



HUGGING STRANGERS

The Frequent Lows and Occasional Highs
of Football Fandom

JON BERRY

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Chapter 1

I am not saved and I savour the smell of football

ON BOXING Day 1963 my Uncle Lou took me to West Brom. It was my first game. I was ten.

It was one of the most famous days in football, which, for those of you who may not know, did actually exist before the Premier League came along to save us all in 1992. All the games kicked off at three o'clock and here are the results:

Blackpool 1	Chelsea 5
Burnley 6	Manchester United 1
Fulham 10	Ipswich 1
Leicester 2	Everton 0
Liverpool 6	Stoke 1
Nottingham Forest 3	Sheffield United 3

Hugging Strangers

Sheff. Wednesday 3	Bolton 0
West Brom 4	Tottenham 4
West Ham 2	Blackburn 8
Wolves 3	Aston Villa 3

Sixty-three goals in ten games, watched by a total of just over 293,000 people. There was a standing joke in the days when players happily trained on suet pudding and cigarettes that games around Christmas were always affected by possible over-indulgence on their part. The results on Boxing Day might indicate that there was some truth in this. The corresponding fixtures also took place during the holiday period and so it happened that two days afterwards, Saturday the 28th, the same matches (almost, as will be revealed) yielded another 36 goals in ten games. Ipswich exacted a degree of revenge for their double-figure spanking, but Blackburn, despite remaining top of the table, had clearly shot their bolt during their jaunt in the capital and contrived to lose at home to West Ham. Liverpool, who didn't play on the 28th, eventually won the league. They will resurface in this chapter.

Of the 20 clubs who featured on Boxing Day, half, at the time of writing, play in the Premier League. Four clubs currently in the top flight were plying their trade in the third and fourth tiers of English football in the winter of 1963/64: Palace, Watford and Bournemouth in the third, Brighton in the fourth. The First Division consisted of 22 clubs in 1963. So, ten games on Boxing

Day, ten on the 28th, but the eventual champions (and Stoke) didn't play the reverse fixture. Which two clubs are missing from the list?

Arsenal, obviously. And, maybe not so obviously, Birmingham City.

Let's be clear here. As I wrote to my cousin on the death of my Uncle Lou, I knew exactly what his father was up to. Some years earlier I had, for reasons which are hard to fathom, declared that I was a Blues supporter. My mother was recently widowed, and I had two older sisters who couldn't care less about football. I was alone and unguided in the world of affiliation. My Uncle Lou was trying to save me. I always give him a little nod when I visit his grave.

The game at the Albion was a cracker. Eight goals, a crowd of over 37,000, two goals from the legendary Jimmy Greaves. On a gloomy, cold winter's day, the floodlights were on well before half-time. This is exactly how you're supposed to fall in love with football. And I did. I wanted more.

I went home and told my mother how much I'd enjoyed it and that I wanted to go again. To see the Blues. This now requires some explanation.

I was ten years old and I had no one to go with. Uncle Lou had given salvation his best shot but he had a family of his own to attend to. My sisters liked hairdos, rock and roll and boys, and even though they were as supportive as any older siblings might be, there were some steps that were demonstrably too far. But

the past is definitely a different country. I possessed an encyclopaedic knowledge of all bus routes around south Birmingham and was lucky to have lived in an age when ten-year-olds were given an independence and freedom which seems eye-wateringly liberal by contemporary standards.

So off I went on 28 December to watch the Blues play the Arsenal. I've done as much research as I can but none of it has revealed with absolute certainty what any of this cost. What has lodged in my memory is that a child's fare from King's Heath to the top of Bradford Street was three old pence (1p), and I'm practically certain that entrance to the ground was one shilling and six pence (7½p) for a junior. I base this latter calculation on the fact that I distinctly recall from later visits to go and watch Blues' reserves (yep!) that the entrance was nine pence. So the whole lot was about 10p or two shillings.

Notwithstanding my bus knowledge, I wasn't entirely sure where to get off but was spared any anxiety by the fact that most of the passengers were bound for the same place as me. I travelled on the top of the number 50 which could have afforded me a view of the landscape – most of it pretty familiar until we passed Moseley Village – had it not been for the fact that it was against the law for anyone to clean the windows on buses in those days and, naturally, the top deck was reserved for smokers, most of whom went to it with tremendous will and determination. I sat in the fug

among the hackers, waited for when they all got off and followed the flow.

I wasn't quite sure where I was going but felt entirely safe. It's probably almost impossible for a modern reader to imagine that a ten-year-old boy on his own in such a situation would not have evinced some interest, but these were different days. As an example, as I passed the various pubs (terra completely incognita as far as I was concerned) there were, as there would have been at any given time on any given day, kids sat on steps with either a bottle of pop or a packet of crisps. I'm not sure when things changed, but the spilling over into the streets of pub patrons was unknown and so kids were, literally, parked on steps while dads, and occasionally mums, went inside. Given that I have spent a significant proportion of my adult life on licensed premises, it is, perhaps, something of a surprise that the interiors of such places were then as mysterious and unknown to me as the chambers of the city of Atlantis. In short, kids were everywhere and unsupervised; nobody paid them much attention. There might be something to be said for it.

Although I lived in relatively genteel King's Heath, I was no stranger to some of the city's coarser quarters. For reasons that I've explained in other publications, I went to primary school in Balsall Heath. Even though I was blithely unaware of it at the time, this was at the heart of one of the poorest parts of the city which, even by the early 1960s, still bore the scars of

wartime bombing on top of what was already desperate slumland. So the walk up the Coventry Road, under Brockhouse Bridge and up to the ground – which any old rough calculation now tells me I’ve done around a thousand times – made no impact on me whatsoever. Nowadays, my season ticket at St Andrew’s is close to the assembled away supporters who dirge out with tedious regularity the observation that Birmingham’s a shithole and they want to go home – a reflection made, it seems, by all such followings everywhere. Well, two thoughts. First, it’s true that we’re not stuck in some dull gentrified suburb or imprisoned in a sterile Lego box in a retail park on a distant ring road. Second – call this a shithole? You should have seen it 20 years after the Nazis bombed it and successive governments treated the people who lived here as expendable factory or cannon fodder. I’ll give you shithole.

All of which is by way of saying that the walk up to St Andrew’s through inner-city poverty was dominated by the sole thought that I was, at last, going to see the Blues. Nothing else mattered.

The crowd funnelled through gates at the top of the hill into the Spion Kop entrance. I was a well-read ten-year-old, highly versed in the ways of the football annual. I could read the words – well, the letters – but I had no idea how to squeeze some meaning from them. Spy On Cop? If you already know the origin, as I now do, then it’s all a bit obvious, but to save you the bother of googling it, the naming of Kops at football grounds

originated from the battle of Spion Kop in the second Boer War in 1900, fought on a steep hillside near Ladysmith in South Africa. When the Blues moved to St Andrew's in 1906, local people were invited to use their domestic rubbish as ballast and landfill on which the structure was developed. The weariness of the metaphor of being built on garbage has stood the test of time.

Up to this point I had been unwittingly shepherded by the momentum of the crowd, but once through the turnstiles there were decisions to be made. In front of me stood the imposing hill built on the landfill of the residents of Bordesley and even though some chose to turn left or right, I took my chances on the steep stairs right in front of me which seemed the most popular choice. At the top I could look down and see the pitch and so made my way down the still relatively empty terracing and found a spot some 12 rows back from the low brick wall which separated the concrete steps from the pitch. In the decades that followed, I spent two or three seasons watching from behind the goal at the Tilton Road end and bought my first season ticket as an adult in the rug-and-thermos Main Stand where my stepfather (not around in 1963) sat. But, basically, on 28 December 1963, I made my way down the Kop and stood between the halfway line and the Railway End and I've been there on and off for the last 56 years.

Occasionally, when watching the grainy, jerky footage of football from that era, I can genuinely feel

and recall some of what it was like. One thing, however, will not and cannot be reproduced. The smell.

It's entirely true that football, even in its sanitised version in the second decade of the 21st century, still has its distinctive aroma. Flash, modern arenas have often dispensed with the irresistible salmonella wagons that should line the streets to grounds and, thank goodness, toilet facilities have improved beyond measure. Smoking has largely been eradicated from grounds (although, venture to the toilets in the away end at half-time lest you think the ban unbreachable) and modern hygiene reduces, but doesn't eliminate, your chances of being forcibly snuggled next to a rank sweatball. Nonetheless, there remains a smell to football – beer, sweat, onions, masculinity. Yet even at its worst, and it's an oddity that in the digital age of artificial intelligence we can't yet record smell in order to make comparisons, the modern ground would smell like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon when likened to its 1960s counterpart.

First, of course, was the fact that it was compulsory to smoke. As if the tobacco fug were not enough, St Andrew's backs on to a railway line, which in those days meant steam, which, in its turn, was belched out in great gouts over the lowly stand at one end of the ground. Then there were onions and fat emanating from kiosks in and around the ground. It was a smell with which I was familiar enough, having encountered it in the city centre which was dotted with small stalls selling

curious meat products. It wasn't until I discovered the anaesthetising effects of alcohol on the desires of the palate years later that I ventured anywhere near such foodstuffs, so unremittingly vile was the stench. And hovering over this cocktail of fragrance was piss. Piss merits a special mention.

There were 23,239 people in attendance that day which, in a stadium built mainly for standing, rendered it much less than half full. I mention this because football has constructed any number of tales of crowds being so dense that, unable to move, spectators urinated into rolled-up newspapers or into the pocket of the poor unfortunate in front of them as an act of necessity. It may have taken place somewhere, but I never witnessed it. But piss there was – and plenty of it. That was because at the top of the Kop stood any number of blokes who were pissing against the corrugated iron wall from where their emissions streamed downwards in a steady flow. I remember being somewhat flummoxed by this. Surely there must have been properly designated pissing places? Yes. Over there. Under the scoreboard. Gents. Why was nobody pissing there? Where they should be.

As my life has moved on, I've found myself pissing in some pretty carefully constructed temporary urinals. At fun runs and festivals, fairly primitive but functional structures require gentlemen to piss into channels fashioned from cheap, plastic guttering. There's the odd bit of splish and splash and occasional leakage from carelessly fashioned joints (on the guttering, that is)

but it's OK. It's not hugely pleasant but it does the job. Compared to the Gents in the corner of the Kop at St Andrew's in 1963, such places are like the porcelain-tiled privies of the spa rooms in Versailles. Rather than splodge into the officially sanctioned lavatory facilities, many chose to take their chances on the top of the Kop.

Along with the smoke, the steam, the curious meats and the piss was the smell of men. There were some women and a few girls but watching football was very much a male pursuit. In all honesty, I couldn't tell you that I thought the smell of men was particularly awful but it was definitely distinctive. Clothing was heavy, voluminous and often went for days unchanged in an era when the notion of using a washing machine once a day – if you had one – was unthinkable. Attention to fine personal hygiene was a thing of the future and one bath a week was the norm for most people in an age of greedy immersion heaters. We probably all hummed a bit and so what with all the other contributory pongs, going to football had its own very special bouquet which I encountered for the first time on that day.

The teams emerged. Both were wearing strips that bear a remarkable resemblance to the official first-team kits they wear today. In the days prior to football shirts being marketing opportunities, teams only changed if there was a genuine clash of colours. Magentas, lavenders and lemons were all shades of an unimagined future: teams wore red, blue or white unless they were Norwich or Plymouth. So out came the Blues in blue

shirts, white shorts and white stockings. Yes, stockings. For that was the official nomenclature for socks in those days. The Arsenal (supporters of a certain age will always use the definite article when describing them) wore their classic red shirts with white sleeves. They were not title contenders and finished seventh in the league that year, which is about where they had been for the previous few seasons, trailing in the wake of their North London neighbours and the powerhouses of Ipswich and Burnley. They endured a few further seasons of mid-table anonymity – a status which I then didn't appreciate I would rarely enjoy as a Blues supporter – before emerging in the 1970s as regular trophy winners. But in 1963, they were no great shakes.

On a dull, cold afternoon on a half-full, piss-drenched, stinky Spion Kop I watched with, I would like to think, a sense of prescient foreboding of the decades to come, as the Arsenal breezed to a 4-1 victory. I can't check all the fine details because the wonderful 11v11 website, which has sucked away so many of my evenings and on which this book is heavily reliant for factual accuracy, lists neither the Birmingham team nor its solitary goalscorer. Another source reveals that it was Alex Harley – and, yes, you might have thought I'd remember the scorer of the first Birmingham goal I witnessed. The details of the Arsenal line-up and their scorers are there in full. That must be telling us something.

At half-time one of the mysteries of life was revealed to me. I had seen something that had always puzzled me when assiduously studying my beloved football annuals. Forming the background to the photo of the leaping centre-forward – looking, to modern eyes, as though he was 47 if he was a day – were large capital letters on the perimeter of the pitch. I had no idea what they were for. Then, at half-time, numbers, which clearly corresponded to football scores, were slotted next to the letters. At that point, I realised that the large capital letters corresponded to other fixtures being played and that to know what was going on you needed to have purchased a programme. Just to make it entirely clear to anyone under the age of 30 reading this, I'll try not to shout – this was the only way you knew what else was going on. At the end of the game the new-fangled transistor radio would come into play and as we trudged back down the hill to the bus stop, you could huddle next to the plutocrat with such a device pinned to his ear should you feel the need to do so.

One result, however, would be known. As you were leaving the ground, everyone, but everyone, knew how the Villa had got on. Via the transistor radio or, on occasion, via the public address system (he only announced it if they'd lost), you'd know. I'll return to both subjects – the Villa and finding out results – later on.

So my first visit to St Andrew's ended in defeat. Among the many new experiences of the day was the numb frozenness of my feet by the end of the game.

It took some time for the blood to flow as I made my way under the Jeff Hall scoreboard, past the Augean stables of the Gents and back to the number 50s lined up in their numbers in the days when the bus was the principal form of transport for most supporters. I have friends, about whom I do worry, who can tell you exactly how many defeats they've seen, how often we've lost against various teams and the number of grounds where they've seen us beaten. I admit that it's not much of a boast to say that I can't do that, but I'm not quite so obsessive. And, to be analytically honest, it was probably best that my watching career set the tone for the future as it did.

I can't say with any certainty where I absorbed the notion that you stick with your team through thin and thinner, although it is fair to say that the caricature of the perennially pessimistic, unimpressed Brummie has its basis in hundreds, if not thousands, of Birmingham people I know. Anyhow, I acquired it. I knew you had to stick at it. I'm not sure whether my mother was waiting for my homecoming with the sort of fractious anxiety that in later parental life characterised my own restless sleep prior to late-night teenage return, but she merely asked how the Blues had got on and fed me. I asked if I could go again next week – it was an FA Cup game – and she agreed.

I want to tell you it was better. I want to tell myself it was better. We were playing Port Vale. At home. They were in the Fourth Division.

Birmingham City 1, Port Vale 2. Foggy. Smokey. At one point, steam from the railway, along with the fog, obscured the whole thing. Cold. Piss. Stinky. And, just so the point is not lost, the FA Cup was a big, big thing. If it's an ill wind that blows no one any good, then one of the few consolations was that my widowed mother with three children to keep was blissfully unaware of the damage that I was about to inflict on myself for the rest of my life and so when I came home to relay this most shocking of results, I'm delighted to say – even more so in retrospect – that it had no impact on her whatsoever.

If what happened in the two games that I first witnessed was typically ominous, the events of the next few weeks established a pattern with which I became only too familiar. Having been beaten at home by Port Vale, the Blues went to Old Trafford on the following Saturday and beat the mighty Manchester United, 2-1. Once again, it's worth making the point that the first you'd have known about this was the teleprinter laboriously typing out the result on the TV at about 4.45. To a ten-year-old in 1964, Old Trafford was about as accessible as the moon and so one could only, literally, imagine what such an event could have been like. I was both overjoyed and somewhat miffed: I'd been lumbered with two miserable, cold defeats. Why couldn't I have witnessed the good stuff? Still, I supported a team that could beat Manchester United away. That had to be a good thing. Didn't it?

In the next ten games, Birmingham City managed two draws and cemented their place in the bottom two places assigned for those teams to be relegated to the Second Division. I wasn't allowed to go to every home game, but in the middle of this dismal run I was charged with taking my eight-year-old cousin to a game, what with me being such an old hand at it and all that. I didn't like him. He was snively and didn't really want to come and Blues lost 2-1 to Sheffield Wednesday. Any faint hint of joy was a distant chimera and even two months into my active supporting career, I was beginning to get the hang of how to endure low expectations, leavened only by moments and episodes of unexpected delirium.

There was the possibility of just one such moment on Saturday, 28 March when, after 15 minutes or so, we were 3-1 up against Chelsea. We went on to lose 4-3 but, in many ways, that's not the interesting part of the story. That Saturday was during Easter weekend and on the following Monday we played the reviled neighbours on their own patch. Going to Villa Park, which later became a routine part of my weekend, was a two-bus job (50 into town, 39 out) and so just a step too far for my mum to give her permission. Astonishingly we won, 3-0, and then – and I checked all of this very carefully – we played them again the next day at St Andrew's and drew 3-3. Just the three matches in four days, then. It would have been nice to think that the three points

(two for a win, one for a draw – as it was until 1981) gleaned from our neighbours gave us some sort of buffer against impending relegation. It did not, of course. In the succeeding three matches we conceded ten goals without reply, losing all of them. And so, in my very first season, I encountered the football supporting scenario that came to typify my allegiance to Birmingham City. It's April, the evenings have lengthened and the chill air has softened a little. And Blues go into the final week of the season with their fate – promotion or relegation – in the balance and, usually, with the odds stacked against them.

The club most frequently relegated from the various divisions is Notts County. Days before I wrote this, they experienced catastrophic demotion from the Football League, their 17th experience of such failure. Along with their 13 promotions they outdo Blues in terms of yo-yoism but for promotion to, and relegation from, the first flight of English football, we are matchless, having achieved both feats on 12 occasions. Since that fateful day in December 1963, there have been seven such relegations along with a further two from the second to third tiers, and eight promotions. So that's 17 seasons out of 55 where movement between divisions took place. On 12 occasions, survival or promotion was ensured in the final game. In the last six years alone, survival from the second tier was achieved on the last day and so when you stir in five appearances (one successful) in the play-offs since 1999, it's easy to

see why the rites of spring around the B9 postcode tend to be rather fraught.

On 17 April West Ham beat Birmingham City 5-0, leaving the latter bottom but one in the table and three points behind Bolton Wanderers. Bolton had one more game to play – at home to mighty Wolverhampton Wanderers – and Blues two. The first of these was a midweek home game against Liverpool, who had just won the league. Much as I pleaded, I was not allowed to go to a night game during the school week. I can't remember how I found out the result. It could easily have been from the next morning's papers, but the newly anointed champions may have had a night or two on the brown ale and Blues had won 2-1. With an inferior goal average (don't ask – the more complicated forerunner of the more sensible 'goal difference'), we now had to beat Sheffield United and Bolton lose to Wolves. Both teams were at home.

All printed records clearly show the two games being played on separate dates, although I have no recollection of this. Bolton seem to have played on the Friday and our glamorous cousins from the Black Country had given them a good hiding, 4-0. I have no memory of this being the case – a situation unthinkable for us in the days of wall-to-wall TV coverage with split screens and multiple commentary teams. By contrast, however, I can recall the events of Saturday, 25 April 1964 with all the firmness and certainty of memory that now eludes me when I'm marooned in a

supermarket aisle with not the first inkling of what I'm supposed to be looking for.

Before I describe what happened on that day – or at least, the one seminal moment – another brief bit of context is required. Substitutes were first introduced in English football at the beginning of the 1965/66 season. Up until that point, if your team was disadvantaged by someone being seriously injured and unable to continue, then it was just tough luck; you played on with ten men, or nine or whatever. Once substitutes were allowed, they were only permitted in case of injury, not for tactical purposes, and it was strictly one per game. You may well be ahead of me here, but this is important information for you to know prior to events at St Andrew's on 25 April 1964 with Birmingham City needing to beat Sheffield United to ensure their First Division survival.

All the trawling of the internet available has not been able to tell me the exact timing of the first of Birmingham's goals in what turned out to be a comfortable 3-0 win. It doesn't matter. There are some things stamped like a deep, red-hot brand into your consciousness.

One thing is for certain; the goal was scored as the result of a corner at the Railway End, right in front of me. The scorer was Trevor Smith, one of the few Blues players of his era – or any other come to that – who played for England. In the days when you had one centre-half per team whose job was to head, tackle

and kick the ball into touch, Trevor was unfortunate to be playing at the same time as the dashing Billy Wright from up the road at Wolves. Wright played 105 times for England and was married to a pop star, so unglamorous, solid Trevor had to content himself with just two appearances. He was old school in every sense. After his 365 appearances for Blues, he played a dozen times for Walsall before opening a pub. He scored three goals and I saw one of them on that day in April 1964.

In goal for Sheffield United was Alan Hodgkinson. He only ever played professionally for the one club, turning out for them on 576 occasions. Like Trevor, he gleaned a few England caps in an era when competition for his place was fierce. To watch footage of how goalkeepers were unprotected fair game during this period is to spend pretty well all one's time wincing and flinching. They survived entire games being knocked, barged and charged before smilingly trotting off the pitch for a nice cuppa and a smoke. To have played 576 times in such conditions required tremendous physical fortitude. But however well prepared he may have been for any eventuality, nothing could have prepared poor Alan Hodgkinson for a fired-up Trevor Smith lumbering up for a corner as he approached the end of his career and with a relegation scrap to win.

As the corner came into the box, ball, Smith and Hodgkinson all ended up in the net together. Whether or not Smith was making any attempt to make contact with the ball, no one will ever know for certain ...

and here I make no apology for another important digression. In an age where betting on a sending off is an entertaining punt for any watching neutral, it is difficult to imagine how rare such an event was back in the early 1960s (which, incidentally, is another reason to watch in wonder as Rattín was famously dismissed in the World Cup against England in 1966). It was a complete rarity and, as a consequence, Trevor was not sanctioned in any way and, even more bizarrely, the goal stood. The story does not end there.

Inured as he must have been to constant physical buffeting, Hodgkinson stayed on the ground. Players in 1963 didn't do that unless they were hurt. I once heard the late Jimmy Armfield, who could have counted himself unlucky not to have been England's first-choice right-back in 1966, ruefully observing an incident on which he was co-commentating on the radio. On seeing a player writhing and rolling, Armfield sorrowfully observed that if another player of his era had genuinely hurt him, the last thing he would have done would have been to let him know. Hodgkinson belonged to that same era – and to the one that didn't yet allow substitutes. In another way in which the sanitised, modern game is inferior to its forebears, the brilliant spectacle of an outfielder going in goal is now far too rare. But that is what happened that afternoon at St Andrew's as the Blues coasted to a 3-0 win against ten men with a stand-in keeper and so assured First Division survival.

I went home elated. We had survived; squeaked home by the skin of our teeth. My mother smiled and was pleased for me. One year later we were relegated to the Second Division where we remained for the next seven seasons. It was to be the first of nine relegations, so far, on my watch. I'm not sure whether, if I'd known this was to become an occupational hazard, I'd have bailed out at that point.

I think I'm glad I didn't.