

Love  
of the  
Game

*Ricky*  
HILL

The Man Who Brought  
The Rooney Rule  
to the UK



FOREWORD BY IAN WRIGHT



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## Foreword by former Arsenal and England striker Ian Wright

RICKY HILL meant a lot to me, and he still means a lot to me. He was without any question one of the pioneers. And what a footballer! He played the kind of football that black players played when me and my mates were just knocking a ball around while we were growing up. He was exciting, dynamic, he wanted to attack all the time, but he always worked so hard for the team as well. I loved his curly perm, that juicy hair, and I really loved the way he played, with that swagger in the midfield.

When Crystal Palace offered me a trial and then a contract in 1985, I was a Sunday league player with Ten-em-Bee, an all-black team in London. We played in an annual tournament and Ricky was always there, every year, watching the games, watching players, and by this time he was an established young professional at Luton. We all knew he was one of us, a black kid from London, who hadn't been picked up by a professional club as a boy but someone who had properly made it in respects of being in and around the England scene and being among the best players in the top division, and being admired by fans and people in the game. Ricky was up there at that level, but he took

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the time to come and see us play. It meant so much to me and everyone else.

He really doesn't get the credit he deserves for what he did as a player and what he's done to help black coaches and managers after playing. But at the same time, every black player will know that Ricky had a prominent influence on the rise of black players back in the day. Ricky Hill has always been an inspirational figure for all of us.

## Joy and Pain of the Game

I HAVE always loved football and I still love it. From kicking a ball around outside my house in north London, to playing for England at Wembley, four miles from where I grew up, being in and around football all my life has been a joy. I was the fourth black player to represent England, after Viv Anderson, Laurie Cunningham and my schoolboy friend Cyrille Regis. I believe I was the first player of Asian origin to represent England in official matches outside of wartime.

I've got a pure love of the game, but I've also experienced the pain of the game as well.

I've been with my amazing wife Sharon since 1982, and we have been married since 1986. She's been the rock not just for me but also for our family, coping with move after move as I tried to build a coaching career. But despite me playing for Luton over 500 times, as well as England, she only saw me play a few matches in my entire career. Why? Because the first time she watched me she was sickened by the racist abuse I was subjected to. It was at QPR, less than three miles from where she was brought up in Kensal Rise, north London.

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In this era, racial abuse of players was commonplace. Chelsea's Paul Canoville was targeted by fans of the club he was playing for, and John Fashanu told me that when he scored for Millwall, large sections of their fans would call it an own goal because they could not tolerate a black player scoring for their team.

That day at Loftus Road, Brian Stein and I were the only black players on the pitch. Sharon was just 18. She took her seat and then listened to the vicious hate towards the two of us. It took all of her strength of character not to respond to the cowards. Afterwards she was adamant she would never attend another game. As I recall she only came three more times to watch me play the game I love; the two League Cup finals in the late 1980s and a league match at Luton. Thankfully she wasn't there to witness me suffering a horrible injury on the pitch in a game in 1987, and so she didn't hear the subsequent shouts of 'nigger, hope it ends your career' raining down from the terraces.

Personally I could deal with that type of direct racial abuse. I'm certainly not excusing it or saying it's acceptable, but I learned to deal with it in my own way.

It's the covert racism that seems impossible to change. It's embedded in the systemic culture of all the institutions within the UK and elsewhere. That, in my opinion, is the real offensive racial discrimination as it prevents black people like me from living an equal life, with equal opportunities. Those decision-makers who freely quote 'if they're good enough they'll get their chance' are never then asked how, over the last 30 years, so many black or Asian minority coaches have been excluded from not just managerial opportunities, but more importantly, a chance to coach at the senior professional level in order to create

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a track record, and be in the conversations when managerial vacancies appear.

Just as black players found it hard to be accepted into the professional game in the 1970s, black managers years later would find that acceptance equally difficult.

It always seemed slightly strange to me. Think about it: the greatest footballer on earth was universally acknowledged to be Pele, and he just happened to be black. He took the football world by storm as long ago as the 1950s. As a boy in the 1960s, and into my teenage years in the early 1970s, in the European leagues and in particular the English leagues, black players who were attempting to carve out a career in the world of professional football were rejected and in most cases totally ignored. And along with that reaction came the stereotypical statements such as ‘black players don’t like the cold weather’; ‘black players are too volatile’; ‘black players can’t head the ball’. It was as if those in positions of power in football – managers, coaches, chairmen and the Football Association – were making a conscious effort to propel those stereotypes throughout the industry. Here is an example from 1983 in *Shoot!*, the most popular football magazine at the time, in an article about why black players were becoming more and more successful in that decade, ‘Twenty years ago the chances of Cyrille [Regis] managing to bridge the gap between non-league football and the big time would have been strictly limited, probably nil. Black men did not play league football in those days. The trouble with most black footballers hoping to make a career in the British game in those days was that they bore all the physical attributes necessary to play but had glaring weaknesses in technique and attitude. They often lacked commitment, they



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struggled to concentrate for a full 90 minutes and tended to wilt under pressure.’

I don’t remember Pele wilting under pressure or lacking commitment when Brazil won successive World Cups in 1958 and 1962. The amazing thing about this article is that it was written by (or ghost-written for) a black player – the late Justin Fashanu. In a feature piece titled ‘My Soccer All Blacks’, Justin picked out an all-black team, and I’m grateful I was selected. Either those negative words about black players were put into Justin’s mouth, or it shows the level of conditioning in this country about attitudes towards those with black skin. It was so ingrained that even some black people believed it.

It didn’t make sense to me that since the age of five, when I had developed my love of the game, there seemed to be such a limited black presence around the English professional leagues, despite the fact that I had seen and played with some really magnificent black players throughout my school years. They are the lost generation: I’m saddened that ALL those champion players from before my time as a professional missed out because of the wrongful perceptions and wilful racism of those in the game. They were denied an opportunity to make it in football.

Gradually that changed. One by one, through the outstanding exploits of the black professional players, the stereotypical statements were proven to be nothing but a conspiracy founded by a generation who were really not educated in tolerance or acceptance, with an overriding fear of the unknown. Thank goodness for the few open-minded managers who looked beyond what they knew, the ones who extended the hand of friendship and opportunity to all – including me – based on ability, not colour.

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But here we are decades later and the racism still exists. I've received three Coach of the Year awards outside of the UK, yet up until 2019, I had only ever had one reply to countless applications for coaching roles in England in the past 20 years or so. That decency and respect came from Sir Alex Ferguson, who turned me down for a job coaching his reserves, phoning me to explain that Manchester United were going in a different direction. I had got down to the final two for the job, and enjoyed a two-hour interview with Sir Alex at Carrington, United's training ground. In the end I was just edged out by Ricky Sbragia.

This is why I have passionately researched the Rooney Rule, with the aim of bringing it into English football. Indeed, when the Football League backed plans for a pilot of the Rooney Rule in June 2015, the deputy chief executive of the Professional Footballers' Association, Bobby Barnes, said, 'Acknowledgement must go to former Luton Town and England player Ricky Hill, who first brought the NFL's Rooney Rule to our attention at the PFA's inaugural Black Players' Steering Committee, back in 2004.'

That line barely scratches the surface, and I've been left disappointed and frustrated by those in positions of power who haven't fought hard enough in my opinion to ensure that real change takes place in the inclusion of black or Asian minority coaches/managers playing a part in professional football. All that time, I've felt sidelined despite being one of the first to push hard for change in this country.

As I write this, it's still not right. Not enough is being done. There are too many people who are too comfortable in their positions, and not making enough noise and fighting

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harder for real progress. In June 2020, Middlesbrough sacked Jonathan Woodgate and appointed Neil Warnock on the same morning, announcing both moves in the same press statement, without breaking any rules. No black candidate was given the chance to explain their vision for the future of the football club. So nobody should pretend that a proper version of the Rooney Rule I wanted to bring to English football back then is in place now.

There are still too many ignoring the debate totally, resorting to that overly simplistic line, 'If people are good enough, they'll get chances.' Any wonder they're trotting that out when, in 2011, the then-Premier League chief executive Richard Scudamore said exactly those words when dismissing the idea of implementing the Rooney Rule in English football. The NFL in America brought in the rule way back in 2003, which is when I first made moves to bring it to England.

Kick It Out, Show Racism The Red Card and other organisations and individuals have done some good, positive work. But are the pathways there for retiring black players to make their way into coaching and management as easily as retiring white players? How is it that Gareth Southgate's first two managerial opportunities were in the Premier League with Middlesbrough (when he wasn't even qualified) and then with England, while Paul Ince and Sol Campbell had to start at the very bottom of the Football League with Macclesfield Town? To be fair to Gareth, he has since acknowledged others wouldn't have been given the chance he was afforded.

Did those decision-makers in the Premier League all develop amnesia? Were they all oblivious to the hatred and racist abuse

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aimed at black players during the late 1970s and 1980s? They of course do not come from that disenfranchised group of people who were firstly denied even an opportunity to attend trials at professional football clubs in the 1970s. Perception is everything, so it doesn't surprise me that black coaches don't get enough opportunities. When appointing a coach, someone from the same cultural background and history, someone who looks like the interviewer once did, someone who would be the so-called acceptable face of the club, will always prevail.

The white, upper-middle-class chief executive of the Premier League had no reference point on this issue, and no expert knowledge of it. If I said to him that, just as it was with black professional footballers in the 1970s, black managers are first-generation all over again and we need supporting in our struggle, would he have a clue what I'm talking about?

The great managers in the game all have white faces, so unconscious bias will prevail. People haven't seen many black managers in this country, and they've seen even fewer successful black managers. But they've seen countless white managers lifting trophies. So without thinking, it is naturally assumed that white will win, and black isn't capable. Time will change it, but why isn't enough being done to change it sooner?

And even when a chance does come along, things still don't seem right.

How was I only given four months as manager of Luton Town? What unrealistic expectation was I judged on, despite inheriting a rudderless ship? Under Joe Kinnear for example, Luton won five of their first seven games – the standard new-manager bounce in mid-season. They then failed to win any of

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their next 13 and were relegated. Yet Joe was given the chance to bring Luton back up, which he did the following season.

This is not a criticism of Joe or his ability as a manager, not at all. The truth is that I had written a report for those running Luton Town, detailing what needed to be done in order for the club to be successful. It wasn't an overnight fix as the club had been on the brink of disaster, and the squad was decimated. I stated that 13 players needed to move on. I take no pleasure from the fact that all of those players I had highlighted left the club within 13 months. And I feel my assessment was given weight by the fact that only one of them – striker Andrew Fotiadis – found another club in the Football League. He made six starts in just over a year at Peterborough United, before dropping into non-league, along with the other 12 I had recommended should be released. My judgement was proved correct, but why didn't they back that judgement at the time?

This wonderful game has given me glory and happiness, some special moments and lasting friendships. I love football. But I would love it even more if it changed for the better.