

Kevin Keegan

Derek was an incredibly loyal member of staff at NUFC for so many years.

No one is irreplaceable but he just might be!

Alan Shearer

Del Boy is the nicest of men, a touch of class and a gentleman. He was a highly trusted member of staff with great experience and knowledge of players' needs. To add to that he's undoubtedly a brilliant physio.

Stuart Pearce

I was fortunate enough to join Newcastle United in 1997 and lucky enough to have Derek as my physio. We became good friends.

My defining memory of Degraves is his enormous appetite and his love of music, which both combined one night at a Stranglers gig in York, both eating and drinking to excess and finishing the night pogoing with the big man for the duration of the gig.

As U21 manager I asked Degraves to join my staff as I knew that his professionalism and patriotism would be a great fit, not to mention his loyalty.

What a Man!!!

Degraves – I I love you

'Del Boy is the nicest of men, a touch of class and a gentleman.'

ALAN SHEARER

DEREK WRIGHT

MY STORY IN BLACK AND WHITE



Four Decades Fixing the Mags

WITH JOHN WRIGHT

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Chapter 1

Arsenal

‘GEORDIE, MAN! Gis a hand with me bogey. The rope’s knackin’ me hand.’ I showed my friend my blistered palm.

‘Oh, shite,’ he replied, grabbing a share of the loop of hemp rope I was holding. We were walking down the steep hill from Stanley towards my home in South Stanley. On the homemade go-cart were the contents of a hundredweight bag of coal, carefully divided into ten paper bags from the original hessian sack; the contents were now spilling on to the path every time the cart’s wheels went over a divot. I was in big trouble: that coal should have been fish and chips.

My aspirations of being a business entrepreneur ended that day as a 12-year-old lad in the fading light of a 1971 summer’s evening. Unfortunately for me, the cost of a bag of coal was just a bit less than the pound note my dad had given me for fish and chips ‘four-times’, which lit the ‘stupid’ lightbulb in my head. Mam and Dad had sent me up the one-mile hill to Kaiser’s chip shop for a rare family treat. George and I should have been there for the chippy opening at six o’clock, but we decided to pop into the shop next door first. That’s where we spotted the sacks of coal for sale, 75p a bag. I came up with the bright idea of dividing the contents and becoming Stanley’s youngest and most brilliant-ever

coal merchant, roaming door to door to visit our eager customers. Selling ten bags for 10p each meant we would make 25p profit and still get the fish and chips! We cadged some paper bags from the shop owner and gleefully started our enterprise. By the time the bags were ready, stacked neatly on the bogey outside the chippy, we were already filthy with coal dust.

Of course, no one in the houses along Spen Street was interested in buying ripped paper bags of coal from two dirty imps. Time passed and the implications slowly dawned: ten bags of coal, spilling out of the tattered paper, no fish and chips, sun starting to set. Eventually the march of time forced a decision and we had to head back. First, I pulled the go-cart, but as the hill steepened the cart pulled me by the hand down the hill.

‘Me da’s ganna kill us, Geordie.’

‘Mine win’t. He doesn’t care when I get hyem.’

‘Whey, mine does.’ George looked at me with his hacky face and shrugged. *His* dad *didn’t* care. Of course, both of my parents were panicking by this stage. In the 1970s there was a considerable amount of flexibility about staying out, but being absent four hours late, in the dark, was beyond the pale. When Dad finally saw me, he showed his relief by greeting his errant son with a kick up the arse. Ironically, I fell into the full coal bunker outside the house. Of course, he blamed it on us returning minus fish and chips and money, with a bogey full of coal. My mother managed to calm him down and ran a bath for me to clean myself up. She explained that my dad had been in a panic, frantically searching the streets. A bit of TLC from Mam was what I needed and everything after that was right as rain.

* * *

I was born on 10 October 1958. I grew up on the streets of Stanley in County Durham. The town was in the process of closing the

pits but back then it was still very much a mining community. My first school was South Moor Greenland Primary School, where many years later they filmed some of Martin Shaw's *Inspector George Gently* series. I met three boys on my first day: Alan Reay, Geoff Hind and Alan Reader. Sixty years later and I still see them regularly.

My parents had to share my granddad's house on Elm Street in South Moor; my brother and I shared a bedroom with our parents for four years until a council house became available. The place we moved to was Chiltern Gardens in South Stanley, about two miles away. The estate would be described in modern terms as a 'sink estate', a place to put antisocial tenants. Many of the residents did have significant social problems and there was a lot of crime, not that I was aware of that at the time. Growing up, we were oblivious to that, it was all we knew. I do remember once my dad carefully planted a large privet hedge around our garden on the end terrace, only to discover two hours later that it had all been moved and planted in a garden up the street (retrieved by my irate father with a threat of violence to the perpetrator's father).

In hindsight, a wide and eclectic social mix lived on our street. Beautifully manicured gardens maintained by elderly couples or plots bursting with expertly grown fruits and vegetables owned by tradesmen would be separated by desolate yards full of detritus such as cushionless settees or damp mattresses surrounded by nettles and dock. One family at the top of the street had even ripped up half of their floorboards to put on the fire. Stray dogs constantly roamed the streets, harassing the children. We would occasionally crowd around two dogs 'stuck together by the tail', waiting for one of the mothers to come out of the house wearing the ubiquitous pinny carrying a basin of water and throw it over the dogs.

In many ways it was a blessed childhood. My brother John and I had loving parents, Pat and Derek. We lived in an environment full of adventure. Our house was on the end of a terrace that was beside farm fields and beyond that were two woods, thoughtfully named First and Second Wood. When not in school, my childhood involved many hours roaming through the fields and woods, covering huge distances, probably some 20 square miles. We would be out all day, climbing trees looking for birds' nests, or fishing sticklebacks out of the ponds, or raiding fat, green gooseberries and rhubarb from gardens. Sometimes on Sundays we would spy on the miners playing pitch and toss in the heart of Second Wood, standing by an old poplar tree called the 'Witchy'. We saw them scatter once when the 'polis' drove down the path towards them, running here and there in their pinstriped suits and cloth caps.

It was a great time for street games such as cannon (tin cans with sticks on hit by tennis balls), tally-ho (defend your base against the marauding hordes) and montakitty (a version of leap-frog: 'Montakitty, montakitty one, two, three; finger, thumb or little ganny?'). We also made 'javelins' out of bamboo sticks that we sharpened and feathered, launching them hundreds of feet with nothing more than a knotted piece of string. October was always the most exciting time as we prepared for bonfire night. Boys (and girls) from different streets would build their own bonfires and would spend the evenings going 'bonty-raiding' other gangs' stashes of wood. I'm ashamed to confess that we would occasionally go down the wood and fell a tree for the centre-pole of the bonty, too. Other childhood memories include a rag-and-bone man called 'Dingly' Bell with his horse and cart, French onion sellers wheeling their bicycles up and down the streets, wearing Breton shirts and berets, and wedding 'chuck-outs' or 'hoy-oots', when the bride-to-be would throw loose change out of her car on the way to church,

with all of us ‘bairns’ charging around after the car picking up pennies, thruppences and tanners.

One of my favourite games was ‘gates’. In our street, two rows of houses faced each other, with a single road running up to a cul-de-sac at the top of the road. Each front garden had a gate that we opened and used as a goal. About six of us would defend our own goal while everyone tried to score in everyone else’s goal. Once you let in, say, five or ten goals, you were out. The one defending the goal conceding the fewest was the winner. As a shout-out to women’s football, by far the best player in the street was a girl called Eunice Petrie. Unfortunately, in those days there was no option of playing amateur football, let alone professionally, for women; if it was, she would have made it.

It was about the time of the fish and chips incident that I was starting to realise I could play football. I’d already made it into the Greenland junior school team, first as goalkeeper but then as centre-half. We’d won the Stanley League and the Newcastle player and legend Frank Clark presented us with the trophy. It was after moving to Tanfield Grammar School to the north of the town that I started showing greater promise. Physically I developed early, and I was blessed with speed, winning awards for sprinting at the Durham County schools’ athletics competitions. I was also stronger than my peers, and fearless, meaning I progressed to representing Stanley District and then county for Durham schools. That was in the days when Sunderland and Gateshead were still part of the county.

My parents came to games when possible. My father is an intelligent guy, but he left school at 14 without any qualifications to his name. That’s what nearly all working-class children did then. After completing National Service, he finished a six-year boilermaker’s apprenticeship at Redheugh Iron and Steel Company

on the Tyne and became a welder. We hardly saw him because of the hours plus overtime he worked. He would be up and out the house in the morning before we were up. He had to walk the mile or so up the hill to Stanley and then get the bus to Gateshead. If he wasn't doing overtime, he would arrive back in the street in the early evening. He would stand and watch our game of gates, giving encouragement and advice, before going in the house to see Mam. She had a better education than him and went to Stanley Grammar. Unfortunately, falling pregnant with me out of wedlock and then giving birth while she was only 19 meant the end to her studies for the time. She'd completed training as a radiographer but had to give this employment up when she was expecting John so that she could firstly avoid the radiation risk and then look after the two of us. She became a primary school teacher some years later.

One thing about where I grew up, we were never far from trouble, be it the many intimidating stray dogs let out of the houses by their owners for the day, or other children looking for a fight. I was never impulsively aggressive in that way, but because of a macho culture and the frequency of fights I was immersed in, I discovered I was good at it. I learned that a major factor behind being able to win a street fight was the ability to take pain, as well as meting out whatever damage you could inflict on your opponent. This pain tolerance was something I'd inherited from my dad, which he 'got' in turn from his father, Joseph. Joe was a miner in the Craghead Colliery, but he was also an amateur bare-knuckle boxer. For a while the fighting got out of hand and lads would travel for miles just to 'have a go' at me. I wasn't hard to find, with my bright red hair. I was taught a lesson one day playing gates when I refused to stop our game for the bin wagon and lost a fight with one of the men. Well, a 12-year-old against a fella in his 20s, what would you expect?

I was always calm but determined on the football pitch and, by the age of 13, professional clubs had noticed me. I was approached by several First and Second Division clubs, including Manchester United, Leeds, Liverpool and Birmingham. The two local clubs, Newcastle and Sunderland, were also showing an interest. Stanley's support is split between the two local clubs. It's roughly equal distances between the Stanley and the two cities and therefore the town is split approximately 50:50 for support, at least it was then. Legend has it that a train line ran from the north of the town to Newcastle, and another ran from the south of the town to Sunderland. My dad, always a Newcastle supporter, had 11 siblings and the brothers' support for the two clubs was split.

When I was old enough to go without a grown-up, I went with my Stanley mates to St James' Park when I could. Because I was playing so much football, this meant it was only the occasional weekend match or, more often, a midweek one. I would usually go with Stephen McPhail. We always went in the Leazes End. I remember the blokes selling bags of peanuts. We would hoy down a tanner and they would chuck the bag of peanuts straight back to us.

I particularly remember the Fairs Cup players, especially Wyn Davies, Frank Clark and Pop Robson, and then shortly after that John Tudor and Supermac himself, Malcolm Macdonald. Those who were at his home debut on 21 August 1971 when he scored a hat-trick in the 3-2 win against Liverpool will never forget it. I also have an image in my mind of Alan Foggon on another occasion standing in a centre circle devoid of grass and up to his ankles in clarts.

Like many aspiring professionals, most of my football experience at the time was involved in playing the game, not watching it. With the interest of the two local clubs, it might seem strange that I chose to sign as a schoolboy for Arsenal. The north

London club went to great efforts to court me. I was playing for Stanley Boys up at Consett's Belle Vue Park one freezing afternoon towards the end of 1972 when my dad was approached by a small gentleman wearing a raincoat and trilby. It turned out to be the Arsenal manager, Bertie Mee! The man who had managed Arsenal to the FA Cup and league double win at the end of the previous season had made the effort to travel by train from London just to watch me play. His interest had been sparked by their North East scout, George Emmerson. My parents were impressed by the effort made by Arsenal and when I went down to visit the club their staff, including the chief scout Gordon Clark, were equally professional and welcoming. There was no doubt the whole club had an air of regal quality about it. It's impossible to forget the majestic white Marble Halls at the entrance to Highbury.

So, although I visited other clubs, I'd already made the decision that I wanted to play professional football for Arsenal FC. My parents were invited down with my brother and me. We stayed in the best hotels and were given tickets for shows in the West End. Bertie even made the effort to take my family to restaurants. Before those trips my parents hadn't been on a train or airplane. Their holidays consisted of day trips to South Shields. One evening we were in a swanky restaurant and my dad was offered a liqueur by the *maitre d'*. He requested a lager. The waiter was halfway through reprimanding my dad for such an uncouth request when Mr Mee raised his hand and told him: 'Make that two.'

Over the next year I continued to improve as a player. One notable achievement during that time was that I was part of the Durham Boys County team that won the Northern School Counties Championship at Roker Park. Other now familiar lads I played with at the time were Derek Scott, who went to play for Burnley and Bolton over 400 times, and Stan Cummins, the

Middlesbrough and Sunderland forward. When we won the cup we were presented with the trophy by the Sunderland manager, Bob Stokoe, less than a week after he'd run on to the pitch in his cream-coloured raincoat following their famous FA Cup victory. Toon historians will know that Bob was an important ex-Newcastle United player, not just our rivals' manager: he'd played for us for a decade and was in the 1955 FA Cup-winning team.

I was also brought under the umbrella of potential England Schoolboys and was invited to an instructional course held by the FA; I then signed as an associated schoolboy with Arsenal on 6 September 1973 at the age of 14. Shortly after my 15th birthday I went for England trials in Leeds but was ultimately unsuccessful. That didn't deter me and for the remainder of that academic year and the next I continued to improve as a footballer. I travelled regularly to north London. Most Friday afternoons, after school, a taxi arrived at our house in Stanley and drove me to Central Station. I would get the train to King's Cross to be met by the chief scout, Gordon Clark, or his assistant Ernie Collett. They would always be waiting for me without fail, even when the train was hours late. They would then make sure I got to my digs. Our youth team played in the South East Counties League. I would make the reverse trip home on Sunday afternoon and arrive back in the evening to be ready for school the following morning.

It was around this time that my dad lost his job. He'd been forced to move downriver to Ryton Marine on the Newcastle side of the Tyne as some of the shipyards started to close, but eventually that place suffered the same demise. They blamed it on Japanese and South Korean shipyards undercutting the UK shipyards' prices. Whatever the reason, he was on the dole with no prospect or work. This was the time of recession, inflation and the Three-Day Week. There was mass unemployment and,

to add insult to injury, he'd worked the last six months prior to being sacked for no wages.

The situation where we lived in Stanley worsened as well. There were always some chronically unemployed men on the estate, but the numbers out of work continued to rise. Many of the children were feral. I didn't see much of my brother John at the time, but I knew he was spending more and more time in the 'wrong crowd'. Two of these lads eventually progressed years later to being imprisoned for being professional birds' eggs thieves. The situation culminated in John getting into trouble with the police. Fortunately for him, we moved house because my parents could finally afford a mortgage. My dad and two of his foreman work colleagues had been approached by three of the ex-managers of Ryton Marine to see if they were interested in starting a metal fabrication business. The three tradesmen had been hand-picked by the managers for their known work ethic and ability. So, the increased income from their fledgling business in Sherburn Hill meant for the first time our family could move out from the council house and into our own home. This was just up the hill in East Stanley. Having said all that, I only have fond memories of South Stanley and I wouldn't change a thing about my early years there.

Towards the end of my final year at school I was losing interest in my academic studies. Although the country was suffering an economic depression, the education we received at Tanfield was excellent. I'd been fortunate enough to pass the Eleven-plus exam to get into a grammar, but I was throwing away my education by being only interested in football. I had dreams of playing for England, so why should I bother with my English and maths O-Levels? I'm sure thousands of boys before and after me have had the same thought process and it's something professional clubs have tried to tackle after the 1970s. I do remember my mother

stressing the importance of educational achievement, 'just in case', but of course I dismissed that advice.

We had a very strict headmaster at school called Dr Sharp. He was legendary. Any disobedience and the cane came out: hand or arse, he didn't seem to mind. There were about 800 kids at the school and lunchtime (we called it dinner) was a noisy affair, but when the Doc entered the hall, those assembled fell silent. The whole room avoided eye contact with him. One day, not too far off from the O-Level exams, I was summoned to his office. On the way I wondered which offence I'd been observed committing and had a couple of ideas, but when I went in he told me there were concerns that I was neglecting my studies because of football. He told me that if I failed my exams he would ban me from signing for Arsenal as an apprentice. Looking back, I'm sure he wouldn't have been able to do that, but I'll always be grateful for that threat because it ensured I worked hard at school for my final exams. Little did I know then how important that would be. I must give a mention to one of my teachers from the primary school, Greenland, called Miss Handy. She would always have a quiet word with me and tell me that I would always do well in my studies if I believed in myself. It was her sensitive encouragement just as much as the Doc's methods that worked.

I finished school in the summer of 1975, fortunately with good O-Levels. I signed my apprentice forms for Arsenal on 21 August, for a two-year period. I had the summer months at home then moved to London for the start of the 1975/76 season. No matter how hard a club tries to prepare and support a 16-year-old child moving away from home, it's not easy. Once it finally dawned on me that I wasn't heading home on the train every Sunday evening I became very homesick. I'd left a loving home in a very tight-knit mining community to live in digs in the capital city of England.

North London in the 1970s was a far cry from home. I lived in digs with another apprentice from Mansfield called Carl. We lived on Arnos Grove in Southgate. His homesickness was worse than mine: I woke one morning to find a note from him on my bed telling me he could bear it no longer and he was going home immediately.

I must admit, I was close to following him to King's Cross and jumping on the first train heading north too. One thing that helped me was receiving letters from home. I still have a shoebox full of them, many of which were from my good school friends, Graham Kirtley, Gordon Baker and Eric Tregonning. Graham and Gordon are supporters who have followed Newcastle United their whole life and still have season tickets. Treg was a Sunderland supporter with great football skills. Unlike me, he made the decision early regarding his future and passed up any trials to concentrate on his studies. He became a dentist and practised in Stanley his whole career.

Once again, the club did what they could to help with my homesickness. I was a bit young to go to pubs, but I do remember going on my own to the pictures in Leicester Square and being amazed by the volume of people milling about the place. My time in Southgate came to an end one evening when the train bringing me back from Newcastle got into King's Cross late, and when I got to the digs the landlady refused to let me in. I had to find a telephone box to call home. In a panic, my mam contacted a distant relative, who happened to be a retired police inspector down in Islington. He drove across London to get me. I ended up staying with Uncle Jim and Aunty Margaret for about six months. I couldn't impose myself on them for ever, so the club arranged for me to move in with the family of one of the other boys in the team, Colin Brooks. They lived in Worcester Park

near Guildford in Surrey. This was much more like being back in a family atmosphere, I'm sure something that also gave my parents a lot of relief. I remember going down to Box Hill and enjoying the Surrey North Downs. Colin was released and started working for his dad's roofing business, and Arsenal decided I should move again. This time they put me in digs in Barnet, north London. I would get picked up every day in Cockfosters to take me to the training ground.

On the football pitch things were going well. I continued playing in the South East Counties League, then progressed to the reserves, playing in the Football Combination. I've kept a photo of a couple of us apprentices standing with Malcolm Macdonald, one of my Newcastle heroes, who was then an Arsenal player. Many of my team-mates eventually went on to become household names; I played alongside fellow young hopefuls such as David O'Leary, Frank Stapleton, Graham Rix and Wilf Rostron. Older players such as John Radford and big Terry Mancini sometimes played in the reserves.

It was around this time that I started taking an interest in the work of the physiotherapist, Fred Street. Bertie Mee had encouraged Fred to train as a physio several years earlier, and then when the opportunity came up he had him transferred to Arsenal. Bertie also had an interest in injuries and rehabilitation. I would observe what Fred did and said to the players when he was treating them. He'd also become England physio shortly before I joined the club, so he had everyone's respect.

The turning point for my career as a footballer was probably an incident I had as a spectator that happened after the Spurs versus Newcastle League Cup semi-final first leg at White Hart Lane on the evening of 14 January 1976. I'd been an apprentice for about six months and, despite missing home desperately, I was successful on

the pitch. The semi-final was an opportunity to meet some of my mates from Stanley who had travelled down for the match. There was nothing better than a bit of the North East coming into my London life, even if it was for a matter of hours. The match itself ended in a 1-0 victory for Spurs but there was still a lot of hope for the return fixture a week later. I said goodbye to my Stanley friend, Stephen McPhail, and headed towards the Seven Sisters Tube station, dealing with the lump in my throat. As I left Stephen, I carefully hid my scarf in my trousers pocket; after all, football hooliganism was a significant problem at that time.

I must have been spotted wearing the scarf before I hid it; I heard a shout and turned to see a gang of 10 to 15 Spurs supporters running towards me. They were coming at me so quickly, I barely had time to kick the first one in the midriff and land a punch on a second attacker before I was submerged in a melee of fists and feet. I tried to retaliate but quickly decided the only option was to curl up. I took a lot of kicks to the head and chest. At some point I lost consciousness. When I woke up I was lying in a garden minus my coat, with my shirt ripped. My scarf was gone, too. Once I'd gathered my thoughts, I hobbled to the Tube station and got myself back to Worcester Park train station in Surrey. What the people on the Tube thought about a bloodied and bruised 17-year-old boy in a shredded shirt sitting beside them, I'll never know because they never asked. I'm certain, had I been in Newcastle, a mother hen would have helped me. At the time I was just thankful that I managed to get away relatively unscathed, although my chest and head hurt a lot.

I'd taken several heavy blows to my face and head in fights before this, but I'd never been knocked unconscious. The following day I felt shocking; I had headaches, felt sick and was generally out of sorts. I had what the doctors today would call post-concussion

syndrome, a constellation of symptoms that can occur after a moderate head injury. The club decided I would be better off at home, so I headed north for three weeks. I remember Alan Oliver the famous sports reporter wrote a piece on the assault for the *Evening Chronicle*. After returning to training and playing I struggled with pain in my chest for another four weeks, probably due to cracked ribs. After that it was a struggle to regain full fitness.

Shortly after that event, in March, we had the opportunity to watch a midweek match between Newcastle and Arsenal. A group of us apprentices were sat behind the Arsenal team bench. I was beside David O'Leary. I must have still been indignant following my assault, so I wore a black-and-white hat and got a right bollocking for it at training the next day. Things weren't helped when Bertie Mee resigned at the end of the 1975/76 season. His replacement was Terry Neill, who travelled the short distance from Spurs. I started the following season well enough, but then suffered a bad ankle injury that kept me out for a further six weeks. And then came the discussion no aspiring footballer wants. The new manager Neill had taken a look at me and decided I would never be in the club's plans. I was part of a mass clear-out that he was having. This came quite early into the new season, while I was still recovering from the ankle sprain. But that was that ... I was out. Close to my 18th birthday, heading home with my dreams in tatters. Bizarrely, the best way I had of dealing with it was repeating the mantra that I just wasn't good enough. Perhaps I knew in my heart of hearts that I *wasn't* good enough.