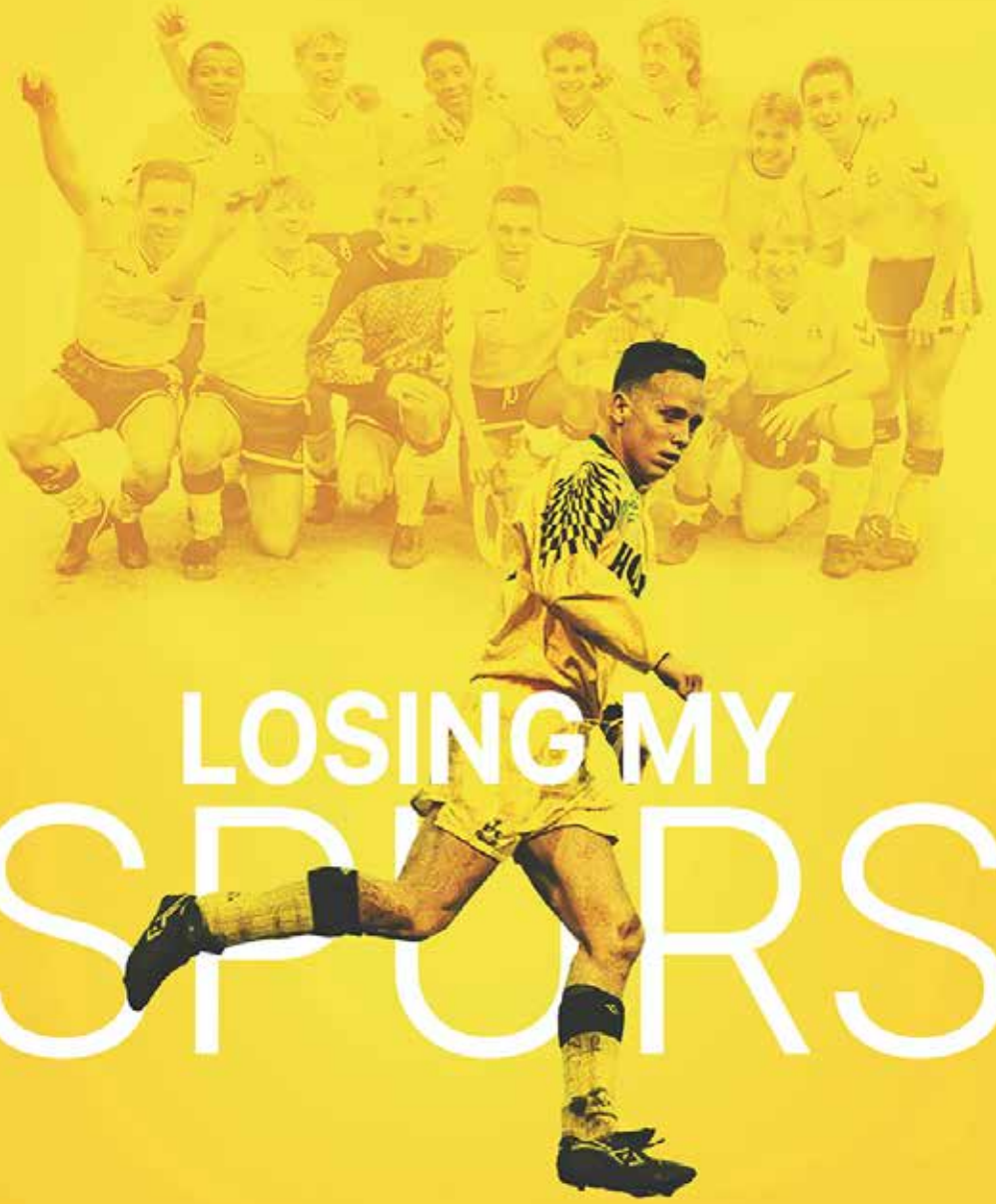
ANTHONY POTTS



LOSING MY SPURS

GAZZA, THE GRIEF AND THE GLORY

The Memoirs of a Failed Footballer

ANTHONY POTTS

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Contents

Prologue 9

1. Jumpers for Goalposts 11

2. Woolies Wonders 24

3. Football Existed Before 1992 29

4. All Latin to Me 37

5. House of Cards 46

6. Phoenix Rising 58

7. Is F*** an Adverb? 63

8. Up for the Cup 89

9. Three Lions 127

10. Is Gascoigne Going to Have a Crack? 136

11. I'm Doing Nothing Until He Gets One 154

12. Trial and Error 186

13. Lost 202

Epilogue 222

1

Jumpers for Goalposts

'POTTSY, IT'S my knee. It's f***ed. I saw the X-ray, they're saying it's nothing but I'm telling you it's f***ed.'

'What do you want to do?' I asked.

'We need to get back to London, get John to look at it. I'll get Jimmy to drive us.'

This conversation took place in the early hours of 29 September 1991. I was standing, more like swaying, in a quiet corner of the Newcastle Freeman Hospital. I had been drinking for two days and was talking to a very distressed Paul Gascoigne, arguably the most talented player in English history.

This wasn't how I had pictured life as a professional footballer.

* * *

I can't remember a time when I wasn't obsessed by football. As I have got older, I have managed this obsession but it is still there.

I'm not one of those who has incredibly early memories and can't recall living in the womb or being held as a baby. Before the age of about four is a complete mystery to me, but I can remember Arsenal getting to three consecutive FA Cup finals at the end of the 1970s. I was five for the first, against Ipswich Town. This was in a time when the FA Cup was the pinnacle of the footballing calendar. I can remember the excitement of the build-up during the week. The day itself was a real event. It was shown all day on ITV and BBC and I would watch every minute, flicking backwards and forwards from channel to channel to find the best segments. Meet the players, how they got there, the fitting of the cup final suit, the FA Cup song and joining the players as they left the hotel to go to the game. I loved it all. I would get some sweets and sit down on the floor of the living room with my dad and watch five hours of build-up followed by the game itself. I would physically shake with excitement.

My dad, Michael, takes his football very seriously. He has never hidden his annoyance if his concentration on the game is interrupted, and everyone in our house knew not to make a noise when the football was on. I know I used to irritate him with my inane questions. I used to try so hard to sit there in silence, but my excitement always got the better of me. Seven hours is a long time for any child to be quiet and I'm sure my dad was relieved when we finally got a second television and I could watch the build-up in a different room. I would still go back for the game itself, though.

Years later, I used to watch *Match of the Day* with my dad. It was the only programme I was allowed to stay up past my bedtime for. He would spend all evening avoiding the results as he didn't want to know the scores before he watched the highlights. The radio in the car would be switched off, and he would avoid anyone who might tell him the score. When it came to the time that *Match of the Day* was due to start, he would turn the television on and off, really quickly, in case the news had overrun, as at the end of the bulletins they gave the football scores. If it overran, and he saw the results flash up on the screen, the air would turn blue. My mum, Patricia, would then usher me out of the room; it was a similar thing when he was doing DIY and it wasn't going as smoothly as he had anticipated. I would be transferred to the garden before I heard some words that my young ears weren't yet ready for.

My dad was a latecomer to football. It was always a regret for him that as a young man, in 1963, he and my mum had owned a flat that overlooked Highbury, the home of Arsenal. He had a perfect view of the action, which Arsenal fans would have killed for. But, at that time, he had no interest in watching the game, and would even make a point of leaving the flat on a Saturday afternoon as the noise of the crowd would disturb his day. He played football as a young man but never watched it and was never really a fan. The World Cup in 1966 was the event that ignited his love for football. He then began watching Millwall with my mum's dad and ended up being a season ticket

holder. He actually missed the birth of my sister while queuing to get a season ticket for Millwall in 1968, something my nan never let him forget. He was lucky that the team he watched ended up evolving into the class of 1971, thought by most Millwall fans to be their best ever. Millwall were always my second team growing up. They started an obsession for football with my dad which he then passed on to me.

When I was just three years old, my dad was involved in a motorbike accident which left him in Greenwich Hospital for nearly three years. I was five when he eventually left. It was a bad break to his leg, which got infected, and they spent all that time trying to save the limb. The ward he was on was full of patients in similar situations. Eventually, they had to concede that they could not save it.

My mum used to regularly take me and my sister Sarah to visit my dad at the hospital. After they heard the news that my dad's leg was to be amputated, my mum took me aside before a visit to the hospital and explained what was going to happen. They were very worried about how I might react with me still being so young. *The Six Million Dollar Man* was a very popular programme at the time, and my dad's new leg was sold to me as a bionic one, just like Colonel Steve Austin. The thought was that rather than me seeing the amputation as a disability, it would convince me that it was actually a good thing. Far from being bothered by it, I was envious. For years I thought my dad could leap giant buildings in a single bound. He must have got

sick of me constantly asking him questions about his 'bionic' leg. My dad said that on that particular visit he was sitting in his bed waiting for us when a very loud voice could be heard from the corridor shouting excitedly, 'Daddy, they're cutting off your leg today!'

The way my dad tells it, everyone in the ward turned to stare at the door in horror, praying it wasn't going to be their kid who walked in the door. The group sigh of relief could be heard in the hospital car park.

When my dad was in the hospital, he became friends with a patient in the next bed to him, who had two broken legs. It turned out that he was a safe breaker who had been breaking into an office when he fell through the roof. His accomplices had to carry him back out and drive him home in agony. They then set it up at his house to make it look like he had fallen off a ladder. He was well known to the police and they knew he had been the one who had fallen through the roof but they had no evidence so couldn't charge him. In conversation, he told my dad of a big job they had planned. From my knowledge of cop shows, I think you would call it a 'blag'. He asked my dad if he would want to be the getaway driver. My dad said yes! He figured that he wasn't known to the police so no one would suspect him. In the end, the amputation meant he couldn't take part.

I still don't know if the 'blag' was a success.

My dad would often tell us stories of some of the things he got up to as a young man, normally with my mum trying to

shush him as she didn't think it was the best example to set. I guess you would call him 'old school'. He always had an angle on every job he did and, as a young man, if he had enough money for a nice suit and to be able to get drunk at the weekend, he was content. When I was a child, he was very strict and instilled in me good manners and respect. I was always very conscious of not wanting to upset or disappoint him. He is very big on family, and some of my fondest memories of my childhood are holidays in a caravan at various places around England.

After the accident he was unable to do a job of his choice, having to take the first job that was available. His options were limited. This was before everything was so politically correct and if you went for a job interview, having one leg put you in a worse position than someone with two. As a result, he worked for nearly 20 years for British Telecom, doing a job he hated. He did it purely to provide for his family. He was a proud man and to not work and earn his own money was never an option. He hated it but he would have done his job to the best of his ability; he has always been a perfectionist. He also would not have done an additional second of work than he had to. If management asked him to do something that he felt wasn't part of his job, then he would have refused to do it. It was a job to him and if it wasn't in his job description then he wasn't doing it. He saw his sick leave entitlement as days due off that he would always take every second of. I can remember him planning out when he was going to take them at the start of each working year. I

was always aware of the sacrifices that he had to make to build a future for his family.

Apparently after the operation, when he was given the all clear to go home, they were still very worried about how I might react. These worries soon disappeared when, on his first attempt to get up the stairs on one leg, I sprinted through the gap where his leg used to be, to beat him to the top.

I don't remember much of him being at the hospital, but I can only imagine how difficult it must have been for both him and my mum. My dad was in constant pain, and has been ever since, and he was stuck in a hospital bed while my mum struggled to bring up two young children alone. She really held our family together at this time and she was always on the go. My sister, Sarah, is four years older than me and was already at primary school, but I was still too young for school. I can remember that my mum used to clean houses for extra money, and she would have to bring me along as she couldn't afford childcare. It must have taken her twice as long having to clean up after me as well as do the job she was paid for. It sounds like a cliché but both my parents have always been sources of inspiration to me for how they have dealt with my dad's disability. He is in almost constant pain and has been for more than 40 years due to complications with the amputation. Yet when I look back on my childhood it was blissful, I never felt like I missed out on anything or that it was any different to anybody else's. That's a credit to both my parents.

I was born and lived in Welling, in south-east London. Charlton Athletic were my local side but this was not a good time in their history, as they had low attendances and struggled financially. Growing up, everyone I knew was an Arsenal fan. I say everyone; there was one kid down my street who supported Nottingham Forest. He was always in their kit. It is incredible to think that they won back-to-back European Cups in 1979 and 1980. At the time, supporting Forest in Welling was the equivalent of a Londoner supporting Manchester City or Manchester United: a glory hunter or plastic fan, as they are now called. Unfortunately for him the glory didn't last long, but credit to him, he still supports them even now.

The kids who played out in the street in my road were all dressed in replica Arsenal kits and I became a fully fledged fan when I was given a hand-me-down strip from a boy on my street called Alan. I was only about five and it was far too big for me. I had to roll the sleeves up about eight times just to be able to use my hands and a strong gust of wind would have seen me take flight like Mary Poppins. So that was me, five years old and an Arsenal fan whether I liked it or not. I loved that top and still have it even now. The funny thing is that it was the kit from when Arsenal did the double in 1971, which was a year before I was born, so it was already six years out of date when I got it.

I consider myself to be fortunate as being the last generation that really properly played outside. They call us Generation X. There was one reason that we played out so much; there was

literally nothing else to do. There were only three TV channels, and no internet or video games. Children's TV lasted about an hour and a half and most of that was educational, with programmes like *Why Don't You?*, *John Craven's Newsround* or *Blue Peter*. I had just spent my day having to learn things at school and didn't want to do it in my free time too. Every night I would race home from school to watch cartoons or *Grange Hill* before having my tea, then go out playing football until the street lights came on. Playing out, running around, making up games, laughing and having fun with your mates. It genuinely doesn't get any better than that. The street lights were my signal that it was late and I had to come in; there were no mobile phones then. The older children would play out under the lights until their parents screamed their name from the doorsteps of their houses.

We would use the kerbs as touchlines and the tar lines across the road as the goal line. There were hardly any cars and most were on driveways. Occasionally a shout of 'Car!' would go up and we would grab the ball and wait on the pavement for it to go past. What few cars were parked on the road – no household had more than one car – were like magnets to the ball. It always seemed to get stuck underneath them. Then it would be the job of the kid with the longest legs to lay on the floor and try and scoop the ball back out from underneath. Many a pair of trousers were ruined by oil from under the car.

The footballs we played with cost about a pound and would often burst and then we would all club together enough money to buy a new one from the corner shop. They were air floaters and almost impossible to control as they were so light and flimsy. If you owned the ball, you literally owned the game; everyone was too scared that you would take your ball and go home. These matches were often rough and bad-tempered and there were always fights but these would be instantly forgotten and forgiven.

The neighbours were our biggest problem. The ball would end up in gardens, and we all knew which gardens we were okay to go in and which ones we had to sneak into. The rule was if you kicked it in the garden, then you had to get it. At this time, you knew the names of all your neighbours and I can remember hating or liking them all based on how annoyed they got if our ball went in their garden. The best tactic was to get in and out as quickly as possible before you were spotted. Being shouted at and threatened by neighbours was a regular occurrence, unlike today where people are too scared of repercussions. All the people in my street knew who I was and where I lived and they would be around my house in a heartbeat if I got too lippy or the ball went into a garden too many times. Then the doorstep shout would come, and you would make the walk of shame, banished indoors with a smack round the back of your legs for damaging a plant or not showing respect to your elders. It was a relief when the summer came and we could go and play on the heath at the top of the road.

Bostall Heath was where I really learned my football. In the summer, I would play until it was too dark to see the ball. We would take spare clothes to put down as goalposts and put them in front of the biggest bush on the edge of the heath so that we wouldn't have to keep running after the ball if the keeper didn't save it. It did mean we would be scratched to pieces trying to recover the ball. I didn't have many friends outside of school my own age; you played with the kids who lived near you and the children in my street were all three or four years older than me. It certainly helped my football development. On the heath there used to be huge games sometimes with as many as 30 or 40 kids. I was still about seven or eight while most of the players were teenagers. I was by far the smallest but would often get picked quite early as I wouldn't stop running and was always comfortable with a ball at my feet. I used to love it when they said good things about my footballing skills and I was always trying to impress them.

It is easy to look back on this time with rose-tinted glasses, but half the reason we were allowed out so much was because of an ignorance to the dangers and the lack of cars. Every park had a strange adult who you knew to stay clear of and most families had a peculiar uncle who you were told to stay away from too. There was a lack of real awareness of the dangers – even my 'friends' I was playing football with on the heath. It was only later that I realised that these kids were all truanting from school. I would race home from primary school and go straight

up the heath in the summer, often forgoing my tea until later. These kids, who were supposed to be at the local comprehensive school, known locally as Elsa, would already be there smoking, drinking and doing drugs. But I didn't care, I was there to play football. Besides, I had no reference point, I just thought it was normal. They would offer me cigarettes and swigs of their drink, but I wasn't interested. Footballers didn't drink or smoke (or so I thought) so neither would I! As dodgy as they were, they all looked after me and I never felt threatened in any way. I was by far the youngest and they were very protective towards me. If we didn't have a ball to play with, they would ask me if any footballs had gone up on my primary school roof during break time that day. If any had, they would scale the gate, climb on the roof and take the ball to continue the game.

There was a serious gang problem on the estate near my house, and I can remember that huge fights and stabbings were not unusual. One time, a kid got stabbed in an alleyway next to my school as I walked through it and a couple of the kids from the heath, who were involved in the incident, practically picked me up and ran me away from the trouble. Arson was another big problem; schools were regularly burnt down and fires were always being set in the woods next to the heath. Racism was also rife. The National Front had their offices in Welling and used to give out leaflets outside the local schools. The local council cleaners would get beaten up for trying to take these posters down. Racist graffiti was everywhere. It was based

largely on a fear of the unknown. In 13 years of education based around Welling I can count the number of class-mates who weren't white British on one hand, and yet this was real hate. In 1977 there was a riot in Lewisham, our neighbouring borough, after a National Front march. It had the dubious distinction of being the first use of riot shields in mainland England. People have short memories when they talk about the kids of today.

My regular football partner in crime at this age was a kid called Nicky Georgiou. He was four years older than me and had been in my sister's class in Hillsgrove, our local primary school. He was incredibly skilful, and I was always trying to emulate what he did. He went to Elsa, which was the same school the kids from the heath were supposed to be at. Elsa had an awful reputation in the area, and these kids were the worst of a bad lot. Nicky wasn't as keen as me to join in their games on the heath because he was more aware of what they were really like. If you saw these kids walking down the road towards you, you would turn around and walk the other way. One of them used to threaten Nicky to make him join in the matches and, in the end, Nicky had to tell a teacher at his school and they put the equivalent of a restraining order on this kid. I just carried on blissfully unaware, happy that there was always a game of football to play in.