

**Derek Air**

**LAND  
OF THE  
GIANTS**

**My Journey  
Through the  
World of  
Table Football**

Foreword by  
**Mickey Bradley**  
of The Undertones

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## Chapter One

# The Ghosts of Langton Green

LANGTON GREEN is not the quintessential English village that I expect to find in this part of Kent. I expect it to exist only in monochrome, yet here it is alive and in full colour. My idea of English villages in the south-east has clearly been clouded by the war films of my childhood – films like *Went the Day Well?* and *The Eagle Has Landed*. Where’s the church with its spire? Where’s the village green with a duck pond surrounded by quaint ivy-covered cottages? Where’s the village pub complete with rustic local nursing his pint of warm bitter?

Langton Green, rather disappointingly, has none of these things (except the village green, although rather than being the centre of the village it appears to have been tagged on as an afterthought behind the pub) and instead of the village emanating from this central point it appears to grow out of the ribbon-like Langton Road, occupying a narrow strip on the way into Tunbridge Wells. Many of the houses are large, with substantial gardens placed behind walls that may whisper quietly of money but shout loudly ‘KEEP OUT’. Remember, this is the London Commuter Belt. There’s money here. Serious money.

But I’m not here to give a TripAdvisor review of the area. I’m here to make the pilgrimage that every enthusiastic

fan of Subbuteo has to make at least once in their lifetime. For us, this is our Hadj. As I walk back along Langton Road from my parking place in the car park of The Hare, it starts to rain, and I raise the hood of my waterproof jacket. After about 100 metres, I stop outside a detached red-brick house. This three-storey building, originally designed as a house but now the business premises of Baltic Star Design and Build Limited, was where the game of Subbuteo was invented and first produced. I am here to see it and take the photograph of the blue plaque that adorns the outside of the building. The plaque, donated by the magazine *Langton Life*, proudly proclaims that ‘WORLD-FAMOUS SUBBUTEO FOOTBALL GAME CREATED and MADE HERE 1947-1969’. (Later, after spending hours stuck in the car on a very hot day thanks to the seemingly endless delays on the M25, my wife will moan that we spent all that time in a car so I could take a picture of a little blue plaque.)

I return to the car, tell Kirstie that I’ve got the pictures that I wanted, and we head off in search of breakfast. Parking outside a small cafe a little further along the road we enter and are disappointed to find that there are no free tables, but that they can make up a table outside. Kirstie and I turn to each other and looking out from under the hoods of our now-dripping waterproofs wonder why the staff might think this a good idea? Feeling the stares of the locals (now I know how the backpackers felt when they entered the pub in *An American Werewolf in London*) we thank them and decide instead to take our chances in the nearby metropolis of Tunbridge Wells.

On the way there I try and make her feel better about the fact that I appear to have dragged her hundreds of

miles to take a handful of photographs by informing her that there's a Subbuteo 'Discovery Day' taking place at the museum in Tunbridge Wells, and after a coffee we walk up the hill to the Amelia Museum, located on Mount Pleasant Road. I explain that the museum is hosting the English Masters tournament the following day and that some of the country's best Subbuteo players will be competing.

'We should have come for that,' she says.

'I didn't want you to be bored,' I reply. Kirstie, you see, is not a Subbuteo enthusiast.

We make our way around the museum but can't seem to find the Subbuteo Discovery Day that is supposed to be taking place. Once outside, we happen to pass a window where we catch a fleeting glimpse of two young children playing the game on the other side of the glass. Going back inside, we make our way to where the 'event' is taking place, and quite frankly, I'm disappointed. There are two tables set out with children playing against what appear to be two middle-aged library assistants. Scattered across a nearby table are photocopied sheets where children can 'design a Subbuteo player' by colouring in the outline of a player on its wobbly base. This is not, I feel, up to snuff, and if the English Subbuteo Association (ESA) are serious about growing the game for future generations, they will have to do better. With the Subbuteo World Cup – due to be hosted by the ESA and played here in Tunbridge Wells – just over a year away, this is disappointing. I say so on Twitter later in the day and well, let's just say, the ESA are not in agreement with me.

Stepping out into the (now) bright sunshine we decide to find a pub for lunch before making the (no doubt)

horrendous return trip home along the M25 and M40. Over lunch Kirstie says she's surprised at how little the town seems to appreciate the importance of Subbuteo (she actually used the phrase 'cashing in' but I wouldn't have been so vulgar as to say this). She wonders why there's no museum to the game here, or at least a permanent display that explains how it was invented and grew from the local area to become the world's premier table soccer game for decades. I tell her I'm as baffled as she is. Even the town's Wetherspoons pub doesn't acknowledge this; not for them the Peter Adolph, the Old Heavyweight or even the Wobbly Base. Instead, it's called the Opera House, and to be honest it's a remarkable place. A Grade II-listed building, it was once a real opera house and it still retains many of the original features such as the stage, the orchestra pit, boxes and seats in both a circle and dress circle. Once a year the pub is turned back into an opera house and tickets to a one-off performance are sold to the locals.

It's still surprising, however, that Tunbridge Wells doesn't capitalise more on its connections with the game of Subbuteo. After all, it started here in 1946 and grew to be a major employer in the area, both in the form of full-time factory workers and part-time painters who were drawn from the housewives of the surrounding area. Starting in that building in Langton Green, it soon expanded into factory premises in the town of Tunbridge Wells itself.

Throughout its early existence, Subbuteo had enjoyed a fierce rivalry with another table football game, Newfooty, founded by William Keeling in 1929 and produced in Liverpool. Sales of the rival game had been declining

since the arrival of Subbuteo in 1946, and by 1961 Peter Adolph was about to deliver the *coup de grâce* to his ailing rival. In time for Christmas 1961 Subbuteo released their first sets with the now famous 3D figure in 00 scale. Now known as the original heavyweight (OHW) figure, they beat Newfooty to the punch and by the time their rival's own 3D figure made an appearance the game was up for them. The Newfooty company ceased trading in 1961, but Keeling, desperate to keep going, briefly revived the game under a new company, Crestlin Ltd, but it too folded, this time for good in 1964. Subbuteo was now unrivalled in the marketplace and Adolph would make sure it stayed that way for a long time. In fact, a *very* long time. At least until the dawn of the games console in the early 1990s and the advent of games like *FIFA* and *Sensible Soccer*. By then the genie was well and truly out of the bottle. The game by this time was in the hands of the American giant Hasbro, who many felt didn't really understand its culture.

Given the age of most collectors in the current Subbuteo community, the 1970s above all the different eras is seen as the 'golden age' for the game. For many, including me, the genius of one man's design is responsible for it all: Charles Stadden, whose life story reads rather like a boy's own adventure.

### **The genius of Charles Stadden**

Charles Stadden was the third of four children born to working-class parents in the east London area of Leytonstone in June 1919. His father Francis had served in the Middlesex Regiment in the First World War, rising to the rank of company sergeant major and this undoubtedly



had fuelled his interest in all things military; an interest that would stay with him all his life.

Stadden himself had an eventful war, serving in France, the Middle East, North Africa and Italy. When the war ended he returned to work in light engineering, but by 1951 his childhood love of model soldiers became a business opportunity, and he turned his hand to their commercial production, designing 'master models' or 'patterns' for some of the most famous manufacturers. But it was not only toy soldiers he designed. Stadden designed figures for Hornby and Scalextric and this talent soon brought him to the attention of Peter Adolph.

Sadly, Charles Stadden is no longer with us. The great man passed away in 2002, but his son Andrew is very much alive, and in many ways following in his father's footsteps – being himself a sculptor and producer of military miniatures and models of considerable repute. Andrew tells me that nowadays a lot of his work is in repairing and restoring the very popular range of 85mm military figures that his father produced right up until his death in 2002 and were still being made and sold as late as 2005.

After contacting him through Twitter, Andrew kindly agreed to give me an interview about his late father's work with Subbuteo, so I began by explaining that in the course of producing my podcast I had realised that although collectors knew who his father was, others in the community were largely unaware of who he was.

So, to my first question: was Charles aware of how iconic his classic heavyweight figure became? Andrew is clear in his response, 'I'm sure he knew it was valued by collectors. I remember him doing that figure because

most of the Subbuteo master pattern figures he made were made in pewter. He always worked in pewter. He didn't use any modelling compounds, or putties, or plasticines or anything. He carved directly into pewter and that particular figure or set of figures was made in a larger scale, whereas most of the others were directly made into 1/76 or 00 scale.'

Andrew then goes on to explain how Subbuteo managed to retain the exquisite detail when producing the figure in the much smaller 00 scale, 'Subbuteo used an instrument called a pantograph which is like a machine tool to reduce it in size and have the extra detail on it.'

Talking of the detail, I'm now interested to find out who Charles's inspiration for the figure might have been. With his distinctive 1960s-style haircut and impressive torso I had always wondered if he had been based on anyone in particular. Liverpool's legendary Scottish captain (and fellow Aberdonian) Ron Yeats had always been in the forefront of my thinking. 'I don't know particularly,' Andrew tells me. 'But it always struck me that the sort of body shape always looks to me – and this has nothing to do with what my dad said as I don't know if it was sculpted on any particular player – but it's always looked a bit to me like Bobby Moore.' That sounds quite likely to me now, given that Moore had just captained England to World Cup victory, so although not a definitive answer to my question, it's certainly a plausible one.

Had Andrew played Subbuteo as a child? 'Yeah. When my dad started making the first figures in 1962 where they were moulded directly into the base [the Walker] and he'd been given a set from the factory for my brother – he was

seven years older than me but he was never really interested in football or playing Subbuteo so when I was old enough that came along to me. Then later on I bought many of my own teams. I used to play with my friends and have tournaments, probably right up until I went to university.' I ask Andrew if he ever played Subbuteo with his father. 'No. I can't recall that at all,' he replies. 'We used to do loads of other stuff with Dad, but I don't think he was particularly interested in playing any sort of board game or anything like that. I can't even remember him playing cards.'

Could Andrew, I wonder, shed any light on his father's working relationship with Peter Adolph? 'I think they had a good relationship.' Stadden's working relationship with Adolph must have been good as over the years he produced a wide range of figures for him, not just for Subbuteo football, but also for the rugby and cricket games as well. Of course, there is one thing that Stadden refused to design for Subbuteo, but that came after Adolph's time – the FIFA World Cup trophy. After sculpting the Jules Rimet in miniature, it seemed that Stadden would be the obvious choice for producing the new trophy after its unveiling at the 1974 World Cup finals in West Germany. Charles, however, had other ideas. Andrew explains, 'At the time he was also offered the modern-day World Cup with the angel carrying the globe, but he absolutely hated the design of that, so he refused it. In the 1960s, Dad was scrabbling around for work, so he'd tend to take everything on, but by the early 1970s he was able to turn things down and pick and choose a lot more.'

This is great stuff. I'm learning so much about the man that created some of the most iconic figures in the history

of British toy making, but there's one last question I want to ask Andrew. I'm dying to know if there were any perks to being the son of the great Charles Stadden. 'All of the toy things he worked on we used to get the prototype plastic models back because all of Dad's models were made in pewter, so once they were like pre-production models for some reason we got them sent to the family and I'd get to test out some of the Subbuteo stuff. I remember we had the rugby kicker and we used to play with that, and I think we had a larger version of the throw-in figure.'

Did he get to keep them or were they handed back to the toy companies? 'Yeah, we got to keep them. In fact, they might still be in a box here. My mother passed away in 2020 and we had to clear out the house, so they might still be here in boxes. I think there's shoeboxes full of bits and pieces that Dad made and got back as plastic samples.' I inform him that once this book is published and the collecting community find out that he's sitting on a pile of pre-production Subbuteo prototypes, he's likely to find them reaching out to him in the hope that he might let them have a piece of British toy history.

It's clear that his father's work – his military figures, his artwork and of course, his toy work – is a source of extreme pride for Andrew. After all, there can't be many people whose father's work was to be found in most households throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

### **Hating Emlyn Hughes and Subbuteo pillows**

It's the hottest evening of the year so far. The windows in the front room are open and the sound of cars speeding up and down the main road I live on tells me that the boy

racers are out in force tonight, letting their exhausts rip in the late-evening sunshine and annoying grumpy old men like me who are trying to set up an interview. Eventually, a relative calm descends on the street outside and I find myself talking to Daniel Tatarsky about his much-loved book *Flick to Kick: An Illustrated History of Subbuteo*. His book has become something of a reference text for me in the preparation of my own, and I knew that I couldn't write about the current state of Subbuteo without talking to the man who, in my humble opinion, had written *the* definitive book about the hobby. Daniel, it turns out, is of a similar vintage to myself. He's a 58-year-old actor and writer, born in Liverpool but now resident in Newlyn in Cornwall where he lives with his wife and two border terriers.

I start by asking him why he had written his book in the first place. 'The reason I wrote the book,' he tells me, 'was very specifically because I wanted to write something that I would enjoy, and it was actually the first book that I had published. At the time, the only Subbuteo book that was out there was *Fifty Years of Flicking* [by Dr Richard Payne], which I think is a good book with a lot of good information in it, but it didn't look great and it didn't celebrate Subbuteo in the way that I wanted Subbuteo to be celebrated. That's basically why I wrote it – I wanted a book about Subbuteo that I would want to read, and I couldn't find one out there, so I ended up writing it.'

I tell him that I particularly like the fact that his book, although dealing seriously with the hobby, also has plenty of humour in it. He tells me the humour was included in the book mainly because when he played Subbuteo as a child it wasn't just about the playing of the game, it was

also about what he and his opponents would have said to each other during games. He goes on to explain how his publishers were very good at allowing him to use his sense of humour, illustrated by his favourite joke in the book, ‘I’ve never liked Emlyn Hughes, because I’m an Everton fan. One time when Liverpool won the European Cup they had the open-top tour and they were standing on the steps of Liverpool Town Hall and Emlyn Hughes shouted to the crowd, “Liverpool are magic, Everton are tragic,” and although we probably were tragic at the time because we weren’t very good, it just made me hate him, so when I was writing the captions for the book my favourite one is on page 13 where there’s a picture of Kevin Keegan, Andrea Piccaluga [the then Subbuteo world champion from Italy] and Emlyn Hughes. I was very pleased the publisher allowed me to say, “Two great exponents of the beautiful game and Emlyn Hughes.” That’s the sort of humour I have with my mates and as I said at the start I wanted to write a book that *I* would enjoy reading.’

Daniel clearly loves Subbuteo and I’m itching to know how and when he started playing the game. ‘I used to play with my brothers and friends and neighbours. If we couldn’t play football outside we would inevitably end up playing Subbuteo inside. We used to have tournaments and we’d watch each other play. In fact, we had these little telephones that you could use to speak to someone in another room and occasionally we would do commentary to the people in there.’

Now, I’ve heard a lot of surprising things about people’s childhood playing of Subbuteo while conducting interviews for the podcast and this book, but nothing prepares me for

what comes next. 'We used to have Subbuteo pillows,' he says. 'Because we had this hessian carpet which was really painful on your knees and because we weren't allowed to put the board on the table we always used to play on the floor and the carpet really dug into your knees so we used to each have our own little Subbuteo pillow or cushion that we would sort of carry round the pitch with us so we didn't hurt our delicate kiddie knees.' I make a mental note to ask a collector friend if he actually has one of those. I'm pretty sure he does.<sup>6</sup>

Daniel played with his friends throughout his teenage years, but like everything else in life there comes a time when other things take priority. For Daniel, this was when he went away to university and although he kept playing on and off, he only really started playing again seriously when he was researching his book and joined a Subbuteo club in Putney. He enjoyed his time at the club and while there he entered a few competitions. He tells me that he reached number 51 in the English rankings, but then rather self-deprecatingly he goes on to say, 'That might have been out of 52 people.' In fact he still plays and he tells me that recently they had friends visiting and since he'd just moved house and had all of his Subbuteo stuff out, they had a few games.

On reading *Flick to Kick* it soon becomes clear (at least to me – you dear reader may disagree) that like me he considers the late 1970s and early 1980s to be something of a golden age for Subbuteo. I ask him if this is simply

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, the following evening I search for 'Subbuteo pillows' on Google and find that you can now buy such a thing on Red Bubble. Who knew? I send Daniel a picture of the pillow, but to date I have no idea whether or not he has actually purchased one.

nostalgia on his part (as it is with me) or is there something else that brings him to that conclusion? He agrees that there's an element of nostalgia, but goes on to explain that he believes that era was the best time for the game mainly because of sound business data that he unearthed during his research. 'That was when it was selling the most,' he says with an air of authority. 'That was when it was played in the most countries and that's around the time when it won Game of the Year for the second time. I think that's when it was at its peak and also, it's before the growth of video games and stuff like that. Whilst there are obviously still a lot of people who play it, I don't think we can say that it's anywhere near as much played as it used to be. I'm not sure it will always be played, but certainly among people our age it's always going to be well-loved.'

I then come to the question that I've been kind of dreading asking. It refers to a quote from his book. I'm interested as to whether or not he still stands by what he wrote back in 2004. I tell him I'm a little nervous about asking him this but he puts me at ease and tells me I can ask him anything, so I take the plunge, 'In the Outroduction for your book you wrote, "The latest owners, Hasbro, now see a future for the brand which looks exciting." Do you still hold that opinion today given what many in the community see as Hasbro's actual managed decline of the brand?' I apologise again for bringing it up, but he appears fine with the question. 'At the time I wrote that they [Hasbro] did have big plans for it [Subbuteo], and they were going to do a major relaunch and they had all these ideas. And while I never thought that they would launch it to such a point where it would go back to what it was in the



70s and 80s, they seemed enthusiastic to want to do better for it ... but yeah, if I was writing the Outroduction now I would probably say, “Hasbro had big plans for the brand but they never came to fruition.” Nowadays, it’s of value to them [Hasbro] as a brand, but in terms of the game, they’re happy for other people to produce it and try and sell it.’

Another thing that comes through in Daniel’s book is his admiration for Peter Adolph as an entrepreneur. Like Daniel, I’m an admirer of the great man, but I believe that as good as he was, it was the sale of the company to Waddingtons in the 1960s that really propelled the game to the stratospheric heights it ultimately reached. I’m actually nervous to ask him if he agrees with me, but in for a penny, in for a pound, so I put this to him. He begins by pretty much agreeing with me which raises my spirits somewhat. ‘It [Subbuteo] had grown beyond a cottage industry and I think there’s a little anecdote which I put in the book where there was a day when he [Adolph] saw someone walking in the offices and he didn’t know who they were and that it was at that point that he thought, “The company’s too big for me now.” It obviously grew very well under him and had become an established product, but I think that without the force of Waddingtons it probably wouldn’t have gone on to the heights that it got to in the 70s. As an entrepreneur – without him it wouldn’t even have got off the ground – he was incredible and while he was happy with the price he sold it for I think his one problem was that he never really let go and that was a shame for him, I think.’

We talk briefly about Adolph’s short stint in the Waddingtons era as a consultant and how this didn’t last very long, drawing parallels with what life was like

for Bill Shankly after his shock retirement from football in the summer of 1974. Daniel seems to agree with this comparison. 'I think with Adolph it was he basically wanted the best of both worlds – he wanted the money for selling it, but he wanted to keep control and that was never going to happen. Also, his thing about trying to "Subbuteo-ise" everything was never going to work – and people can argue with me as much as they want about this, but Subbuteo football is brilliant. It's a great game and I love it. Subbuteo Rugby and Subbuteo Cricket, with the best will in the world, are a bit crap. Subbuteo Rugby is, in effect, Subbuteo football but with a ball that you can't kick. Subbuteo Cricket is just not ... as good but it's all right. Obviously, I've bought both Subbuteo Rugby and Subbuteo Cricket but they're just not as good as the football.'

In the end, Daniel accepts the truly remarkable achievement that is Subbuteo and the role that its creator played in that. He ends his contribution to this part of the conversation rather sadly, 'He [Adolph] came up with, or rather developed, one brilliant idea but he should have stopped there. I wish I was as lucky to be in that position.'

I realise that by now we've been talking for an hour and I'm conscious that I don't want to take up too much more of his time, but I'm interested to find out what he knows about the current state of the hobby. 'To be honest, I don't. I don't really follow it. If you split Subbuteo into its two main areas – playing and collecting – every now and then I'll go on eBay and see if anything tickles my fancy.' I ask about collectors' fairs. 'We're in Cornwall, miles from anywhere,' he says. 'But if there was one nearby, I would go.' Back to the current state of the game. Does he know

anything about the playing side? ‘I don’t really follow the playing side of it. I couldn’t tell you who the best players are in the country at the moment.’

That seems a good place to end the conversation, so I thank Daniel for generously giving his time. He tells me it’s no bother and that if I’ve got anything else I want to ask him then I just have to get in touch, and he’ll try to help. Daniel has been kind, warm and funny, and I come away from the conversation feeling like I always do when I meet someone who loves the game – that I’ve made a new friend, and there’s not many communities where you can say that about someone who was a complete stranger to you less than an hour earlier.