

Introduced by
**IRENE
GREAVES**

The one and only

*Jimmy
Greaves*

**Authorised
biography**

By the man
who knew him best

NORMAN GILLER

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Contents

Acknowledgements	9
Introduction	13
Kick Off: Starting at the end	17
1. A rare diamond of a goal	21
2. Getting sober out of our minds.	29
3. Bombs, footballs, schools and scouts	37
4. Chelsea, the 'All the Best' club	46
5. England and the Haynes partnership	57
6. Tragedy and then the Italian Job	69
7. The Glory Glory Years	88
8. Drinking for England	102
9. Bobby Moore on tape.	121
10. The G-Men on the road to Wembley	130
11. The 1970 World Cup Rally adventure	136
12. Reminiscing with the Real Mackay	146
13. Hammered with the Hammers.	157
14. Rising with the Sun	164
15. The TV-am Soap Opera	184
16. Saint and Greavsie	198
17. Safe as the Banks of England.	207
18. The Cloughie connection.	222
19. Stand and Deliver	234
20. Best of the Best.	242
21. The 50-year milestone	254
22. The final years	264
23. Quote, unquote ... The tributes	269
24. The Great Entertainer	284
Extra-time: The Jimmy Greaves Facts and Stats File.	290
Index	300

Chapter 1:

A rare diamond of a goal

WE DELIBERATELY chose 5 May 2022 to publish this tribute book as a lasting memory of the greatest British goalscorer ever to set foot on the playing fields of England, James Peter Greaves. It was 60 years to the day that Jimmy scored one of the great Wembley goals against Burnley in the 1962 FA Cup Final, among the most satisfying moments of a career – and life – that can only be described as extraordinary. Fittingly, it was a rare diamond of a goal.

There have been many books written about Jim, 20 of them ghostwritten by me and several biographies conscientiously carved by people who admired but did not really know him. Now we come to the book Jimmy and I had discussed writing just before he was savagely struck down by the stroke that robbed him of his speech and much of his movement. It was going to be called *The Truth*.

Let's wind the clock back to that day Jimmy helped Spurs retain the FA Cup they had won 12 months earlier when becoming the first team of the 20th century to complete the elusive Double of League championship and FA Cup. This is how Jimmy remembered it:

“I never used to make predictions about scoring. It was the easiest way to make yourself look foolish. But for some reason I felt confident enough about this match to say to

my team-mates in the dressing-room beforehand, “Get the ball to me early, lads. I’m going to score a goal inside the first five minutes.” It was so unlike me, and when the words came out I wondered if it was somebody else talking. Sure enough, with the game barely three minutes old, goalkeeper Bill Brown found Bobby Smith with a long clearance, and he played it on to me on the edge of the penalty area. I over-ran the ball but quickly regained control and from 15 yards rolled a shot with my left foot through a forest of legs and into the net. One of the newspaper reporters described it as being “as accurate as an Arnold Palmer putt”. Just wish I could have putted like that on the greens.

The goal meant so much to me. I had been as nervous as a kitten in Battersea Dogs’ Home when joining Spurs from Milan six months earlier because they had won the Double without me and I was terrified of upsetting the balance of their great team. I had been robbed of a goal in the European Cup semi-final against Benfica in the previous month, but this goal against Burnley – the one I had predicted – wiped out all the bad memories.

We went on to beat that smashing Burnley side 3-1, Danny Blanchflower clinching victory from the penalty spot. Danny, who was godfather to my son Danny a few months later, told us that as he was placing the ball on the spot his Northern Ireland team-mate Jimmy McIlroy, Burnley’s stylish schemer, sidled up to him and said, “Bet you miss it.” Danny said nothing. “As I ran past Jimmy after putting the penalty into the net,” Danny told us, “I said, ‘Bet I don’t...’”

They were some of the happiest times of my football life, and playing for that Tottenham team was a privilege. ʘ

I am here as your guide through Jimmy's life and times, the good, the bad and the ugly. In the hope that you feel his presence on the page I will be quoting him at every opportunity, mostly from conversations we had over the years I covered his career as a reporter and then from our close collaborations on our many book projects after his ridiculously premature retirement at the age of 31. Health warning, I will be focusing on his drinking in the first part of the book before opening the floodgates on his considerable footballing feats. Some of it is quite harrowing, but Jim would have wanted me to tell the naked truth.

One of the questions he was continually asked was, 'What was your best goal?' People thought he was jesting when he continually selected one he scored right at the back end of his career while in an alcoholic state with Southern League Barnet.

‘It was when I could still be described as a drunk. Barnet were marvellous to me and used to cover up when I went on benders, but I gave my best for them in my sober moments. This particular day I was playing in midfield in a fourth qualifying round FA Cup tie against Edgware when the ball came to me about 30 yards out. I cracked it with my left foot on the half-volley and the ball zoomed towards the right-hand post, but I put so much bend on it that it finished flashing into the top left [corner] of the net. I never used to get that excited about scoring but this was the farthest out that I had ever hit the target, and I ran in celebration towards the touchline with my arms raised. I acknowledged the rapturous applause from two spectators and a dog. It's a funny old game.’

Describing the Barnet goal as his best was Jimmy's way of dodging a question he was always being asked. As he had nearly 500 to

choose from, he found it impossible to pick and I tried to find a way to help him choose just one by writing a book with him called *GOALS!* We sent a questionnaire to every major British forward from Jimmy's generation and they described their most memorable goal and also a personal favourite they had had seen live or on screen. A huge majority selected the one Jimmy scored against Manchester United in 1965 and which featured every week in the *Match of the Day* opening titles until colour television came in.

I put it under the microscope in a closing chapter in the book called 'Anatomy of a Goal':

‘Jimmy Greaves scored what was by any standards quite a goal for Tottenham against Manchester United at White Hart Lane on 16 October 1965. Typically, Jimmy was embarrassed when so many of the top marksmen we approached selected it as the greatest goal they had ever seen. He wanted them to choose an alternative goal but as, co-editor of this book, I insisted that their first choice should stand.’

Among the players who selected Jimmy's goal were George Best, Johnny Haynes, Geoff Hurst, Denis Law, Tommy Lawton, Francis Lee, Martin Peters, Bruce Rioch, Terry Venables and Frank Worthington. Best and Law played in the game for United, and the rest saw the goal on television.

So what was so special about the goal? This is how Geoffrey Green, doyen of football writers, described it in *The Times*:

‘Magic may be an overworked word, but what came next was just that. It was Greaves who set the high point to the banquet. Receiving from Mackay with his back to the United goal some 35 yards out, he sold two

dummies, changed direction and in the bat of an eyelid had shimmied through and past the converging tackles of three of the great defenders, Foulkes, Stiles and Dunne. Next, Greaves drew out the goalkeeper and bypassed him too, before stroking the ball into the gaping net. The stadium erupted; the terraces waved like a forest in a gale and Manchester could only stand and wonder at it. This was the act of a Pelé under the Brazilian skies, Puskas in the sunshine of Madrid. Greaves, the Fagin of the penalty area, the arch pick-pocket of goals, has stolen many spectacular goals but none quite so richly embroidered as this one.’

The after-match comments from the United players who had been on the receiving end were a chorus of acclaim for the goal. ‘No defence in the world could have stopped him,’ said Nobby Stiles. ‘We all knew we shouldn’t commit ourselves to tackles against him, but he draws you towards the ball like a bee to honey. You make your challenge and find yourself tackling thin air. Jimmy’s some player.’

‘It was a goal of pure genius,’ said Pat Crerand. ‘We all just shrugged our shoulders and got on with the game. When that little so-and-so makes up his mind to score, there’s little you can do about it but just feel privileged to see a master at work.’

‘Even though it was a goal against us, it brought a smile to our faces,’ said George Best. ‘We almost enjoyed watching it! In my time in football, I’ve not seen a better executed goal. Jimmy was in total command of the situation from the moment the ball arrived at his feet. He knew exactly what he was doing, and left a queue of defenders chasing his shadow.’

Sir Matt Busby was celebrating the 20th anniversary of taking charge at United. ‘It was nice of Jimmy to give me that goal as an anniversary present,’ he joked. ‘I don’t think I’ve seen a better goal scored against us. Jimmy is a master of fashioning a goal out of nothing. Only Denis Law can match him for turning a half-chance into a goal. They are the two kings of the penalty area.’

‘I had gone off injured and John Fitzpatrick was substituting for me,’ said the other great goal-master, Denis Law. ‘Watching the goal from the touchline bench was like seeing poetry in motion. I have always considered Jimmy the greatest goalscorer of all time and this is the goal that surely proves it.’

Denis added with a chuckle, ‘I hate the wee man.’

When did Jimmy make up his mind that he was going to score? Jim:

‘It was not premeditated. I never planned to score a goal in my life. Goals just used to happen. They were just an instinctive thing with me. With this particular goal, I remember receiving the ball from Dave Mackay. John Fitzpatrick was breathing down my neck and I turned him, pretending to go off right but then setting off in a straight line. From then on, everything’s a bit of a blur in my memory, but I’ve seen the goal enough times on television to know that I changed direction two or three times to throw Nobby, big Foulksie and Tony Dunne off balance.

If I had any skill, that was it – the ability to wrong-foot opponents. A goalscorer is like a card sharp. While you’ve got the ball at your feet, you’re holding all the cards. You know where you’re going, and the objective is to kid the man or the men in front of you that you’re going somewhere else. So you set out to deceive them with little feints, sudden

changes of direction and acceleration. If you look at pictures of any of the great ball-playing marksmen scoring their goals, you will usually see one or two defenders on the ground behind them. That's because they had a gift for making defenders commit themselves to tackles. It's like a boxer counter-punching. You wait for them to make the lead and then, whoosh, you're off and past them before they can get their balance back.'

What about the final shot?

'I was rarely a whacker of a ball. I couldn't burst the skin of a rice pudding from 15 yards. Power shooting is a different game altogether. You have to distribute your bodyweight in a different way. I was usually on my toes for my goals and used to steer rather than shoot the ball into the net. For that goal against United, I drew goalkeeper Pat Dunne off the line and let him think he was dictating the angle to me while I knew that I was really in charge. He was inviting me to shoot into the left-hand side of the goal and I dropped my shoulder and cocked my right foot to pretend I had accepted the invitation. I waited until he had all his weight on his left-hand side and then moved wide of him and was left with the simple task of a tap-in goal. People are always reminding me of that goal, but I honestly think I scored a better one against Leicester a couple of years later at White Hart Lane. It was similar to the United goal, but what made it even more satisfying was that I collected the ball from a clearance by goalkeeper Pat Jennings. So it was literally an end-to-end move with only the two of us touching the ball and it was that other master, Peter Shilton, that I hoodwinked at the other end. Very satisfying.'

I had to twist Jimmy's arm to get him to talk in any depth about goalscoring. Throughout his career, he would always say that the most important goal was his next one. As the uncrowned king of goalscorers, he deserves the last word on the subject of goals, and I know it will be echoed by all proven marksmen: 'A goal is a goal is a goal!'

From goals to gongs and a subject that irritated me but did not bother Jim in the slightest. Okay, I am biased but in my view he should have been knighted long before his passing. I think the Establishment got their own back on him for continually knocking the honours system. He strongly felt that the UK should have adopted the old-style Russian process of rewarding outstanding sports performances with Masters of Sport medals, and he used to regularly mock the fact that the likes of Bobby Moore, George Best and Denis Law never got the knighthoods their service to football deserved.

For more than 20 years I campaigned for Jimmy to get a gong, and the *Daily Mail* took up the crusade in 2020 but rather overcooked it, with dozens of pages devoted to getting him the knighthood he had earned. How did the Whitehall mandarins react? They gave him a measly MBE, which Jim – if he had been able to express himself – would have told them to stick where the sun don't shine.

Enough to drive a man to drink ...