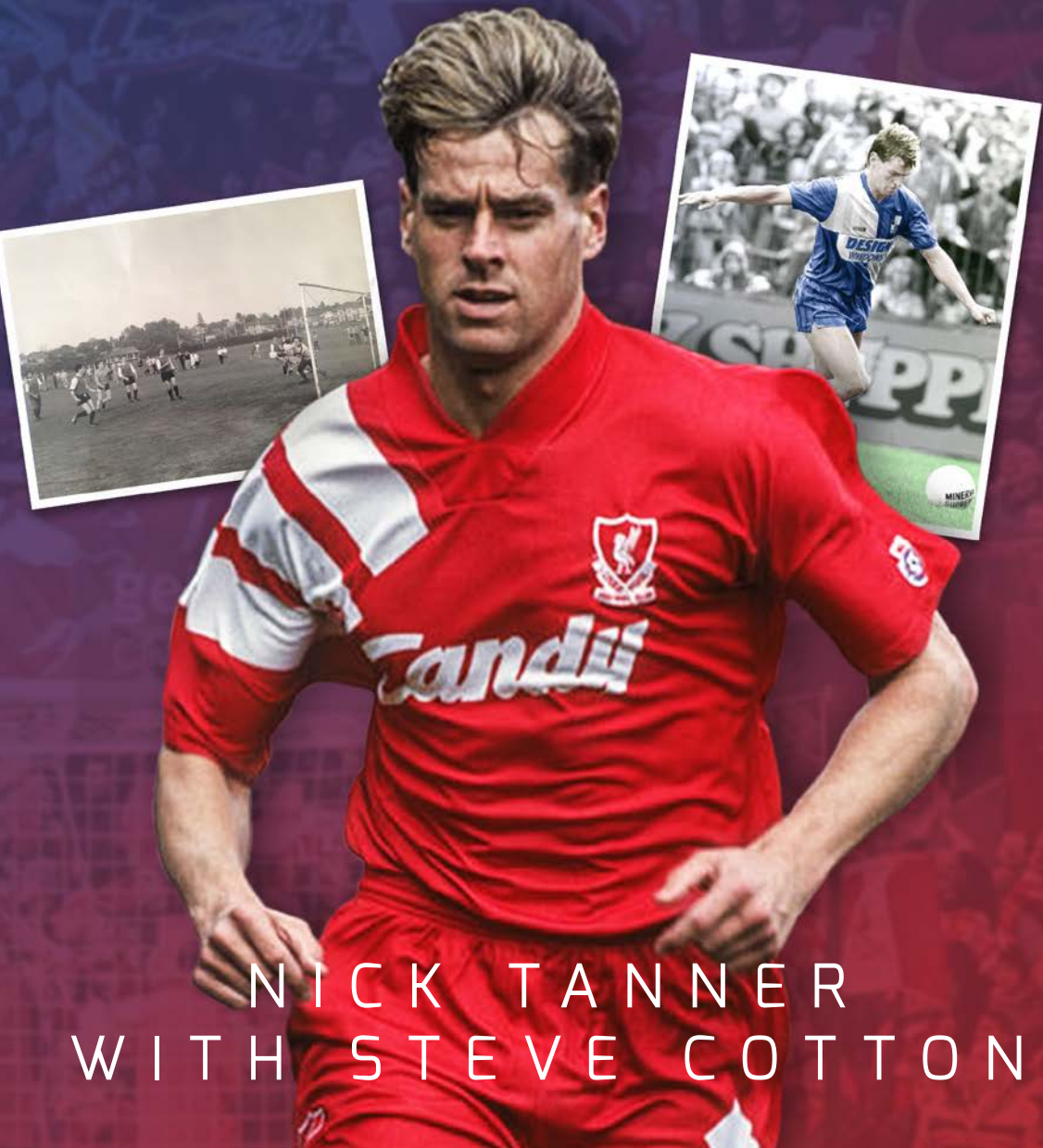


FROM A FIELD TO **ANFIELD**

A Real Grassroots to
Professional Footballer's Story



NICK TANNER
WITH STEVE COTTON

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Prologue

‘There’s a chap called Kenny on the phone’

AS personal turning points go, the summer of 1988 could hardly have been bigger. I had made my name at my hometown club, Bristol Rovers, in what was then the Third Division, and they had offered me another year’s contract on the same money. For a lot of players that would have been straightforward: same cash, hometown club, playing in the first team at the age of 23 – ‘Where do I sign?’ I didn’t really get on with the manager, Gerry Francis, though, so I started to look elsewhere.

Torquay United came in with an offer of £10,000, which Rovers seemed to accept without a great deal of hesitation, and I soon found myself in conversation with Torquay’s manager, the former Tottenham Hotspur and England left-back Cyril Knowles, who got straight to the point. I was a single lad back then – and Cyril knew that, so he tried to play on that to tempt me down to Devon. ‘Come and live down on the English Riviera, son,’ he told me. ‘There are loads of young female students here. They’ll be right up your street. You’ll love it down here.’ I have to admit, it did sound good and I was very tempted, even though Torquay

were in the old Fourth Division and it would have meant dropping a league.

It was a serious offer, and I was still giving it some proper thought – with Cyril’s words fresh in my mind – when the phone rang at my parents’ house. I was still living with them at that point and my parents weren’t into football at all, so when my mum, Mary, answered the phone she certainly didn’t recognise the famous voice on the end of the line. She told my dad, Dennis, to get me and he shouted up to me, ‘Nick, there’s a chap called Kenny on the phone for you.’

That was in the days of having one phone in the house, with no mobiles or anything like that, so all I was worried about when the phone rang was that somebody might be ringing up to have a moan about something I had done when I was out drinking, or that some girl’s father was ringing to ask why his daughter had got in at three in the morning. But the phone was passed to me and when I heard the voice on the other end of the line, I naturally assumed it was one of the Rovers lads taking the piss.

‘Kenny Dalglish here,’ went the Scottish voice. ‘I want to sign you for Liverpool.’

Of course I didn’t believe him at first. I knew Liverpool had been watching one of my team-mates, Gary Penrice, but I had no idea they held any interest whatsoever in signing me. These days, if a club such as Liverpool were watching a lad at a club such as Rovers, it would be all over social media, agents would be talking, and the player would be well aware of the interest.

Quite literally the first I knew of Liverpool being keen on me, though, was when the manager – the great Kenny Dalglish – rang my parents’ house and told me he wanted me to sign for the champions. Three years earlier, I had just quit my job at British Aerospace to join Rovers full-time from Mangotsfield United, and now I was on the phone to Kenny, with a choice to make: Torquay or Liverpool? The discussion soon turned to money and of course there was no agent on the scene to do my negotiating for me.

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I was quoted in the *Western Daily Press* a few days later as saying, ‘It certainly hasn’t trebled my wages at Rovers as some people have suggested.’ I wish it had – and so did my dad. Kenny asked how much I wanted. I was on £220 a week at Rovers and being daft I wondered if he would stretch to £300. ‘Of course, Nick...of course,’ came the reply. I was more than happy with that and could not wait to tell my dad the good news, but the significance of what was happening didn’t really mean too much to him at first. In fact, his initial response was, ‘What are they paying you, son?’

Being a hard worker himself, he always knew the value of every pound. So when I said that I was moving up two divisions, and moving away from home, for an extra £80 a week, he was furious. ‘You should have asked for more. Ring that Kenny fella back and tell him you need more,’ he said. So I did – I nervously picked the phone up, rang him back and asked if I could have £330 a week.

‘Aye, I think we can stretch to that,’ came the reply. I thanked Kenny and put down the phone. I turned to my old man, beaming, and proudly told him I had managed to wangle an extra 30 quid out of the Liverpool manager. He shook his head. ‘You should have asked for more,’ he said. I just looked at him and told him, ‘Well, I’m not ringing him back again!’

Not that money was my dominant thought when the manager of the reigning champions had just phoned me and asked me to sign for him. I had got it in my head that I would be dropping a division from the old third to the fourth – and yet, here I was a few days later, about to join the champions. It had taken me little more than three years to go from Mangotsfield to Liverpool, a jump of seven divisions.

The worst part was having to ring back Cyril – who sadly died a few years later – at Torquay and say I had chosen the team that had won the league the year before over the team that had finished fifth in the old Fourth Division! He was fantastic about it – I suppose he had to be – and wished me all the luck in the world. He briefly tried again to convince me to sign for Torquay,

dangling the carrot of those Scandinavian students, and telling me I would play every week for him but wouldn't get a game at Anfield. But then he said, 'I'm only joking, kid. Go for it – enjoy every minute at Liverpool.'

Liverpool ended up paying £20,000 for me – double the fee Rovers had agreed with Torquay – but as Kenny explained, with an offer of £10,000 on the table, Gerry Francis had asked him for £12,000, and he just agreed to pay them a bit extra. After all, what was the risk for Liverpool in forking out a few extra grand? A few weeks later, they brought Ian Rush back to the club for £2.8m.

My friends were stunned when I told them what was going on. They knew I would probably be leaving Rovers that summer and I had mentioned to one of the lads, John Smart, that Torquay was a likely destination. He said something like, 'That would be great, because we can come down for a few weekends on the piss.' He knew I wasn't entirely comfortable with dropping a division but he made the point that at least I would be playing every Saturday and it would be a decent place to live.

So when I called him the next day, to tell him I was actually signing for someone in the First Division, he naturally didn't believe me. 'Well, who is it then?' he asked. 'I can't tell you in case it doesn't go through,' I replied, 'but it should be in the paper tomorrow – all I can say is that they're in the top half.' He rang me back a few minutes later, having checked the league table, and said, 'I've worked out who it is. You're going to Wimbledon with Bobby Gould, you prick!'

Of course, the next day it was all over the papers that I was going to Liverpool, so I rang him back and said, 'Now who's the prick?!' We both burst out laughing and I am not at all surprised he didn't believe me, because I don't think many people, least of all me. When I went up to sign, my Rovers team-mate Andy Reece went up with me. We had not long got back from a holiday in Crete with one of our other Rovers team-mates, Ian Weston, and we drove up and got changed in the motorway services before

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Liverpool. We put on our shirts and ties and must have looked like a couple of defendants headed for the magistrates’ court. We drove into Anfield in my recently-purchased Ford XR3i and it was like a scene from *Only Fools and Horses*.



Andy Reece recalls, ‘We had just got back from a week on holiday when Nick rang me and said, “What are you doing tomorrow?” “Nothing,” I said. “Why?” “Well, Liverpool are signing me. I’m going up tomorrow to sign the contract. How do you fancy coming with me?” Obviously, I thought I had misheard him, or that he was messing about. But Nick was insistent. “Tans, don’t be fucking stupid,” I said. “Just pick me up and we’ll have a day out somewhere.”

‘The next day, he arrived to pick me up and again said we were going to Anfield. I was still saying, “Tans! Come on! Stop messing around! Where are we going? Let’s just have a day out.” He kept driving and driving and driving and we stopped at the services on the M6 – I think it was Knutsford – and got changed. Nick was still adamant we were going to Anfield, and, when he came off the M6 in the direction of Liverpool, I was thinking, “He’s taking the piss here. What’s he up to?” But he wouldn’t let it drop. As he pulled into the car park at Anfield, I thought, “Bloody hell, he’s taking this joke way too far now.” We got out of the car and walked into the reception, and he gave his name to the lady on the desk, who told him they had been expecting him. At this point, I was thinking, “What?”

‘The next thing I know, Ron Yeats came down the stairs and asked Nick how he was doing and what the journey was like. That was when the penny dropped and I actually believed him, “Fucking hell, this is real!” Ron Yeats said, “Come on up, Kenny Dalglish is waiting,” and up we went to see the man whose side had just won the title. We had a day there, I went to Nick’s medical, and the rest is history. When Nick was having his medical, I actually asked

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Kenny if he needed a central midfielder. “I need a better one than you, son!” he said. He also told me I was too old. I was only 25!



The extent of the medical was hardly the kind of top-level stuff you see today when a big club signs a player: I just had to kneel on a chair with my leg down, so they could test my knee, and do a few basic things like that. I was thinking ‘Is this it?’ because I was expecting something a bit more thorough than a few stretches. They took my blood pressure, and a few things like that, but it was essentially a case of, ‘Oh, you’re fine.’

While all this was going on, I could hear Reecey in the background, trying to persuade Kenny to sign him as well as part of the deal. ‘I reckon I could do a job for you,’ I heard him say. Unfortunately for Reecey, Kenny was happy enough with his existing midfield options going into the 1988/89 season. The medical was done, I signed my first contract with Liverpool there and then, and that was that. From Mangotsfield to Liverpool in little more than three years: the journey from a field to Anfield was complete.

1

You never know who's watching

IF you were to tell a 20-year-old lad playing for Mangotsfield United today that, not even four years from now, he could have made more than 100 appearances for Bristol Rovers and be signed by Liverpool – or whichever team happen to be the champions of England – he would probably tell you: a) that it simply couldn't happen, and b) to stop taking the piss.

In fairness, if you had told the 20-year-old me in 1985 that I would be signing for Liverpool little more than three years down the line, with more than 100 appearances for my hometown club under my belt, I would have given you a similar response. But one thing that held me in good stead, from the first time I kicked a ball to the last, was that I always gave everything. That might sound like something of a lazy cliché – the dedicated but limited player who somehow scrapped his way up the pyramid, from non-league to Premier League, squeezing out every last ounce and drop of his ability – but in my case it is absolutely true.

When I had to admit defeat in my battle with a back problem, and retire from the professional game at Liverpool in 1994 aged 28, I ended up back in Bristol and started managing teams on the

local non-league scene, including a stint back at Mangotsfield. The one thing that annoyed and frustrated me more than anything else in that period was unreliable players, or lads who couldn't, wouldn't or didn't give their best all the time. Bear with me on this one, but mobile phones have ruined non-league management for a lot of people, because before everyone had a mobile, you could rely on lads to turn up for training on time and to do the same on a Saturday. You would say, 'If you're not at training on Tuesday, you're not playing at the weekend.' I can remember being told that: if you don't train, you don't play. It was simple enough, fair enough, and you respected it as a rule.

After training on a Tuesday, the lads would ask what time we were meeting for the game on Saturday – if it was away from home – and we would be told 'the coach leaves at 11 o'clock, usual place, don't be late' or whatever it was. The majority of the time, everyone would be there without any problems and off you would go. That was certainly the case when I first played men's football – for Frampton Rangers, Avon St Philips and Mangotsfield. Someone might be a bit late for a home game once in a while, so one of the lads would be sent to the nearest phone box to ring his house, and would invariably be told by his wife, 'He's already left, he should be with you soon.' You hoped for his sake that he was, and that we hadn't dropped him in it when he was really spending the afternoon in bed with a woman from work or something. On the whole, you knew lads would turn up and be ready to play.

By the time everyone had a mobile phone, and then social media came along, what started to happen was that lads would skip the odd training session, because they could just drop you a text with some bullshit excuse. No face-to-face contact, no picking up the phone, no guilt, just a quick sentence typed out on the phone and that was that.

Sometimes they would go out on a Friday night, too, thinking you couldn't see them, but then you would check your own phone on the Saturday morning and pictures of them out on the piss

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would appear. No one could accuse these lads of being the sharpest tools in the box. You would get a text an hour or two later, saying, 'I can't play today, I've got a bad stomach,' and I'd text them back a picture of themselves bollocksed from the night before, saying, 'No wonder you've got a bad stomach, you were still on the piss at 3am.'

I always had a laugh as a manager but I always wanted the good players to maximise their potential, just as I had done. I used to say to them, 'Look what happened to me. Every time you go out on the pitch, if you try, there is a chance someone will be watching; a scout or a manager could be walking his dog or something, you just never know who is going to be there at any given time.'

I am a prime example of how that can happen. Even before Ron Yeats had been at Twerton Park in May 1988 to watch a late-season Third Division game between our Bristol Rovers side, who narrowly missed out on the play-offs, and promotion-chasing Walsall, I must have done something to catch Rovers' eye while at Mangotsfield. Before that, I had done enough to go from Frampton Rangers in the Gloucestershire County League to Mangotsfield in the Western League, so it has always been a real bugbear of mine when talented non-league players, or talented players in general, do not make the most of their ability or simply do not always put in the effort.

When I was first managing a club – the now-defunct Almondsbury Town in the Hellenic League – we quite literally had no budget, which as you can imagine severely limited our options when it came to finding players. We had trained one evening and were walking back to the changing rooms from the artificial pitch and the youth team were playing on the main pitch. I stood there for ten minutes and watched this lad, Marcus Mapstone, who clearly had a bit about him. I said to the chairman, Bob Jenkins, 'He looks all right, doesn't he?' We watched him a bit more, and he was putting himself about, winning tackles and headers, and showing he could play, so I said, 'He can come with us on Saturday.'

Bob looked at me as if I was mad. 'What? With the first team?' 'Yeah, why not?' I said.

We didn't have a reserve team, or if we did, they were playing in district division 25, with a load of fat ale-house players. I was chatting to Marcus's dad after the game, and he told me the lad was barely 16, but he came with us for the next first-team game and he did well. We put him in the middle, so if he made a mistake someone could cover him, and sometimes you have got to take a bit of a gamble and know where to play them. He might not have gone on to play in the Football League, but he had a decent career in non-league football in and around Bristol, and my point is that he didn't know the first-team manager was watching that evening. Had he just stood around with a cigar out, I might have walked past and never noticed him. You don't even need talent to try your best – but if you do it in every match and every training session you never know where it might take you.

Pubs and bars across the country are full of the 'coulda, woulda, shoulda' brigade, who will tell you until they are blue in the face that they could have done this, that and the other, and that they were better than this player and that player. They throw all the ifs and buts in the world at you – had it not been for this injury or that bit of misfortune they would have made it to the top. I have heard it myself countless times, from lads who reckon they were better than me, and – yes, sometimes they might have had more ability – but it's not all about pure talent; I put in the effort to get where I ended up. 'I can't believe you played for Liverpool,' one lad I played against years ago in non-league told me once. I shrugged my shoulders and said, 'Yeah, but I did.' What else am I supposed to do? Feel sorry for him that he did not get the same breaks?

I played in games where lads who were supposedly the most talented players in Bristol sat down on the halfway line and sulked because things weren't going their way in the game. Attitude is incredibly important, as I came to realise at all stages of my career,

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from non-league to the Third Division to the Premier League and then when I was back managing locally in non-league.

Even at the time I went to Bristol Rovers, I heard people say I only ended up there because they had no money and they got a few of us in from Mangotsfield on the cheap. That's fine, and maybe there was some truth in that, and getting picked up by Rovers from the Western League was one bit of luck I had. But was it luck again that I went to Liverpool? Again, maybe, but I must have had something for Ron Yeats to spot me, watch me and recommend me, and for Kenny Dalglish to sign me. I worked my bollocks off, too. Someone said to me once, 'You're one of the worst players who ever played for Liverpool,' and I said, 'I played more than 50 times for them, though, so it really doesn't make any difference to me what you think.'



Phil Purnell recalls, 'People have asked whether I was surprised when Liverpool came in for Nick, and I suppose you are always going to be a little bit taken aback when the champions of the day sign a lad you have grown up with and played alongside. But a massive club like that would have had a very clear idea of what they looked for in a player – and they saw a bloke who was playing out of position on the left wing but could also play across the back four or in central midfield. He was 6ft 2in, strongly built, could kick equally well with both feet, and could get up and down the line all day, because of his athleticism – and when you have all of those attributes, that ticks a lot of boxes.'

'If they can then get him for a price that, in the context of their budget even back then, was a drop in the ocean, it is no risk for a club like that to take him on. They had a great tradition of taking players from the lower divisions and turning them into first-team regulars, and they clearly liked what they saw in Nick. The fact Nick and Gary Penrice went on to play in the Premier League, only a few years after playing for Mangotsfield in the Western

League, should show every young footballer the importance of not throwing in the towel at 16 or 17 if you don't get taken on by a professional club.'



It doesn't bother me what anyone says about me – they are free to say what they want – but sit down and speak to me and listen to how I ended up in that red shirt or even in that blue-and-white quartered shirt before it. People are entitled to their opinion but I will always stick up, and speak up, for myself, because I know how hard I worked to get where I did.

Am I really one of the worst players to have played for Liverpool? Well, there are three things about that: if I am, then it wasn't my fault Kenny signed me and picked me, or that Graeme Souness then kept picking me and gave me a new contract. I was just trying to get on with playing football, and ask yourself this: Would you turn down those opportunities if they were happening to you? The second thing I have to ask is did you even see me play? One bloke came up to me at one of the shows I put on with Liverpool legends, and said, 'I can't believe you're still making money out of the game and out of Liverpool's name – you only played a handful of games and you weren't even any good.' When I pressed him, he told me he had never even seen me play. 'Oh,' he said. 'I've just heard you weren't very good.'

The third thing about this is that I was playing on the left of the Bristol Rovers midfield when Liverpool chose to sign me. I had never played centre-half in my life, at least not regularly. That was Liverpool's decision to put me there. In my three years at Rovers, I only played once in central defence, when Vaughan Jones and I played there together at Wigan Athletic. We had a nightmare that day and Bobby Gould said he would never play me there again!

Which other players played as many games as I did for Liverpool out of position? It was not that long ago when I found a poll on a social media site, which was posted by some attention-seeking

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journalist whose name I forget, asking his followers to vote on who was Liverpool's worst ever centre-back pairing. Worst ever. The club has been around since 1892 and spent a fair bit of that time outside the top division. The options in this poll included Martin Škrtel and Dejan Lovren, who were coming in for plenty of stick at the time; Phil Babb, Steve Staunton and someone else, who by definition were a trio rather than a pair; and me and Mark Wright. We had the lowest share of the vote, but that post was like a red rag to a bull.

In the 1991/92 season, when I played the majority of my games for Liverpool, Wrighty and I played together 19 times and lost two of them. We won away at Tottenham and beat Arsenal and Manchester United at Anfield. In those 19 games, we kept eight clean sheets and the team conceded 14 goals. What probably didn't help was that in the opening two games of the following season, we lost two high-profile games: 4-3 because of Eric Cantona's brilliance in the Charity Shield against Leeds United and then 1-0 at Nottingham Forest in the first televised Sky Sports Premier League game. These were games that were seen by a lot of people. Overall, though, mine and Wrighty's record together as a centre-back partnership doesn't stack up too badly.



Mike Marsh recalls, 'Where Nick is concerned, there is a bit of football snobbery knocking about, and I think he has probably been caught up in that. He became a regular in the Liverpool team immediately after people like Alan Hansen and Gary Gillespie – first-class footballers – having been brought into the club as a £20,000 punt from Bristol Rovers. He might not have been the most exotic name, but he was given an opportunity and he took it.'



In my career, I went from Mangotsfield to Rovers to Liverpool, and yes, that could have been Mangotsfield to Rovers to Torquay had

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things panned out slightly differently that summer, but they didn't. My cards fell in the way they did partly through good fortune, of course, but mainly because I put myself in a position to make the most of my ability.

Plus it's not as if I ever cost a club much: Liverpool paid £20,000 for my services in a summer when they spent £3.4m in total, while Rovers picked me up as part of a deal that cost them a couple of floodlight bulbs. You can say whatever you like about me, but I think I always provided hard work and effort – two ingredients that, if lacking, can end a lot of talented players' careers before they even really get started.