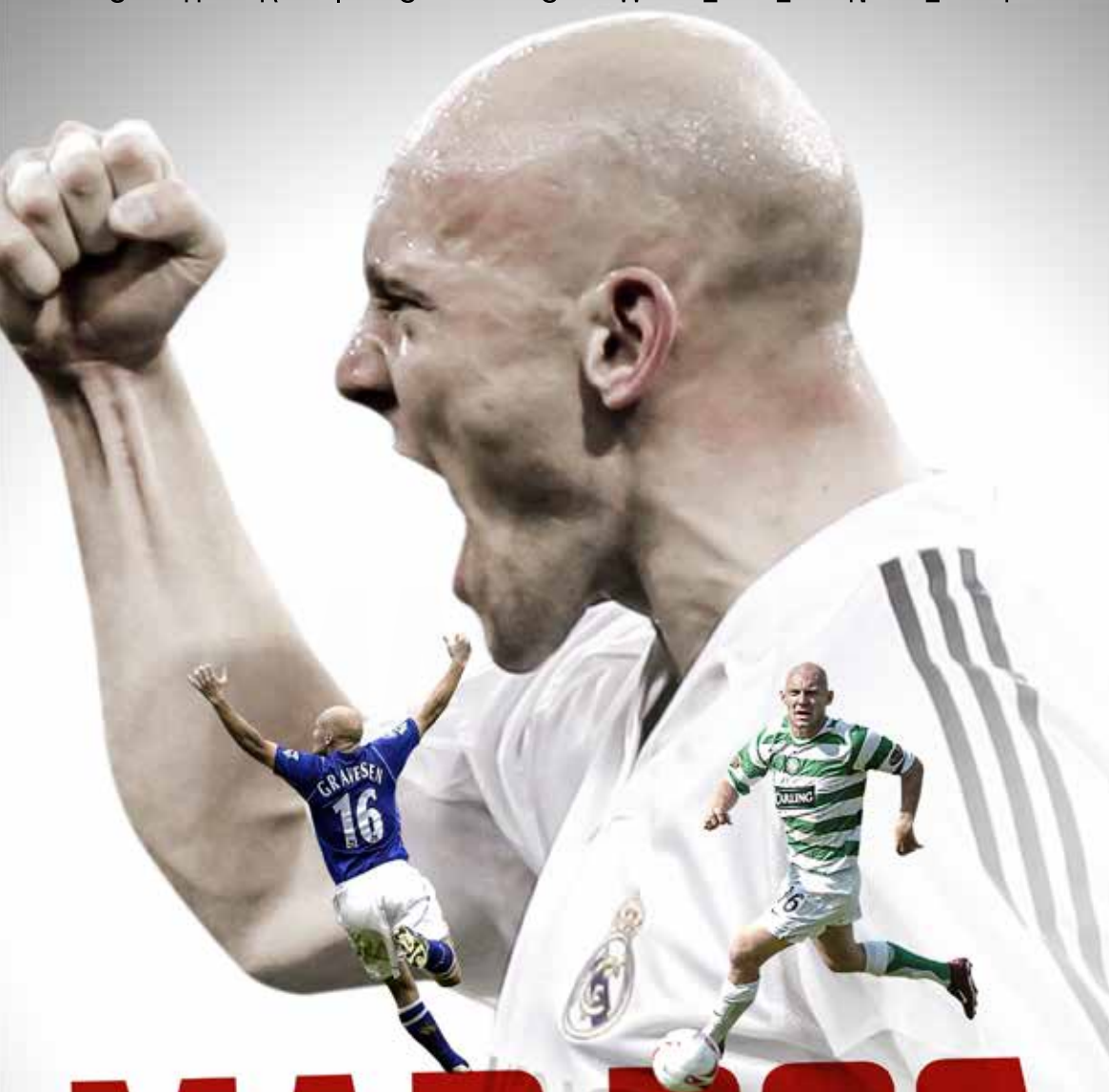


C H R I S S W E E N E Y



MAD DOG

GRAVENSEN

The Last of the Modern Footballing Mavericks

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Contents

Prologue	9
Introduction	11
1. Money, Money, Money	15
2. A Star is Born	23
3. Graduation Day	35
4. Deutschland über alles	41
5. Tick, Tick, Boom!	47
6. Toffee Time	55
7. Mike Tyson's Idol	66
8. The Green Nissan Micra	78
9. Bending it Better than Beckham	89
10. Fun in the Sun.	99
11. Vamos Real!	111
12. He's a Galáctico	118
13. Dentist Thomas	125
14. Mission Complete	134
15. Porn Cocktail	144
16. La Gravesinha	154
17. Tartan Tommy	163
18. Ferry Cross the Mersey (Again)	180
19. Curtains	189
20. Keyser Söze	197
21. Invisible No More	207
22. The Maverick	214
23. Mavericks United	224
24. The Fans	244
Sources.	252
Index.	254

Prologue

Wednesday, 9 March 2005.

ZLATAN Ibrahimović was revelling in the electric atmosphere under the floodlights of Turin's Stadio delle Alpi along with a host of superstars of world football such as Zinedine Zidane, David Beckham, Ronaldo, Lilian Thuram and Alessandro Del Piero.

The eyes of the world were on the titanic clash, with a host of subplots and intrigue. Bars, homes and diners across the globe were tuned in watching two heavyweights go toe to toe, slugging it out until one would rise victorious.

It was football at the highest level: fast, skilful, tactical and performed by the finest exponents of the game.

Within a microcosm of this epic tussle, Zlatan — known for his tremendous ego and self-belief — decided to indulge the watching millions with some of his signature impudence.

He found himself isolated, one on one with a Real Madrid player near the corner flag. The giant Swede swayed his hips

looking to put his opponent off balance, then darted forward like a tiger, slipping the ball through the defender's legs.

A nutmeg in a game of this magnitude is the ultimate putdown, designed to make an opponent look stupid. No professional wants to get done like that in front of the watching world.

As Zlatan did it, he expected the Real Madrid player to wince, realising he'd been made to look like a stooge, while the Swede galloped on to collect the ball to a flurry of shrieks from his adoring public.

But what he didn't bank on was the guy whose dignity he'd just stripped had not being raised at one of Europe's most glamorous, opulent clubs. He hadn't been cosseted and groomed for stardom in a flash academy, where promising teenagers are treated as if they are African kings.

He was dealing with a man who comes from a place most of the planet has never heard of. A place with a rock-solid code of representing yourself with pride and dignity, a code that's ingrained into all of their folk.

Everyone there — the Danish town of Vejle — knew what was coming next.

Zlatan never got the ball. The other guy didn't buckle.

He turned around and showed the big Swede, 'You might be chasing the flash of cameras but I'm here to win, lad.'

It was style over substance. The Real Madrid player?

His picture is on the cover of this book — and this is his story.

Introduction

IT'S no small undertaking deciding to write any book, no matter what the subject or genre is. But working on a topic that is rich and unmined are the deciding elements that tip the scales. When you discover that sweet spot as a writer, the juices start flowing and your mind begins racing. You wonder where you could take things — and what you could manufacture from the plentiful raw materials that are flashing before your eyes.

That was the case with this book. Although we shared a city for 12 months of his career, I never came across Thomas Gravesen or had any reason to pay him much attention, apart from the fact he was a well-known footballer I'd seen on television down the years.

But I began hearing whispers and noticing snippets about this character, who seemed to be cut from a different cloth. Whenever I dropped his name into conversation, people either lit up and regaled some tale they couldn't believe was

true, or they'd say nothing apart from vaguely remembering him. I also noticed that any mention of him online seemed to attract a lot of interest, and that those who knew the real Thomas were desperate to find out more. It was clear the affection Thomas was held in by those who've encountered him at close quarters. There's a lot of mystery. Very little is known about Thomas by ordinary fans and the general public, even though he was one of the most interesting and unusual players of his generation.

Here was a character who had the makings of being the subject of a riveting book. He was a rich, successful footballer, but his story resonates beyond sport. The more research I did, the more I could see that Thomas had gone through experiences that everyone could relate to.

Thomas is a person who's lived a dream. It's a phrase bandied about in the current climate of reality TV as things are handed to people, without any achievement. But very few individuals ever truly realise it and actually do what they've always imagined in their mind's eye. To aim for a goal and reach it.

Every one of us, regardless of our standing, has dreams but the truth is that most of us will never see them fulfilled. It's the beauty of life. It's what gets us up every morning. You might get there, then again you might not. But we all keep going, hoping that one day it might be us that's lucky enough to join that small, select group of people who turn those dreams into reality. Thomas did that.

INTRODUCTION

Normally, with this type of book, the subject collaborates, allowing you to take a shortcut directly into their mind and raid their memory bank. I explored that option but Thomas is a difficult person to contact. He has no website or social media. Even tracking down which country he lived in wasn't easy. The avid interest in him means there's more than one red herring out there, causing even more confusion. I did approach one person who purported to be his agent but that turned out to be an erroneous claim. Eventually, I managed to get to someone close to him but was informed that he wouldn't even consider any proposal.

As I began to collate more research and speak to sources, I realised that Thomas was an even more interesting subject than I'd previously thought and, in fact, this book would be better without his involvement. It's the old cliché of someone boasting about how out-of-the-ordinary they are. If they have to say it themselves, then it's a false proclamation. Someone who's a true one-off doesn't need to mention it. Ironically, as an author, I have to admit that actions can speak louder than words.

Thomas has a certain unexplainable charisma and anyone who's had dealings with him remembers him vividly as a larger-than-life character but at the same time sensitive and naïve. He has an uncanny ability to leave a mark, whether it's through football or his outlandish personality. Lots of phrases like 'screwball', 'loose cannon', 'madman', 'barmy', 'unicorn', 'mental' and 'lunatic' have all been used to

refer to him, but in a positive sense. Put simply, he's a man you never forget.

More often than not, Thomas had a wide smile plastered across his face, a glint of devilment in his eyes and was clearly revelling in living his dream. The ex-team-mates I've spoken to all recalled how bubbly he was. Thomas has an infectious vibe that all of them still look back on fondly. To them, that lived longer than anything he ever did with a ball.

And that's the crux of this book. It's about someone who lived a dream but was then ultimately robbed of his childlike enjoyment of it in cruel circumstances. It's about how he took a talent, applied it and succeeded by going all the way to the top of the world of football, and back down again.

It was a journey full of achievement, media scandals, controversy, mystery, intriguing rumours and sublime skills, but the person on the journey did it in the only way they knew how — with honesty and integrity.

There are few more powerful things in life than watching someone truly happy and motivated to do something, purely for the joy it brings them.

We only get one shot at life. Thankfully, some like Thomas make the most of it. And for the rest of us, it's never too late to be inspired to do so.

Chapter 1

Money, Money, Money

NOTHING stays the same and nowhere is it more true than in professional football.

It's the world's game, played by all creeds and colours, from the Brazilians honing their samba skills on sun-drenched golden beaches, to the Germans developing technical skills in training centres to the South African youngsters playing barefoot and carefree in the townships. It's that universality that has seen the game change so much.

Decades ago, players developed at their own pace. They were signed by clubs and given coaching as youths, but had to complete an apprenticeship to see if they would be lucky enough to be afforded a career in the game. Now it's far more sophisticated. The hopefuls are honed for the professional

game with sports science, personalised training and genetic studies whilst still children.

Take the world's two best players. Lionel Messi left Argentina for Barcelona's academy aged 13, taking his family with him. Cristiano Ronaldo was reared by Sporting Lisbon and played for their first team at just 17. Hours and hours were put into their development. They and today's generation of players were raised to be footballers. It's gone so far that talented children under ten now change clubs for a transfer fee and teams establish academies in far-flung countries all across the world hoping to spot — and claim — a diamond in the rough before a rival does.

Of course it's worth it or they wouldn't bother. Portuguese club Benfica reported in 2018 that they'd earned £230 million by selling their own academy graduates over a three-year spell. With the club's academies becoming more vital and with the players joining so young, the pressure to churn out consistently good footballers is ever present. That has caused the desired end goal to become far narrower; there's no tolerance for anything other than what is deemed to be the 'consummate professional'. This book celebrates a player who would likely never have made it through that sort of regimented academy system.

These developments have been fuelled by the rapid improvement of communication via the internet and satellites, which has given every team the chance to attract a global audience. Our hunger for and reliance on live

games is reflected by the huge cost of broadcasting rights. For example, in the 2018 round of English Premier League deals, Sky paid £3.57 billion and BT £885 million. Only three years previously, the league pulled in a staggering £5.14 billion for the rights to screen games. But when the league began in 1992, the price for 300 games for a five-year period was a relatively paltry £191 million.

Manchester United, who many regard as the world's most famous club, attracted their first sponsor in 1982 in electronics giant Sharp. It was followed by financial juggernauts Vodafone, AIG, Aon and one of the largest car manufacturers, Chevrolet. But things didn't stop there. Manchester United have led the way and now have an official airline partner (Aeroflot), an official feature film partner (20th Century Fox), a global online marketplace partner (Aladdin Street), an official tyre partner (Apollo) and, among others, even a global wine partner (Casillero del Diablo).

Real Madrid, European football's most successful team, have a similar stack of deals. They use the term 'main sponsors' for Emirates and Adidas, and have global sponsors in Movistar, Microsoft, Nivea Men, Audi, Hankook, Manou, Exness and EA Sports.

Even the great Barcelona aren't above this 'bun fight'. Despite their motto '*Més que un club*' (More than a club) and counting the Pope among their season ticket holders, they conceded defeat after proudly refusing to allow any

sponsors to sully their iconic shirts. Initially, they had the UNICEF logo and donated money to the fund annually. But they signed with the Qatar Foundation in 2011 before moving on to Qatar Airways and currently display Japanese online shopping behemoth Rakuten.

Clubs have even started selling the names of their stadiums. Germany's best-known team Bayern Munich used to play in the city's towering Olympiastadion, built for the 1972 Olympics. But when it needed remodelling, Bayern moved to the cutting-edge Allianz Arena, named after the German financial services firm.

Smaller clubs jumped on this trend, with Scottish outfit Livingston attracting the ire of some of their fans by renaming their stadium The Tony Macaroni Arena, after a low-end Italian restaurant chain.

It wasn't long before moguls and billionaire tycoons started buying clubs as moneymakers. The earliest to raise eyebrows was Russian Roman Abramovich, who bought Chelsea for £140 million through his private investment company Millhouse in 2003. He spent more on numerous big-name players, which won the club English Premier League titles and ultimately European football's biggest prize, the Champions League. This success meant revenue shot up, and companies had to pay significantly more to be aligned with Chelsea.

Since then, there has been a flood of rich individuals wanting to acquire blue chip teams. The world's most valuable club, according to Deloitte's 2018 report, is

Manchester United, earning €676 million. They are still owned by the American Glazer family, who assumed control in a takeover which valued the club at \$1.5 billion in 2005. By 2018, that had shot up to \$2.3 billion.

Manchester City was bought by former Thailand prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra before Abu Dhabi's deputy prime minister Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan usurped him. The list of clubs bought by tycoons is a who's who of the game. AC Milan was owned by Chinese businessman Yonghong Li's Rossoneri Sport Investment before American billionaire Paul Singer's Elliott Management Corporation took over. Paris Saint-Germain belongs to Qatar Sports Investments and Singaporean billionaire Peter Lim snapped up Valencia.

The one constant that hasn't changed is the reliance on the players to deliver success. But there's no longer merely an expectation. There's now a necessity driven by the pressure of such vast sums.

No one wants to deal with loose cannons. They get short shrift because the number of youngsters wanting to make it is so abundant. The message is: 'Either toe the party line or you're out the door.'

It's the reason why off-the-cuff characters like Eric Cantona and George Best aren't around any more. Another is maverick Faustino Asprilla, who missed the 1993 European Cup Winners' Cup Final for Parma after a bus driver hit his car. The irate Colombian striker ended up on the bus, so the driver trapped him but didn't bank on Asprilla shattering

the windscreen with his feet to escape. Then there was wildman Paolo Di Canio, who described a winning goal as ‘like having sex with Madonna’. He also shoved a referee on his backside and made fascist salutes to celebrate goals.

Today’s footballers aren’t like that. Instead, they roll off a cookie-cutter production line. That’s not to say they aren’t skilful, dedicated athletes, but the characters are the ones fans idolise — the players whose names kids put on their replica shirts.

It’s not just in football, either. Kimi ‘The Iceman’ Räikkönen is the most popular Formula 1 driver even though he’s racing with skilled multiple world champions Lewis Hamilton and Sebastian Vettel. Fans adore Kimi’s character; he says very little but refuses to adhere to the PC line.

We live in a time when we’ve become spoiled for sporting excellence. What sets some apart is their innate DNA, the way they think, the manner in which they do things. Usain Bolt was the reason every continent tuned in during the Olympics. They wanted to see if the great man could break another world record. Everyone knows his Lightning Bolt celebration but before his races the Jamaican would joke with the mascot kids while his rivals could barely blink and were springing five feet in the air with nervous tension.

There’s no rhyme or reason to it. We’re all wired differently. You can’t fake it — that’s the beauty of being a maverick.

One of the issues this book deals with is how the vast sums of money have influenced the way football has developed. One-off extroverts that excite the masses are a thing of the past. Footballer Stuart Pearce built a reputation at semi-professional club Wealdstone FC while working as an electrician before jumping into the pro ranks, going on to win cups with Nottingham Forest and appearing for England at the World Cup. Stuart says, 'The modern game is so sanitised and exposed to the media that it almost suppresses personality.'

Look at how Paul Gascoigne prepared for the biggest game of his career, the semi-final at the Italia 90 World Cup in front of a global audience of tens of millions. Instead of resting up or being sequestered in his room, Gazza endured a full-paced five-set game of tennis in the sweltering Sardinian sunshine with an unwitting holidaymaker at the team hotel, only hours before kick-off. It wasn't the best preparation, but it's what he felt like doing. Now professionals wouldn't be allowed to act like that. They would have to accept the decision on how they spend their rest time being made for them.

This book turns the spotlight on a man who's been described as a grenade with the pin pulled out, the last of the real mavericks to make it through to the pinnacle of football intact. A guy who even the erstwhile Baddest Man on the Planet, Mike Tyson, saluted as being impressively out of control.

MAD DOG GRAVESEN

A man who went from his small hometown team to the most glamorous and prestigious club side of all time, leaving behind a reputation that's still marvelled at and a cult following everywhere he's been.

His name is Thomas Gravesen.