



**"I LIKE PLAYING WITH
STEVE BECAUSE HE
PLAYS THE SAME
STYLE AS I DO."**

PELE

I'M WITH THE

COSMOS

THE STORY OF

STEVE HUNT

WITH IAN McCAULEY

Foreword by Adrian Chiles

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Freddie's Head

'USE BOTH feet, Steve.' That's what Uncle Dave and Uncle Den would say to me in the back garden of my nan and granddad's house at Brantley Road. It was good advice, but I knew it was my left foot that would do most of the work. Brantley Road was a terraced house with a long, thin garden. In front of a bedroom window was a home-made goal, built from three pieces of wood and a net.

Brantley Road was the hub of my life. Uncle Dave and my mum still live there. Brantley Road is in the shadow of Villa Park and we were a Villa family. My nan, Rose, had a season ticket, and it was with my mum and uncles that I went to Villa Park. Nan could only be described as a Villa fanatic. When Villa lost she had a habit of locking herself in the toilet, and it was difficult to console her. My granddad (Dimple) would stay at home to watch the wrestling and practise the moves – Nan told me not to encourage his

‘grappling’. Strangely, Dimple wouldn’t go to first-team games, but would go to watch Villa reserves.

Brantley Road was Evans family territory. My mum’s sister, Bet, who was a lovely and kind woman, lived opposite our family home with my three cousins, Darren, Julie and Jason. My nan, granddad and my mum’s brother, Dave, also lived in the road. Dave still lives in the house he was brought up in, and my mum returned to Brantley Road to move into the flat that my cousin had vacated. Uncle Den and Aunt Lin moved to Great Barr with my cousins Paul and Joanne. Aunt Bet and Uncle Ron later moved even closer to Villa Park; it resulted in a comical moment during a reserve game – more details to follow in the next chapter.

I was pleased when my mum moved back to Brantley Road, as she is very close to my Uncle Dave, but the community spirit of the street has been lost. When I was a kid, council estates were respectable places; there were high standards and a sense of respect among the residents. Unfortunately, although of course there are still a lot of decent people living in the area, it is simply not the same. Last month, my mum and Dave went to Weymouth for a holiday and returned to find that a load of rubbish had been dumped in Mum’s front garden. I know I sound like an old man saying ‘things ain’t what they used to be’, but it makes my blood boil when an

elderly lady can't go on holiday without someone taking advantage of her absence.

I now live on the Isle of Wight – more of which later – but suffice it to say that I have very happy memories of family holidays here on the island, where a ball was never far from my feet. Some sort of yearning for childhood innocence may have been a factor in my desire to live on the island.

When I moved with my mum and dad to Perry Barr, after a previous move to Nechells, it was to the tenth floor of a tower block. At the time it seemed exciting moving to a tower block, but I can see why people said they were totally unsuitable for young families, especially when the lift didn't work. You do wonder why the town planners didn't anticipate the problems. My mum, though, actually loved the flat.

When I moved to America, Rose moved in with her. She was virtually bed-ridden so it must have been a difficult period for my mum, as she had given up her job at the *Birmingham Evening Mail*, where she made the tea. The position provided her with an outlet and I think she enjoyed that social contact. The sports reporters would often ask her for bits of gossip from Villa Park in my first spell at Villa, things like, 'What does Steve think of the latest signing?'; 'What's the team going to be next Saturday?'

After giving up her job, and while looking after Nan, I think my mum felt isolated. I was in America experiencing problems of my own and trying to focus on football, but when I think back, perhaps I should have been more aware of her isolation in that tower block – though I think she would agree that I have been a good son. Besides which, my mum, in the stoic manner of so many women of that generation, tried to conceal what she was going through. It is certainly the case that my return to England was, at least in part, because I wanted to be near her. Cosmos offered me a good contract but I was determined to keep an eye on her, and help in any way I could. She is a strong and proud woman; I am glad that my football career largely took place in the West Midlands, and family is still the most important element in my life.

My mum was always there for me, providing total support for my football and every other aspect of my childhood. I was an only child but my mum, nan, granddad, uncles and aunts always made me feel part of a large, loving family.

It is strange in this modern era of football academies, when children are scouted at five or six, to remember that the trajectory of footballers in my time was quite different. In many ways, the path of my career was quite conventional for the period: a football-mad boy playing in the back garden; a loving mum who supported my football; playing

for my primary school, Yewtree, encouraged by Mr Salt, our PE teacher who urged us to 'have fun' when playing. At the age of 11, I signed for Stanley Star (Villa Boys). I went on to play for Aston Boys and the Warwickshire county side.

We were a football family. Uncle Dave still turns out occasionally for Brantley Rovers, the side he founded, and also loves walking football. It may seem a little strange that I haven't mentioned my dad, after all most football-mad kids are encouraged by football-loving fathers. I do remember seeing my dad play, but his influence on my life and my football was minimal. The last time I saw him was when I was 16.

I don't make close friends easily, but Dean has been my friend since the age of five and remains my closest friend. Dean and I grew up in Brantley Road, and both of us moved with our families to Perry Barr – in my case when I was 11. We both attended Great Barr Comprehensive and, although we were in different years, we were pretty well inseparable as kids. Dean probably spent more time at our place than at his own. We bonded through music and football. Often, we would be playing music in my bedroom where, from the window, a red light would flash. Mum rarely asked me to turn the music down, except when we played Jimi Hendrix, but she wasn't very

happy about the red light. I think she thought it might be misinterpreted.

In those days my dad would come straight home, put his suit on, and, as quickly as he could, go to the local working men's club. To be perfectly frank, I preferred it when he went out. There was always an atmosphere when he was at home, and there were regular arguments between my dad and my mum. I suppose I have always felt defensive of my mum. She has been a constant support, and probably one factor in why I haven't made contact with my dad. Anyway, life seemed calmer when he finally left for good.

My interest in music was always there, but one particular gig changed my life. Uncle Dave took Dean and I to see The Who in 1969, and it felt like pure escape; the energy of the band seemed to penetrate your skin and overwhelm your senses. I knew from that moment that music would be a constant in my life, and I could tell that Dean felt the same. Dean and I went to gigs every week. I remember particularly seeing Curved Air, Jethro Tull, Free, Led Zeppelin, and the Rolling Stones. The usual venue for big gigs was the Town Hall, most often with Dave, who, with typical generosity, would buy the tickets. Occasionally we would go to Henry's Blues House. At these gigs, it felt that we were entering a world far removed from inner city Aston and the tower blocks of Perry Barr.

I have a lot to thank my uncles for as not only did they introduce me to live music, they were always encouraging my football. They were quite different characters. Uncle Dave is in his 70s now and to the best of my knowledge has never used bad language, had an alcoholic drink, or smoked a cigarette. One of the reasons he stopped going to Villa Park was because he got sick of the swearing. Den, who died in his 50s, was very different; he had been in the army, and if he heard someone on the terrace criticise me he was fierce in his determination to defend my corner. Den in some ways prepared me for the practical jokes that footballers tend to favour; he put cornflakes in my bed, superglued my bedroom door shut, and on one occasion, inserted a clothes peg in a sausage, killing himself laughing as I bit into it. They played together for Brantley Rovers, the team Dave formed with friends in 1963; Dave was a midfield player and Den was a centre-half. If an opponent clobbered Dave you could guarantee Den would put his foot in on the perpetrator.

Dean and I played football together throughout our childhood and teens. We would play one-on-one in the concrete pedestrian subway of Perry Barr, sometimes using the entrance as a goal. I learned a lot of my dribbling and shooting skills in that subway, and it has to be said that Dean wasn't a bad goalkeeper.

It is said that Pelé began playing football using a sock stuffed with paper. Dean and I had a ball, but Pelé was 16 years older than me, and I can imagine that kids might have been kicking socks filled with paper on the back streets of Aston during the war. Football is universal. Pelé describes football as more an obsession than a pastime, and I guess that's the way it was for me. I wasn't much interested in academic subjects. From my classroom windows I could gaze at the goals on the local recreation ground next to the school. In my classroom daydreams I would see myself curling a free kick over a wall into the corner of the goal. My mum made me do my homework, and I was no trouble at school, but I just couldn't wait to get out with a ball – usually with Dean. We would go out in all weathers. I was a professional footballer for 14 years, but I still count those days innocently kicking about with Dean as among the happiest memories of my football life.

In Mike Brearley's book, *On Form*, he writes about how the New Zealand Test cricket captain Brendon McCullum tried to emphasise the play aspect of professional sport by reminding his team about the innocent way they came to love cricket as kids. He urged his team-mates to recapture that spirit. As a boy I loved football, and I know exactly what Brendon meant. I guess, however, that capturing that spirit becomes more difficult when your living depends

on playing a game. One footballer who always seems to transmit an innocent love of the game is Wayne Rooney. As I write he is with Derby County in the Championship, and despite Derby's poor form he still seems in love with playing the game that has provided the canvas for the expression of his rare gifts. Not least among these gifts is Rooney's football intelligence. Rooney has been a great player and he still doesn't get full credit for his achievements.

Dean and I did the normal things that teenagers do, including a bit of mischief-making. We used to attach wire to coins. We would then hide behind a wall, and, as an unwitting passer-by bent down, we would whip them away. Invariably, the hoax would result in us being chased through the back streets. We had to get the money back because it was the only pocket money we had.

I saw my dad play football once. He was left-footed and had a bit of pace. In my memory he was quite similar to me in his style of play. I am at a loss about why he took such little interest in my football; after all, most fathers would take pride in a son on the brink of the professional game. He was very interested in boxing and once bought me a Freddie Mills punching bag, with Freddie's head on the bag. When we were out, or going away, my mum would put Freddie's head in the window to suggest that someone was in. I think the fact that Freddie was totally stationary

meant that he would only have deterred the most stupid of burglars.

That bag was also used in what may now seem some immature horseplay. In fact, some readers may regard it in a slightly harsher light. Freddie's head was not a pretty sight: battered by my youthful combination punches, it was in a state of disrepair. One day, Dean climbed on my shoulders and attached Freddie's battered head to the top of his own. We then concealed our bodies with a long raincoat so only my legs and Freddie's head could be seen – I guess we were about seven feet tall. We knocked on a front door and as it opened I said, in a deep, 'scary' voice, 'We're here for the rent.' To the householder, it must have seemed that the rent man's voice was emerging from the belly of a seven-foot man. We scarpered pretty quickly.

Throughout my school years my focus was mainly on football, playing for Stanley Star and hoping to gain an apprenticeship at Villa. I continued to go to music gigs with Dean, whose parents were breaking up, as were my own. Most young men don't talk about their emotional life, and we never spoke about our parents separating. As I have said, the atmosphere at home improved when my dad left, but I suppose a psychologist might suggest that his departure had an effect on my development, and the fact that I find it very difficult to forgive people who I believe have done

me wrong. But music has always provided a release and football a point of focus. When I was struggling, with issues connected to my enforced retirement from the game, music was where I sought and gained my escape.

I had a brief flirtation as a kid with Manchester United. I suppose the main reason for that can be summed up in three words: Best, Charlton, Law. As a young prospective winger I was thrilled by George Best. It seemed that here was a player who had everything, and in my eyes he will always be the equal of Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. I played against George for Villa reserves in my first spell at the club. I think it was after he had returned to United following one of his disappearing acts. Best was my hero, and I remember being incredibly excited that I was on the same pitch as him. I found it hard to focus. Perhaps that experience helped me when I went to Cosmos, and I found myself playing with Pelé, Beckenbauer and the rest. I was always aware of the necessity of maintaining my concentration. I played against George when he went to America, and bizarrely I faced him on another occasion when he was playing for Nuneaton. It was a benefit game for that club.

Best was the equal of Messi in emerging with the ball from a tangle of defenders. He was a brilliant dribbler, but he could also see a pass, had an awesome range of passing and he was a deadly finisher.

Best had the dribbling skills of an old-fashioned winger – the ability to manipulate the ball in tight spaces. Bobby Charlton wasn't a manipulator of the ball – his genius was when he had a bit of space ahead of him. He was quick and had a miraculous swerve which would take him clear of defenders. He also had that thunderbolt shot. I will always be a Villa man, but these two were my inspirations.

I played against Best in America but also in his time at Nuneaton, who had a £40,000 tax bill and Best was approached to play against Coventry as a means of making money with which to settle the payment. Typically, Best arrived with an ex-Miss World – Mary Stävin. It was during an alcohol-free period in his life, and he was absolutely brilliant, helping Nuneaton to a 2-1 win. I also played with Charlton in a testimonial for Phil Parkes, the Wolves keeper.

The other player I enjoyed watching in that United side was of course Denis Law. Let me leave the description to George Best, 'Denis was the best in the business. He could score goals from a hundredth of a chance, never mind half of one.'

I am very proud to have played with the superstars of Cosmos, but Best and Charlton were my heroes and I cherish the fact that I shared a pitch with them.