

MARVIN CLOSE

“ I HOPE YOU DIE OF
CANCER ”



LIFE IN
**NON-LEAGUE
FOOTBALL**

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The Beginning

FOR AS long as I can remember, I always wanted to be a professional footballer. My dad was from Salford, that rare beast, a Man United fan who lived locally. Naturally, I followed in my father's footsteps and became a Reds fan too. Like most young footballers of my generation, I grew up wanting to be Paul Scholes, then spent the following couple of decades learning how to be me.

I grew up in a small village in the north of England surrounded by farms and rolling pastures. Depending upon the season, the sharp stink of pig manure or the fuggy, weirdly sweet odour of rapeseed oil. Big starry nights far away from light pollution. My village was a hop, skip and a jump further up the road from the back of beyond. There was one general shop that always had long unsold tins of butter beans at the end of a shelf, a pub, a church and my tiny primary school. It only had 30 kids and the only way we could get a school team together was by joining up with pupils from three other tiny primaries in villages seven or eight miles away. I grew up in a small world, but I was a happy kid.

At home we had a big garden at the back, and I started kicking a full-size football around when I was two. My dad bought goals with metal posts and netting, a proper leather

pill and little football boots for me. From being a toddler, he taught me a love for playing football. He taught me how to trap a ball, side-foot, volley on the turn, the whole gamut, and it gave me the greatest joy in my young life. I think that to learn so young that you can be good at something and achieve it is the greatest thing. I got that in spades.

Dad was a really good young player and had been on Oldham Athletic's books. He was offered a professional contract, but my grandfather, who was very strict, persuaded him to turn it down. This was back in the days when footballers' wages still weren't that good. He wanted his son to get a proper job that would last him a lifetime, not a few years. And so he did. He left the promise of full-time football behind him, became a manager in the motor industry, and although he continued to play in Sunday leagues, he passed his dreams on to me.

Every day he'd come home after a full day's work, we'd have tea and then in the spring, summer and most of autumn, Dad and I would spend two or three hours in the garden working on my skills. Sometimes we'd get my older sister to go in goal for crossing and shooting practice, but it was mainly me and my dad. He made me practise skills over and over again, which may sound boring and regimented for a lot of young kids, but from an early age I lapped it up because I could see how I was improving and getting better at the game. And then there was no let-up. When the bad weather began to roll in off the fields and winter set in, Dad and I would move inside to the Kitchen Stadium.

Tables and chairs were pushed against the wall. Plates, mugs and breakables went into drawers and cupboards. Dad would defend the two kitchen cabinets on the one side, while I defended an area around the kitchen door opposite. Inside, we used a sponge ball, but it was the same drill as

outside. Dad would teach me how to shield the ball, thread a pass, tackle. He constantly set me challenges. Lob the ball on to the top shelf of the white kitchen cabinet. Head it into the bin. When I was five years old, he challenged me to do 50 keepie uppies. That was achieved and it became 100. Then 500. By the time I was eight, I could do 2,000 keepie uppies at a go.

Some nights the sponge ball would get kicked into the washing-up bowl full of dirty pots from tea and then we'd be pummelling a soaking-wet sponge around the kitchen, sprays of water going everywhere, Mum going nuts. There was no quarter given. I'd shield the ball away from Dad and back hard into him. Toes would be stepped on, tackles would fly in. We'd be screaming and laughing our heads off. One night, our dog ate the sponge ball, but nothing could stop us. We made a new ball out of old newspapers and Sellotape and used that until we could get a proper sponge replacement.

According to writer Malcolm Gladwell, to become expert at anything, whether that be playing a violin or becoming a portrait painter, or in my case playing football, you need to put in approximately 10,000 hours of practice. I reckon I got the first few thousand under my belt by the time I was five, which was also the age I started playing for the nearest town's under-10s as well as my primary school team.

I was gifted technically, but still tiny. My kit was like a dress, it was that big on me. Playing for them, I learned a new skill – how to not get crippled. Playing against nine- and ten-year-olds was an eye-opener. Once I'd dribbled past a player or two or cheekily nutmegged someone, the boots started to fly in. They didn't like being beaten by a little five-year-old twerp one bit, and I soon learned how to hurdle scything tackles and sidestep deliberate leggings

over. It toughened me up no end, and although they didn't realise it, the older kids were doing me a real favour.

By the time I was eight, I was playing for the town's under-11s team, which was managed by my dad. From day one he's been the biggest influence on my career, but it's always been tough love. I didn't expect any preferential treatment playing in his team. My dad knew I was good but expected high standards from me as well. If I'd scored a hat-trick, he'd be on my case all the way home in the car. Why didn't you score five? Why did you pull at the shot that went over the bar? You didn't get your body over the ball. Why did you scuff that one at the far post? You toe-poked when you should have side-footed it. Dad would pat me on the back now and again but, knowing football as he did, would never give me false praise. If I was to make anything of myself as a player, I had to dig in harder for him all the time. But it paid off.

I was spotted by a scout from our nearest big club – a League One team with a long history and a well-established centre of excellence. Four of my team-mates and I were asked to go in for a 'trial'. I was the only one chosen to stay and so began a nine-year relationship with my local professional club. It was a big commitment for a kid, two nights a week, but it's all I wanted to do. At that age, if I wasn't playing or practising football, I was watching it live or on TV, and consuming every book and magazine and football programme I could get my hands on.

Some weeks later, I was playing in a small local tournament for my under-11s team and the then-Leeds United goalie Paul Robinson was refereeing each of the short matches. He came up to my dad and me straight after the match to say I'd 'really got something' and he wanted to recommend me to someone at Leeds. Whether or not he

did I'll never know, but we didn't hear anything back. The point is, though, I was being spotted more and more.

The centre of excellence was in a large gym next to the ground. Always bloody freezing, with a rock-hard floor. They broke the gym up into different quarters, one for each age group, and worked mainly on skills and tricks and such like. I don't wish to sound cocky, but I already knew them all and was well ahead of most of the kids in the older age groups in terms of technical abilities, let alone my own group. If I wasn't the best player there, I was certainly in the top two or three.

All was going well until the day the centre management decided that, henceforward, we were to play competitive matches against age-group teams from other big professional clubs around the north. This should have been fantastic but it meant we had to commit ourselves exclusively to the club and, therefore, were no longer allowed to play for our Sunday league teams. This was where all my friends were and, when you're just a kid, it's a shock to the system to be pulled out of your social group. It was like having to leave all your mates and go to a new school.

I soon began to loathe the 'competitive matches'. We were ordered to wear suits and ties, loaded on to a coach and then driven to places such as Liverpool, Sunderland and Manchester to play in a match of four 20-minute quarters. You might get one quarter on the pitch, sometimes a quarter plus five or ten minutes. But basically, as a kid, you were driven bloody miles to play 20 minutes or so of football with an ever-changing cast of different players. There was no flow, no coherent play. It was all so bitty and disjointed. The club would say they were teaching us discipline, broadening our horizons and giving us the experience of playing against similar-level talents from further afield. I didn't feel as if I

was learning anything and certainly wasn't enjoying it. So, I became a rebel.

I told my dad how much I was hating it and said I wanted to play for my old local team again at the weekends. Dad gave me chapter and verse about what a great opportunity I was throwing away, but in the end he could see how unhappy I was. So back I went to playing on Sundays and was soon seeing all my old mates again and enjoying my football. Even more so when I was selected to be part of a regional team that was to take part in a youth tournament in France. There were young teams from Lyons and Saint-Étienne – and a scout from Manchester United.

He'd heard about me, and told my dad that if I impressed he'd get me a two-week 'trial' at Man United. As Reds fans, you can imagine how thrilled my dad and I were. A fortnight-long chance to show them what I could do at the Theatre of Dreams. Wow. But as the matches got underway, I suddenly felt massive pressure on me, and the nerves kicked in. I didn't play badly, but hardly impressed either. I never got my fortnight in Manchester, and that got me to thinking: *Maybe Dad was right about throwing away an opportunity?*

I decided to swallow my pride and ask the centre of excellence whether they'd take me back. I was under no illusion; they didn't owe me anything. But they did give me a trial, liked the progress I'd been making and took me on again. By the time I was 15, I'd been making such leaps forward that the club signed me up as an apprentice scholar and had me training with the under-18s. And at 15 I also became the youngest player at the club ever to play for the reserve team. The future looked rosy.

But there was no way Mum and Dad would ever let me get carried away. If I ever fell behind with my schoolwork,

they were on me like a ton of bricks. Homework was checked up on and had to be done, no argument. I was no 'Brain of Britain' but I was intelligent and, having put the work in, passed all my GCSEs. My parents always wanted me to have an escape route if I didn't make it as a footballer. But hey, why should they worry?

At 17, I was a regular man-of-the-match in the reserves. The local newspapers were giving me purring write-ups, predicting I'd be an important part of the new generation at the club. I had enough money to buy my first car, signed on with my first agent and finished my apprenticeship on a total high. Life for me was looking good. My new agent was utterly convinced the club was going to offer me a professional contract, and although I didn't want to tempt fate, privately so was I. I looked around at the other apprentice midfield players at the club and knew I had more technique and ability than any of them. The only other young player who shared my position on the pitch was a big powerful lad, but he was one-footed and didn't have my ball skills or game understanding.

Come the day of reckoning, I trooped up to the club manager's office, where he and the youth team manager were waiting for me. The latter gave me an encouraging smile and I nodded my head and smiled back. The manager, a hugely experienced guy who'd been in charge at a dozen different clubs up and down the Football League, sat back, looked me in the eyes ... and sighed.

'I'm sorry but we're not going to offer you anything.'

I was blindsided. Nine years at the club, and just ten words saw me out of the door. I felt embedded there, a happy part of the furniture, and now in seconds everything had changed. The club manager went on to say he really rated me as a player. If we'd been in the Championship and not

League One, he'd have signed me. As it was, he'd decided to go more physical and direct in the middle, so wanted big, strong players. I was too slight for what he needed, but from everything he'd seen and heard I'd get a contract elsewhere. He was signing up the big powerful lad, not me.

I was totally lost for words. I just wasn't expecting this at all. Neither was my youth team manager, who was clearly stunned. I'd done well at every level I played at and he'd seen me through a lot of it. We exchanged glances, but there wasn't a lot we could say to one another. He looked as crushed as I felt. I rang my dad to give him the bad news and he was really upset. I felt as if the bottom had fallen out of my world. As ever, Dad was straight back into thinking positive. Pick yourself up. You're good enough to find another club. Just continue to apply yourself.

I tried to do that. But as the last couple of months of my apprenticeship wound down, I became a person I didn't much like. Previously, I'd be ecstatic when the first team won. Now, angry and embittered, I'd revel in their defeats. Serves them bloody right. The anger seemed to set me alight on the pitch. I had 11 more matches with the reserves before I quit the club for good – and scored ten goals from midfield. I was playing so well that rumours started going around the club that they were going to reconsider my contract. It wasn't to be.

So, I had to find a new resolve. Thanks to the support of family and friends, I began to lick my wounds and tried to find a new home. I got on to my agent big time and told him I'd go anywhere. I took a five-hour train journey down to South Wales for a trial with Cardiff City while the season was still on. I played okay but nothing special. Pass. Peterborough United called me in, and that was a weird trial indeed – a 60-minute one-off match between 22

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players who'd never met before and I was played totally out of position, shielding the defence. I did alright, but nothing outstanding. They too took a pass on me. Now I was starting to sweat. I had no back-up plan. All I ever wanted to do was be a professional footballer and everyone seemed to be giving me the shrug. I wasn't used to this, no way. I'd always been the best in my group, my team, wherever I'd played. It taught me a big lesson, that if you're going to get what you want, you really have to dig in.

I got a call from my agent. A League Two club from the Midlands were showing interest. Apparently, they'd been tracking me for a while and now they knew I'd been released, wanted me to spend two weeks of their pre-season with them. I realised straightaway that this was an opportunity I had to seize with both hands. And head and feet.

It was the toughest fortnight of my young life. Away from home for the first time, I stayed in digs with a really nice, welcoming family, but once in my room I felt anxious and alone. I was 17, not particularly worldly-wise and hardly slept that first night. I had no idea what to expect from my first day at this new club in this strange town. All I knew was that if my hopes and dreams to become a footballer were to progress, I had to dig in. I had to become brave and that wasn't easy. I'd been in a comfort zone at my long-time club, convinced I'd be given a pro contract, and this was all new and frightening. I now had to prove myself to a whole bunch of people who had no clue who I was and had probably never seen me play before. I didn't manage much breakfast on that first day.

I was put through my paces like never before during a gruelling pre-season training campaign. Their manager was a former top international player who proved to be ruthless in getting us fit. Every day for a fortnight we were given

'triple sessions'. First off was a 6am alarm, and then into a local swimming pool for opening time at 7am. A minute late and it was a £50 fine. An intense series of swimming races were next up, and in between each race we had to pull ourselves out of the pool and first do 20 press-ups on the side, another race and then 30 press-ups, another race and 40 press-ups, and so on. If you finished last in any of the races, you had to take part in the very next one. We were absolutely flogged. What made it worse was that although our manager was at least a decade older than us all, he was a superb swimmer and won every race he took part in.

Swimming and press-ups over, it was back to the stadium and a second session of running. An hour and a half of long, laborious, flat-out running. All timed and more fines for those that didn't hit the manager's targets. A welcome break for lunch and then back out to a couple of hours of gruelling football practice – three separate teams trying to variously retain possession or steal possession. Then flipping and flipping back again. I had to think so hard, way beyond the muscle memory.

I'd go home at the end of each day totally exhausted, quickly eat something and then fall asleep. The next day it was more of the same. I'd never been worked so hard in my young footballing life and it was mind-boggling. But as the days passed, I felt less tired and increasingly much fitter. Not just physically, but mentally too. I was being pushed more than ever before and, far from giving in at any point, my growing mental resilience was making me work even harder in the sessions. I worked my bloody socks off, did everything they asked of me and more. I stayed on after training sessions to put in more hours practising my skills. No way was I going to let this opportunity pass me by. I became aware that the manager and the coaching

staff were becoming impressed with my work ethic and my commitment. More than anything, I was enjoying my football there and they could see how I might fit into their thoughts. To my relief, they offered me a two-year contract. I'd made it. I was a professional footballer.

It was a team that preferred the ball on the ground and tried to play a passing game. They had me as a starter from the first match of the season and, from early on, I pulled a series of man-of-the-match performances for them. I became a first-team regular and eventually played 40 matches in my first season there. People were really welcoming at the club. I settled in quickly and all was well. Until Christmas.

We had a small squad and a worrying run of injuries came to a head when our prolific goalscoring centre-forward pulled his hamstring. Without him we had few guaranteed goals in the side and drifted slowly but surely into the relegation zone. Life on the pitch got tougher and we couldn't buy a win. Plenty of draws but all the teams around us started on winning runs. At the death we had to win our final match to stay up. True to form we drew 0-0. I was now playing for a non-league club.

Even though we'd dropped out of the Football League and everyone at the club was hurting, I still felt hopeful during that summer off-season. I was still a teenager and had my whole career ahead of me. In a relegation fight, I'd been one of our best players and a regular in the team. I was halfway through a two-year contract and, despite the drop, still on the same money, as clubs hadn't yet started to put relegation clauses into contracts. It was a well-run, proper club. We'd learn from our mistakes, pick ourselves up and bounce right back into League Two, surely?

But we didn't and I'd remain in non-league football for the rest of my career. As each season came and went and

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each new club came along, I still believed I was good enough to get back into the Football League. But life happened and this is the story of that life. The injuries that came at the wrong times. The clubs I should never have signed for and the managers who were a nightmare to play under. The trials, terrors, pleasures and tribulations of earning a living as a player in non-league football. From clueless coaches to crazy players; cocky referees to diehard fans; bonkers board members to a lazy new generation of footballers. From the endless travel and dark, wet nights to small successes and fleeting moments in the sun. This is my take on non-league football over the past decade or more, its current state and where I see it in the future.