Chapter 1

DOOG, RIP

The voice at the end of the line was unmistakeable, the introduction superfluous. "David," the uncompromising Belfast accent announced. "It's Derek Dougan."

What started out as a simple call several weeks earlier to request an interview for a book about Malcolm Allison had turned into a series of telephone exchanges and meetings in which we had discussed all manner of subjects, yet never been far from a return to the recurring theme of Dougan's passion for helping retired former footballers in times of trouble. Most of our discussions seemed to have taken place in between his appointments with lawyers, insurance companies or football authorities; engagements he approached with the same relish with which he'd attacked crosses from the wing during two decades as a centre-forward with Distillery, Portsmouth, Blackburn, Aston Villa, Peterborough, Leicester, Wolves and his beloved Northern Ireland.

That he had also shown an interest in – and asked for copies of – my previous books, I'd taken as little more than polite interest. Now it had all become clear. I had, it appeared, been auditioning. "What are you doing for the next few months?" Dougan asked, in a manner that left me in no doubt about the answer he wished to hear. "I want

to get a new version of my autobiography out for my 70th birthday and I'd like you to work on it with me. You could come and stay at my house in Wolverhampton. We'd split any money 50-50."

It should have been an offer I couldn't refuse, but with several months of work left on another project and Derek apparently keen to work to a tight deadline, I had to suggest, with considerable regret: "I'd love to do it, but it depends on when you want get started. If you want to begin immediately I think you are going to have to ask someone else. Otherwise, let's look at it again in the summer."

Cursing the missed opportunity to work with an icon of the football era I grew up with and which, for me, retains an addictive fascination, I listened to Derek's parting comment. He laughed as he delivered his words, but I sensed the edge in his voice. "If I go ahead without you, I hope you read the book and wish you'd been involved."

A few months later, I discovered that his book would never be written. Turning on Sky Sports News to get the day's headlines, I learned that Derek Dougan, aged 69, had died from a heart attack at his home.

The tributes that followed in the next few days were fulsome, whether from teammates, opponents, friends, administrators or those who had simply stood on the terraces cheering or, in some cases, cursing the man they knew as "The Doog". Privately, those who have known him most closely over the years are in no rush to create a saint. Many had witnessed or been recipients of his extraordinary acts of thoughtfulness and generosity, but through their grief and their love they still recognised that Derek could make reckless, ill-judged decisions and, if he chose, be a bastard. By God, he could be a right bloody-minded bastard. John Holsgrove, a former Wolves teammate and a friend for four decades, would tell me: "If Derek fell out with you, or didn't like you, he would just shut you out."

The trick, it seems, was not to attempt to work out how you could reconcile the two sides of the man. You just accepted that the contradiction was as much a part of him as his long legs and gap-toothed grin. Take it or leave it.

The obituary writers had any number of themes to pursue, demonstrating the rich and varied texture of his life and the paradoxical nature of his character. Some reflected on the combustible nature of the young footballer who ventured from Belfast to the Football League, staying at clubs just long enough to get the management's back up before being moved along to the next one. Others, especially those with a geographical bias towards the Midlands, noted the legendary status the more mature Dougan acquired at Wolverhampton Wanderers, where he scored 123 goals and achieved his dream of a Wembley victory during eight years as a player before later becoming chief executive in one of the club's darkest hours.

Those focusing on his life away from the pitch paid tribute to his work as chairman of the Professional Footballers' Association, where his constant campaigning played an important role in laying the foundation for the contractual freedom today's players take for granted. Having worked towards securing the rights of the modern generation, he persisted – in his supposed retirement years – to badger the authorities for what he felt were the forgotten rights of football's older generation.

Another consistent theme was his Northern Irish roots; the pride he felt in wearing the green shirt of his country; the pain he had felt watching from afar as his homeland was torn apart by violence; and his dream of seeing a united team representing all the people of Ireland, regardless of religion or geography. The great friendships he struck up in and out of the game offered a further rich seam, whether it is recording the esteem of men such as Martin O'Neill or recalling that he had been a pall-bearer at the funeral of his great Northern Ireland colleague George Best.

What was not mentioned – because until now it has never been revealed – was that his feats on the field were achieved despite the considerable physical handicap of having only one fully operational kidney. Medical tests in his latter years disclosed that one of his kidneys had never developed from childhood, remaining the size of a walnut instead of reaching of reaching the usual length of five inches and weight of around five ounces. "The doctors asked him if he had been kicked there when he was a boy," Dougan's partner,

Merlyn Humphreys, explained. "For some reason it just stopped growing."

Derek Dougan might have been an antagonistic centre-forward, blessed with speed, strength and football nous more than flash-footed trickery, but no one could claim that he was an ordinary footballer. How many other players would begin a book by quoting Voltaire, as Dougan did in one of his three autobiographical volumes? Anything he lacked in flair with the ball at his feet, he more than made up for with unashamed showmanship and, away from the field, a mixture of easy charm and spiky combativeness, winning friends and creating enmity in equal measure.

Being around Dougan meant you were never far from encountering one of his deeply held beliefs, whether it was about the state of the nation or the way football should be run – to which he devoted another of his books. It was the reason why, when ITV constructed its revolutionary World Cup panel in 1970, Dougan was placed alongside Malcolm Allison in the vanguard. Televised football was never the same again.

Dougan never got to add that latest volume to a portfolio of personal work that even included a novel. Yet his story – which also illuminates a long and important period of development in British football – deserves to re-told, and not through a simple chronological account. The search for the real Derek Dougan requires the benefit of new insight from those closest to him; an understanding of his environmental and social influences; some attempt to rationalise the complexities of an often destructive personality; and a degree of impartial discussion of the man and the issues in which he became embroiled. Such a dispassionate assessment would never have been possible in a book guided by Derek's own words and opinions.

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I am sitting at a polished dining table in the home of Merlyn Humphreys, the woman with whom Derek found love, happiness and contentment in his latter years and with whom he shared his life. Merlyn, previously widowed, strikingly silver-blonde atop her black outfit and with a ballerina's petite figure, explains that, although spending most of her time at Derek's place a few minutes

away in Tettenhall, she has maintained her own detached house in the Wolverhampton stockbroker belt hamlet of Wightwick. She and Doog – as even she always called him – had, however, been planning to pitch in together and get married. He had even selected his best man. But then fate, and Derek's failing heart, wrenched such plans from the soil of Merlyn's existence.

"You know, you never would have got started on that book even if you'd been available," she declares. "He was all fired up about it and then, not long after he came off the phone with you, he received another call and he was off on another cause. That took every moment of his time for several weeks. He loved a cause." On this particular occasion it had been the case of former Wolves player Ian Cartwright, in dire need of funding for cancer treatment. One phone conversation later, Dougan was off in a whirl of auctions, dinners, celebrity football matches and legal documents.

Even on the morning of his death, he had been preparing to head to Hastings to represent former Portsmouth and Northern Ireland teammate Norman Uprichard in an industrial injury case relating to his days as a goalkeeper in the 1950s, an age when part of the job description was to accept a hammering from centre-forwards and then drag yourself back into action with anything from fractured fingers to broken necks.

Without invitation or cajoling, Merlyn describes the events of 24th June 2007. As she does so, a grey and sombre mood settles about us, conflicting with the late summer sunshine that has been dancing on the ornaments and picture frames.

Merlyn had been at home packing a bag prior to travelling with Doog to spend that night with friends Chris and Linda Westcott in Eastbourne. Having left Derek the previous evening so that he could sit up through the night watching Ricky Hatton's fight in Las Vegas, Merlyn was preparing to make the short return journey when the phone rang. "Doog at home" showed up on the caller ID window, but at the other end of the line all she could hear was the eerie silence of a seemingly empty room. "I thought my heart would stop with fear," she remembers.

As trembling fingers attempted to hit the speed dial button for Derek's number, her phone chirruped back into life. One breathless, painfully-delivered word will never leave her. "Merlyn."

The next few minutes passed in a blur of instinctive action, yet remain burned in horrific detail in Merlyn's memory: a mad dash by car; the sight of Dougan slumped, phone still in hand, in his armchair; the emergency call and the urgent order for Merlyn to attempt to revive him while the ambulance was dispatched. "They were telling me I had to get Doog out of the armchair and on to the floor. He was a big person and I was six and a half stone. They counted with me through 400 compressions to his heart and the perspiration was falling from my body on to his. I don't know how I did it, but you find the strength from somewhere."

Merlyn's faltering words, full of heartbreak, appear to require the same kind of effort that was called for in Doog's living room. Then, as now, she soldiered on.

By the time the emergency services arrived, she was close to exhaustion. Yet her efforts had counted for nothing. The briefest of examinations by the medics confirmed that Derek had probably died moments after his phone call. The colour Merlyn had seen returning to his body was simply the manually-achieved movement of blood around his body.

We get on to discussing this book and I tell Merlyn that my intention is to title it *In Sunshine or in Shadow*, a line borrowed from *Danny Boy*. She had selected the tune, one of Derek's favourites, to be sung at his funeral. It seems to encapsulate the light and dark of Dougan's life: the joy he derived from playing football set alongside the gloomy frustration he felt about important issues that affected players' rights; the glory and headlines that illuminated much of his playing career, and, in contrast, his campaigning away from the spotlight.

It also reflects the good and bad of the publicity he attracted right up to his death and, on the most basic level, the strictly defined black and white views of an opinionated man who even his closest friends sometimes wished would relax and accept that, in life, some things are simply the way they are.

Later, more than one former teammate will tell me that Dougan

was an all or nothing kind of player, brilliant and committed when the mood took him, but prone to the odd day when enthusiasm and effort could go astray. Mick McGrath, a colleague at Blackburn, illustrates it by explaining: "We trained in pre-season at open-air school, which you could get to by road or through a field. At the end of every session the first person back to the changing room would get a yellow jersey. Derek was the type that if he wasn't first he would be last – there was no in between with him."

I ask Merlyn if Derek was truly a happy man. The books he wrote about his playing career seemed to focus much more on everything that he took exception to in his profession than the simple pleasure of being paid for playing football. Merlyn's own description of Derek turning down a relaxing Sunday spent walking and lunching in the countryside in favour of a day with his nose in his business files suggests a man who was too consumed by his passions and causes to stop and enjoy the good times.

On this point, Merlyn is quick to contradict me. "Derek was driven," she admits. "And he would go looking for things to get his teeth into. But those closest to him saw the funny side of him, the warmth and kindness and his love of life. Oh yes, he was happy."

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Situated on rising ground in the north-eastern part of the city, the Collegiate Church of St Peter's has been at the heart of religious worship in Wolverhampton for more than 1,000 years. The small Saxon building that was erected in a forest in the tenth century has long since given way to the majestic structure that watches over a bustling city centre, with the ornamented tower rising from the heart of the building now one of the first landmarks to greet those arriving in town via its train and bus stations.

Extensive mid-19th century renovations have given it much of its present-day definition, but the fact that it has retained important architectural features dating back to the 1300s helps to make it a source of civic pride, along with its important role in offering a daily haven for prayer and succour.

There is no more appropriate setting for a public tribute to a

man who bestrode Wolverhampton's sporting landscape for the best part of a decade and remained one of the city's most favoured residents more than 30 years after he left its playing fields for the last time. On Thursday 5th July, the golden Wolves replica jerseys stretched across torsos of all shapes, sizes and ages add a welcome dash of colour to the streets outside the church as Britain's dismal summer serves up a breezy, overcast lunchtime. The shirts are being worn in strict accord with the instructions of Merlyn, who has spent the last week filling numerous notebook pages putting together the funeral service that will bid Dougan his last farewell.

Inside the church, interspersed among family and friends, is the cast list of Dougan's career. The Wolves contingent is numerous, from current manager Mick McCarthy and Doog's old coach, Sammy Chung, to a list of teammates that includes Frank Munro, Jim McCalliog, John McAlle, Derek Parkin, Phil Parkes, captain Mike Bailey, Geoff Palmer, Barry Powell, John Holsgrove, Ernie Hunt, Dave Burnside, Gerry Taylor and Les Wilson, who has flown in from Canada.

Helping to represent Northern Ireland are Pat Jennings, Martin O'Neill, Peter McParland, Sammy Nelson and former teammate and manager Billy Bingham. Opponents such as Denis Law and Johnny Giles take their places on behalf of the wider football community, as do former colleagues from other clubs, while chief executive Gordon Taylor and his former right-hand man Brendon Batson signify Dougan's long involvement with the Professional Footballers' Association – the organisation that was once so close to his heart but which he spent much of his later life battling.

The conflicts that characterised one aspect of Dougan's life are best signified by the absence of John Richards. Over the past 20 years, Dougan has barely spoken to the man with whom, in the early '70s, he formed one of English football's most productive goalscoring partnerships. "I was very disappointed John wasn't there," Frank Munro tells me later. "It was a crying shame those two fell out."

Dougan, who would have abhorred the thought of dark introspection rather than vivid celebration being the dominant mood of the day, is to take his final bow in the colours that

gave him his greatest fame. The hearse, decorated with old-style barred Wolves scarves, proceeds past the respectful applause of the onlookers. Their glimpses inside reveal a coffin of Wolves gold with "Doog", in his own handwriting, stencilled on the side, along with the number 10 – the figure he wore for the second half of his career at Molineux – and the distinctive club badge. Placed on top are two floral tributes: one in Wolves colours of gold and black, sent by the club's London supporters' club, of which Derek was president; the other, from Merlyn, in the green and white of Northern Ireland.

Amid the usual ungainly struggle, the coffin is hoisted onto shoulders. The pall bearers include Dougan's brother Dale and sons Alexander and Nicholas – strikingly like his father – which represents a temporary setting aside of differences that have undermined family relationships over recent years. In an accustomed outside-left position on the coffin is David Wagstaffe, the trusted winger whose understanding with Derek contributed to so many of his goals and who once called his teammate "the best header of the ball in England".

As the funeral party disappears beyond the ranks of photographers into the church, fans – Dougan would not have wanted them referred to as mourners – exchange expectant glances as they wait for the first notes of the service on the speaker system that has been set up around the forecourt of the building. *Bring Him Home*, from the musical *Les Miserables*, reaches them while, inside, the coffin is carried up the pillar-lined aisle and placed in front of the congregation. More than one teammate admits later they could not overcome the feeling that the lid was about to burst open to reveal that their friend had been kidding with them all along.

The tone of the spoken tributes is quickly set by broadcaster Nick Owen, a junior member of the production team when Dougan, at the height of his playing fame, hosted a sports show on BBC Radio Birmingham. Having thanked the attendees on behalf of the family he reminds everyone that Derek was "greatly respected and much loved – even if he did upset a few people", describing him as "controversial, fiery, humorous and passionate".

"I can't tell you how honoured I was," Owen confesses when I ask him about his part in the funeral. "I was absolutely thrilled,

very touched and surprised. When Merlyn asked me to do it she said Doog had often talked about me, which was enormously flattering. I was very proud but also intimidated. Speaking in public can be daunting enough but even more so when you are speaking on behalf of someone at their funeral and especially in front of so many football icons."

The reading from the first book of Corinthians by Derek's niece, Josephine Dougan Long, falls between the official hymn of the football world, *Abide with Me*, and *Danny Boy*. Then Mike Bailey steps forward to recap Dougan's career at Wolves, where "his impact was immediate" after being signed from Leicester in 1967, the sixth occasion he was transferred to an English club. "He was big-name player who gave the club, the fans and the town a huge lift in status," Bailey says, noting that Wolves finally offered him the opportunity of "playing on the big stage to large crowds who adored him".

Bailey's contribution is significant, a generous gesture from someone who reportedly never got on with his outspoken colleague, although when we catch up later he says that the rift between the two men has been exaggerated. Yet others explain that for many years the Wolves dressing room had been defined along the lines of whether you were with Bailey or Dougan.

One of those in Derek's camp, John Holsgrove, who in recent years has grown closer to his former captain, reveals that Bailey "was a little embarrassed" to have been asked to play a formal role in the funeral. "But he handled it very well," Holsgrove comments. "He spoke because he was club captain and he spoke about Derek as a footballer. He didn't speak about him as a person because he didn't really know him."

Former Republic of Ireland and Stoke City winger Terry Conroy gets up to address the congregation, noting that his great friend had "a restless spirit" and emphasising the passion with which he pursued his beliefs and forced home his opinions. "He continued to hammer down doors to achieve the benefits he felt the players of his generation were entitled to," he says, closing with his vision of Dougan meeting St Peter at the gates of heaven and being shown the contract for entry.

Doog, he says, would assert: "That's not the way to do it. You listen to me, Peter, and you won't go far wrong."

The obvious nerves of Aston Villa manager and former Northern Ireland colleague Martin O'Neill are evidence of the honour he feels at being asked to represent Dougan's countrymen. "He was witty," he says. "He thought so himself." He recalls him dominating the squad for the entire duration of an end-of-season Home International Championship tournament early in O'Neill's own career, teaching him a hitherto unknown history of both football and his country. "He had the last word and the first word… he was iconoclastic in the sense that he broke the rules and didn't mind. He had tremendous courage to carry them out."

Leading the service, the Rector of Wolverhampton, David Frith, invites those inside and outside to sing along to the playing of *You'll Never Walk Alone* in order to "add a communal tribute added to those we have already received". As the music fades, chants of "Dougan, Dougan" reach the church, bringing a smile to the face of Merlyn Humphreys as she takes her place at the lectern.

Moving and dignified, her eulogy is based around an adaptation of the poem *He Is Gone*, beginning with the lines: "You can shed tears that Doog has gone, or you can smile because he lived." It precedes her introduction of Nat King Cole's *Unforgettable* – "because that's what Doog is and always will be".

After Derek's elder son Alexander has performed his own composition, *Praise the Lord*, introduced by his brother Nicholas, the Rev. Frith ascends the 15th century pulpit. He begins his address by relating the way Dougan ensured that his sister Coreen spent the Christmases after the death of her husband James at his home in Wolverhampton, "an act typical of his thoughtfulness, kindness and generosity".

As well as his love of his adopted home town, Frith highlights that Derek remained "hugely proud of his Belfast roots, yet also deeply pained by the hatreds and tragedies of his homeland". He continues: "I believe Derek to be an unsung hero of peace and reconciliation. The story of his off-the-field endeavours to put together an all-Ireland team [in 1973] ought not to be forgotten. He believed in the possibility of change, transformation and healing."

Admitting that he could display "waywardness" of character, he claims it was simply "part of the creative tension that goes with exceptional ability". Those close to him "knew that he could throw a wobbly sometimes" and, in an apparent reference to his estranged family, Frith acknowledges that Dougan knew "things could go wrong in relationships" but says he was open to the healing of hurt. "When the impulsiveness had passed, the kindness was still there, deeper and stronger," he says.

Here, the good reverend is perhaps being a little generous to Derek. One of his acknowledged failings was his willingness to hold a grudge; one of his biggest faults his failure, sometimes, to find forgiveness. The way he stayed away from his beloved Molineux for so many years speaks of someone quite happy to cut off his nose to spite his face.

The service over, the coffin is carried back down the aisle as *You Raise Me Up* is played. Dougan had been taken with the song the first time he heard it, at George Best's funeral. On that occasion he had been honoured to be chosen as a pall-bearer, commenting: "George carried us for enough years on the field so it will be an honour to carry him today."

Then Derek Dougan disappears, driven away to a private cremation. It is the final part of a journey that would have seemed incredible to the young shipyard apprentice from Belfast who looked across the water and saw visions of life in another world – the world of football – but whose personality would ensure he could never be constrained by its boundaries.