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Mr
Corinthian

PA JACKSON
AND THE CASUAL CORINTHIANS



L L E W W A L K E R

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PART ONE
Nicholas Lane Jackson, Jnr

Preface

NICHOLAS LANE ‘Pa’ Jackson was a respected and influential ‘grand old man of British sport’,¹ a pioneering Victorian sports journalist, an FA committee member, an accomplished footballing administrator, an entrepreneur, an author and an authority on football, lawn tennis, athletics and golf. But he’s primarily remembered for his affiliation with the celebrated Corinthian Football Club. Under his management, the amateur Corinthians captured the sporting public’s imagination with famous wins over some of the best professional teams of the day. They were admired for their ‘Corinthian Spirit’, an ethos of fair play and sportsmanship, and travelled the world, promoting the game and how it should be played and inspiring the foundation of local football associations, cup competitions and clubs. For over 100 years, they’ve been considered the finest amateur team in the game’s history.

... just as their greatest rivals, Queens Park, Glasgow, founded Scottish football, so the Corinthians founded English football, and it is not too much to say that they were the greatest influence on the game’s formative years during the last decade of the last century.²

Whenever the name ‘Corinthian’ appears in the pages of football history, so does Jackson’s. Whenever their story is told, it always begins with the man affectionately known as ‘Pa’.³ He’s portrayed as the architect, visionary and genius behind the club’s creation. He was, in every respect, ‘Mr Corinthian’.

However, in recent years, Pa and the Corinthians have come under intense scrutiny. Football historian Terry Morris says:

The motives of the men who organised and played for Corinthian F.C. were entirely conservative, aiming

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primarily to preserve the sporting environment in which they had been educated and which they saw as increasingly threatened by the growing popularity and commercialisation of the game. Such motives can easily be understood, but given the misrepresentation and sometimes the hypocrisy with which they were pursued, they should not be admired.⁴

Bolsmann and Porter say:

From 'Pa' Jackson onwards, the Corinthians have been very influential in writing their own story. Those who have written histories of the Club – Corbett (1906), Creek (1933), Cavallini (2007) – have themselves been Corinthians or closely associated with the Corinthian-Casuals. They lean heavily on each other – Creek on Corbett, Cavallini on Creek and Corbett – and, while useful as guides to the club's playing record, they demand careful and critical reading.⁵

The conclusion is that the Corinthians fabricated their own reputation and were snobs and elitists who duped the public into believing the story spun by the club's historians.

Morris also suggests that the 'founding father of the Corinthians' lied and that this is proof of deception, likely indicating other discrepancies in the club's story. Morris points to Pa's claim in his autobiography, *Sporting Days and Sporting Ways*:⁶

I was born in 1849 at Ermington, in Devonshire, but when I was still a baby my parents moved to London and went to live at Little Knight Rider Street, close to Saint Paul's churchyard.

This was a story Jackson frequently repeated in interviews and profiles published throughout his lifetime. However, Morris points out:

Jackson informs us that he was born in Devon in 1849, but in fact the census returns make it quite clear that he was born in Hackney, in the east end of London.⁷

Morris is correct, as in five decades of census returns, Pa consistently stated he was born in Hackney or Middlesex, and the baptismal

records from the Pavement Chapel in Hackney confirm he was born at Southgate Road on 1 November 1849,⁸ and baptised on 21 April 1850.⁹

Morris also infers that the scarcity of information about Pa is also suspicious:

Historians of the Club have never had a lot to say about Nicholas Lane Jackson, which is scarcely surprising, as he had little to say about himself. His autobiography, *Sporting Days and Sporting Ways*, published in his old age in 1932, tells us a lot about the famous men that he encountered in a colourful life, but not much about its author. What he does tell us about himself is largely untrue.¹⁰

The suggestion that the leading protagonist in the Corinthian story was willing to hide information and lie about himself implied he did the same concerning the Corinthian Club too; therefore, Morris regards the history of the Corinthian Club as *Lies, Damned Lies and Statistics*.¹¹

Suggesting Pa falsified information and that a partisan collection of authors fabricated the club's undeserved reputation could mean Morris, Bolsmann and Porter have uncovered a conspiracy theory. If correct, it has implications not only for the club and its founding father but it also opens the doors to a complete re-evaluation of various other volumes that purport to tell the story of the game's early history.

The Jackson Cup

THE YEAR of 1897 was a challenging one for Nicholas Lane Jackson, the younger.¹² After several years of locking horns with the English FA, he had finally resigned, having been accused of disloyalty and insubordination. He also fell ill. The effects of the illness lingered and doctors recommended that he take a holiday.

In January 1898 he headed off to the alpine resort of St Moritz, Switzerland, for the prescribed rest and relaxation. This was one of only a few times he travelled outside the British Isles, and it appears to be the only time he visited Switzerland. Like many novice tourists, he immersed himself in the local culture and activities, and later that year he presented the St Moritz Curling Club with a trophy. According to Jackson, the gift's acceptance was 'somewhat lukewarm', but the presentation of a 'Challenge Cup – To be competed for annually by Curling Clubs in Switzerland', bearing a relatively unknown benefactor's name, must have been puzzling for the Swiss curlers. By following the doctor's advice, Pa had stumbled upon a new sport to patronise.

Over time, the Jackson Cup would become the blue-ribbon event in the curling world, and today is the oldest-surviving cup in the sport.¹³ The original trophy now sits on several additional plinths carrying the winners' names from the last 120 years, and the engraving, 'Presented by N.L. Jackson – March 1898' stands out for all to see.¹⁴

In bestowing a self-named trophy on the St Moritz Curling Club, Pa had aligned himself with a sport for which he had no credentials, no connection and little opportunity to pursue. Obviously, his benevolence had the desired effect because, for Pa, it was all about legacy.

Pa is mistakenly remembered in St Moritz as ‘Sir’ N.L. Jackson, a title he would have cherished and a misconception he seemingly chose not to correct, for Pa wasn’t what he seemed.

From the public houses of Victorian London to the elite world of the country club, the life of Nicholas Lane Jackson, the younger, is a tale of an entrepreneur who became involved with the new sport of association football when it began to flourish. By chance, he entered the elite society of the gentlemen who were guiding the game’s development and, through willingness, commitment and dedication, he earned his colleagues’ respect and rose to become a well-known and active member of the game’s governing body. He was a public figure who counted players, club owners, politicians, publishers, journalists, aristocrats and even some royalty as friends or acquaintances. With his good fortune and his new social standing came a class consciousness and a compulsion to fashion the manners and mores of those whose company he was keeping.

Pa became the driving force behind the Corinthian Football Club, and he guided the club through its golden years, seemingly single-handedly responsible for its accomplishments. He was also the first to publish a club history, which became the primary source for all other narratives, and as a living witness to the club’s foundation, his account of the club’s early years was never questioned. However, it was flawed and exaggerated his involvement because, for Pa, the prestige of Corinthian was directly linked to his celebrity and social status.

The Corinthians were a collection of the best amateur players in the country, and Pa arranged matches against the rising professional clubs in the north of England. It was a recipe for success. The matches Pa organised between the southern amateurs and the northern professionals were edgier than the usual friendlies the public was accustomed to, and their popularity confirmed the demand for footballing spectacles. They provided exciting and meaningful entertainment that undoubtedly contributed to the popularity and growth of football, and may have, in William McGregor’s mind at least, validated the concept of the Football League.¹⁵

Large crowds and widespread newspaper coverage helped raise the marketability of football, and when professionalism was legitimised in 1885, the game’s commercial potential was

too great to be suppressed. The amateur game couldn't compete against the growing tide of commercialism, and via Pa's position at the FA, he became the outspoken and seemingly self-appointed voice of the amateur cause. Yet his attempts to restrict the rise of professionalism were paradoxical, as, on the one hand, he would rail against the indentured professional footballers, once calling them 'poor wretches', yet would collaborate with their employers and arrange fixtures for the Corinthians.

Ironically, Pa probably had more in common with the club owners of the north than with those he had chosen to throw in his lot with. He would have identified with the northern club owners' entrepreneurial spirit, and perhaps this comprehension also lay behind Pa's choice of opposition. He became good friends with William Sudell, considered the champion of the professional lobby and the man behind the staggering success of Preston North End.¹⁶ Pa arranged more fixtures against Sudell's team than any other.

Gathering the finest exponents in the amateur ranks and absorbing the critical innovations from the Scottish game and other footballing centres around the country, Pa crafted a team that played the 'Corinthian style' of football, which was admired wherever they played. The famous Corinthians were in demand, and the appeal of contests against the amateur giant killers meant clubs would be willing to gamble on their reputation remaining intact if they suffered a defeat at the hands of the finest amateurs in the land. It was an honour to have such venerated guests, and, anyway, a visit by Pa's lads might make good commercial sense!

In the background, society was changing, and accepted truths were being challenged. The Victorians struggled with concepts that had once defined their existence in what Birley called 'the new, questioning age'.¹⁷ Darwin's *Origin of the Species* and Marx's *Das Kapital* questioned absolutes and the established order, while Dickens and others exposed the poverty and misery of the increasing urbanisation of industrialised Britain. The art world wrestled with the ugliness of the industrial towns in the north of England, contrasted with the contrived, Arcadian pastoral landscapes they preferred. The Victorian psyche struggled to reconcile the concept of nature versus nurture, the 'green and pleasant land', with the 'dark Satanic mills', which felt like a battle between right and wrong and good versus evil.

Similarly, Corinthian matches were perceived as contests between the 'natural' amateur and the 'nurtured' professional, but win or lose, the Corinthian's reputation always seemed to remain intact.

Meanwhile, national newspaper circulation ballooned, an increasingly literate society demanded more and more sports news, and the Corinthians were particularly newsworthy. Pa, in the right place and at the right time, was able to peddle his thoughts and opinions to the devotees of the new sport, and as Corinthian fixtures became a popular attraction, Pa's reputation and influence grew.

History regards the Corinthians as a unique phenomenon in the story of football. They were the champions of amateurism, famous for promoting the game globally, demonstrating how it should be played, and advocating the values of sportsmanship, honesty and fair play. Their code of conduct influenced all sports and introduced the concept that 'the spirit of the game' was more important than winning at all costs. Although it appears quaint and old-fashioned today, what became known as the 'Corinthian Spirit' continues to represent a sporting code of the highest standards. Even today, referees are still instructed to make decisions ... according to the laws of the game and the 'spirit of the game'.¹⁸

The same principle is still found in many sports and is commonly associated with the Olympic Games and the 'Olympic Spirit' founded by Pierre de Coubertin, who, on a visit to England in the late 19th century, had admired the ethos of amateur sport and the Corinthian Spirit and adopted the same principles for his own Games.

A less acknowledged accolade involves the Corinthians' role in defusing the tensions between the 'northern caucus' and southern gentleman. The matches between the amateurs and the professionals kept the avenues of communication open and provided opportunities for discussion, negotiation, compromise and even friendship. Had the opposing factions been left to pursue their own causes, the game would likely have become something else, divided and regionalised, governed by social class, location, school or occupation; similar forces that would later divide rugby into the union and league codes.

As years passed and the game's popularity accelerated, the numbers at turnstiles continued to drive the universal laws of supply and demand. Growing attendances, leagues, cups and community allegiances propelled the game forward as practical economics eclipsed amateur morals.

At some point towards the end of the 19th century, it must have dawned on Pa that he had hitched his horse to the wrong wagon, and he turned away from the 'cloth caps and scarves brigade' to the rarefied air and exclusivity of the golf and country club.¹⁹ He would continue to be consulted by newspapers and magazines, and his reputation as 'the grand old man of sport' increased as the years passed. Anyway, his new love of golf was far more fitting for the persona he had carefully crafted and refined.

Yet Pa wasn't happy to rest on his laurels. His desire for recognition resulted in a history of Corinthian shaped by his aspirations. Even though his success with the club brought him fame and renown and opened doors to business opportunities and aristocratic friendships, he obviously felt he deserved a more prominent place in the club's history.

In the end, the history of Corinthian belongs to Nicholas Lane 'Pa' Jackson. His version of the club's foundation and success is the source for all the volumes devoted to telling the club's story. Pa's account entered the historical record, which meant that for the past 100 years, whenever the Corinthian story is told, it always begins with Pa.

Many histories of football have been written by some of the game's leading lights, and most mention the Corinthians: Percy Young, Geoffrey Green, Maurice Golesworthy, David Goldblatt, Brian Granville, Eric Dunning, and even the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* subscribe to Pa's version of the club's history.

For over 100 years, Pa has been lauded as a footballing visionary responsible for creating one of the most important clubs of the era. He became an early football icon, to some a genius. But he was also a private man, a mysterious figure who carefully controlled the details of his life, and the information he shared in his ghostwritten autobiography raises more questions than answers. Therefore, albeit 100 years too late, it's time to better understand 'Mr Corinthian'.