DAVID TOSSELL

Natural

The Jimmy Greaves Story

Foreword by Sir Geoff Hurst

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A BOY AND HIS BALL

'I honestly don't know if I ever wanted to be a footballer or not. It was something that was born in me and I was told that from the age of one upwards I kicked a ball. It was the most natural thing that came to me.'

THE likeness was so striking, the smile such an exact replica, that it looked as though Patrick Kluivert's head had been superimposed on to the body of a young boy. In fact, the cheerful face belonged to the former Dutch international striker's nine-year-old son, Shane. His happiness, captured on camera in the summer of 2017, came in the form of a five-year endorsement deal with the footwear giants Nike. The news was delivered by Shane to his 120,000 followers on Instagram.

Let's just pause there. Nike. A five-year deal. For a nine-year-old with a fan base of 120,000.

By the time he reached that same age, Jimmy Greaves, who would go on to become one of the sport's greatest goalscorers, had yet to play a single organised game of football. His social network consisted of those within shouting distance of his front door in Dagenham and the only pair of boots he'd ever owned had long

since come apart at the toes. Not that it mattered as the one leather football he'd ever played with was now in shreds and he and his friends were back to playing with a tennis ball.

These days, the fields in Parsloes Park, across the road from the former Greaves family home in Ivyhouse Road, host very few of the games of twenty-a-side or three-and-in that were a feature of the recreation grounds of post-war Britain. You are more likely to be greeted by the ducks that wander in curiosity from the ponds to the footpaths than by kids laying down jumpers for goalposts. Instead of the seven-days-a-week ad hoc contests that were the cornerstone of the childhood of Greaves and his contemporaries, football activity consists mostly of the organised Sunday morning matches in competitions such as the Echo Junior Football League.

The games are staged on the marked fields by a clubhouse that sits at the intersection of three thoroughfares through the park. Few of those in attendance will have any idea that one of the sport's icons grew up only yards away, and was denied the use of these fields during his earliest years because they were commandeered to grow the potatoes that would be picked by Italian prisoners of war from a nearby camp.

Kit is freshly laundered, boots match the modern-day trend of reflecting the full range of the spectrum and coaches carry holdalls containing more footballs than Greaves and his pals would have laid eyes on in their entire childhoods. For every watching parent who merely wants their child to enjoy football in a spirit of fun and friendship, there are those who support – and sometimes goad – with passion fired by the hope of professional contracts or the fear of unfulfilled dreams; perhaps even echoes of their own.

Michael Calvin, author of *No Hunger in Paradise*, a study of modern player development, notes that Premier League clubs are now prioritising children between the ages of six and nine for identification and recruitment. Which means that any nine-year-old playing in front of Greaves's former home who has not yet been identified as a prospect by a professional team may have missed

the boat already. A year before Kluivert junior signed his Nike contract, John McDermott, the head of development at Tottenham, had told an audience in South Carolina that he knew of one Premier League team that was paying a nine-year-old £24,000 per year. In September 2017 came the story of the six-year-old who was training with Manchester United, Manchester City, Liverpool and Everton before he could even tie his own shoelaces.

Modern football, as Greaves was credited as saying, is indeed 'a funny old game', and not one that young Jimmy – despite the obsession with the sport that fuelled his childhood – would ever have imagined.

James Peter Greaves was born on 20 February 1940 in Manor Park, now a part of the London Borough of Newham but then within the old county borough of East Ham, a mile or so from West Ham's Upton Park ground. Within months, however, the German bombs that had begun falling dangerously close to home forced the Greaves family to move about five miles east to Dagenham. 'My first memory is sleeping in the Anderson [air raid] shelter in Dagenham,' he told *The Times* in an article about his childhood. 'I can still sniff its unforgettable smell – a mixture of cats' pee and hot cocoa. We slept in the shelter most nights and the adults were always going on about Hitler and bloody Germans.'

With dad Jim, mum Mary and older siblings Marion and Paul, the boyhood lived by young Jimmy was unremarkable; no discussion of a child prodigy and certainly no agents lurking on street corners with boot contracts.

He did what other children of the 1940s did: he spent hours out of doors making up all kinds of games; some born out of the Luftwaffe's raids on London. 'We all collected shrapnel and one of our street games was nipping out with buckets of water to put out incendiary bombs.' He collected cigarette cards showing his favourite footballers and cricketers; he enjoyed trips to the 'pictures' on Saturday to see the latest American movie stars and adventure serials; and he accepted powdered eggs and milk and

corned beef as staples of his diet because he knew no different. 'We were all painfully thin, and short, with pipe-cleaner legs. Rationing was supposed to have improved the diet of the working class, but it didn't do much for us.'

And, of course, he played plenty of football. The Greaves house had a garden that stretched away from the house like a pitch. Until the potatoes were dug up from the fields across the way, it was here, or on the streets outside if lighting was needed or the garden was being used to grow vegetables, where Jimmy and his mates would spend hours playing until all the skin came off their tennis ball and, finally, it split. 'I belong to the very last generation in Britain which played in the street. On our estate, no one had cars, so there was no fear of being run over.'

Greaves would recall that he 'arrived as a footballer out of the blue', with no great family tradition in the sport. His dad had played as a modestly-talented amateur wing-half or centre-half and had been a useful hockey player in the army in India. Yet Greaves remembered that 'nobody gave me any real coaching'. But what his father was able to offer him, at the age of five years old, was more valuable than any technical guidance; it was his own leather football. With that, Jimmy became the most sought-after playing companion in the neighbourhood.

Greaves senior served as chairman of a small local club, Fanshaw Old Boys, whose players became Jimmy's first sporting heroes and happily allowed him to have a kickabout with them when he tagged along to games. And when the club was about to discard one of its old footballs, it was Jimmy who ended up with the prized possession.

Not by talent or skill – of which he already had more than most of his peers – Jimmy had become 'the centre of our football world'. The ball was his entry ticket to endless games with boys up to the age of 15, who were happy to allow a slip of a kid to play with them in return for the chance to kick around something better than an ageing tennis ball. No game could take place without

him being picked for one of the teams. Even though the older boys displayed a reluctance to scare off such an important figure, Greaves still needed to develop keen instincts for self-preservation to survive physically. 'That was the best thing that happened to me as a youngster,' he said, 'playing with those lads three times my own age.' After that, even the brutal defences of Italian football would hold few fears.

A veteran of hundreds of street games, Jimmy played his first organised match at the age of nine at Southampton Lane School, scoring twice from his inside-right position with his family watching the action from their kitchen window. Greaves's school team then won the local league in his second year in the team.[1]

It was at Southampton Lane that Greaves had encountered, in a Mr Bakeman, someone who possessed 'the best knowledge of the game I had met in a teacher'. More typical throughout his school years was a sports master of whom Greaves said, 'I doubt if he knew as much about the game technically as my mother.'

Again, it was fate and circumstance that proved to be his most effective coaches. When the toes of the cheap boots he was wearing fell apart after only a couple of weeks, he had been forced to learn to kick properly with his instep to avoid pain and discomfort. And his father's promotion from a guard on the London Underground's District Line to driver on the new Central Line as it expanded out into Essex led to the family moving to Hainault, where the concrete and rubble that formed the back garden meant that Greaves found himself back out in the street kicking a tennis ball. 'When shooting I had to hit it just right, otherwise I would not make contact at all,' he recalled. The proper ball used in official matches was easy to master by comparison.

Away from football, Jimmy enjoyed listening to nature programmes on the radio, but family holidays spent hop picking in Kent – 'it took us five hours' drive in a cranky old lorry to get there'

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1 Greaves's recollection varies from autobiography to autobiography as to whether they won the local cup in the same year or were beaten in the final.

– were the closest he came to the idyllic countryside rambles he heard being portrayed on the radio. 'I was convinced life happened somewhere else for other kids,' he admitted, content to allow his favourite sport to fill the void that everyday existence appeared to have left.

The 11-plus exam that would determine his secondary school destination threw up exactly the result he hoped for. 'I spent so long trying to understand the questions that I had no time to fill in the answers,' he told *The Times*. Failure in the exam hall allowed him to attend Kingswood Secondary Modern in Hainault rather than being stuck at a rugby-playing grammar school. Not that success on the football field was easy to come by. It took Kingswood three miserable years of failure before things suddenly clicked in Greaves's fourth year at the school and a cup and league double was achieved – 'the strangest thing I have ever known happen in the game at any level', he would note.

As Greaves's goals from his inside-forward position fired his school team towards success in that 1954-55 school year, so he came to the attention of a broader audience. 'I idolised Jimmy when I was a kid,' recalled future England team-mate Martin Peters. 'He was three years older than me and I remember him playing for his school side against ours and scoring 11 goals in a 13-0 victory.'

In the Dagenham district team he found himself playing alongside opponents who would eventually become professional peers; Terry Venables, Ken Shellito, Mike Harrison and John Smith. And against someone who would line up alongside him in one England youth team game and eventually be his coach at West Ham during the final months of his League career. John Lyall recalled, 'When I first played against him in the Corinthian Shield Under-15s final, he wasn't a goalscorer at all. He was playing for Dagenham Schools and he ran my Ilford team ragged. He had a dribbling talent and a passing talent that was way above anything else on the field … Jimmy dribbled rings around us that day and,

although he didn't score, someone obviously spotted a talent that could be exploited.'

Venables remembered Greaves as 'an awesome player even then', explaining that he would 'come alive' when the ball reached him, 'dancing around four or five players and scoring fantastic goals'. Venables was so in thrall to Greaves, three years older than he was, that he followed him home on the bus one day, hoping to absorb some insight that might help him emulate his hero. The only result of his spying mission, though, was a long walk home.

When his father was approached by Tottenham scouts after an appearance for London Boys, it was the first time that Greaves seriously considered that he might be able to earn a living from football. Despite being from West Ham territory, it was always Spurs with whom he felt the closest affinity – although he would watch his football at local non-League teams competing in the Athenian, Corinthian, Isthmian and Spartan Leagues. His father, Jim, set his sights firmly on a Tottenham apprenticeship for his son after being impressed by a meeting with manager Arthur Rowe, who had developed the 'push and run' style of football that won the League Championship in 1950-51. Young Jimmy was suitably happy with such a plan, despite the temptation of remaining at Kingswood long enough to earn the chance to win a schoolboy cap at cricket for Essex.

It was selection for the Essex Schoolboys football team, however, that brought him into contact with a mysterious bowler-hatted character who was to change his life; a man who, for reasons of paranoia resulting from previous accusations of poaching young players, often went by the name of Mr Pope, even though those in professional football knew his true identity as Jimmy Thompson, Chelsea Football Club's starmaker.

'Jimmy Thompson was the best scout there was,' says Les Allen, another Dagenham boy who had been spotted by Thompson while playing local amateur football. 'He was a special man. He knew what he wanted and Ted Drake, the manager at Chelsea, gave him

carte blanche to get any players he wanted. He lived in Romford, which was quite a good area for picking up players. He was well known for persuading a lot of boys that West Ham were after to go to Chelsea instead. He told me about the good players that were at Chelsea: a lad my age called Colin Court, who played for Wales schoolboys, and Roy Cunningham, who played for the Scottish schoolboys. Jimmy Thompson went all round the country getting the best players, so it was a good club to join.'

With Greaves's leaving date from school only a month away and Tottenham his apparent destination, Thompson, excited by what he had seen on the field, knocked on the door of the Greaves home. 'He was a genius,' was Thompson's description of his target. 'He would never touch it with his head, but downstairs – cor!' In those days, the sight of a bowler-hatted man on the doorstep usually meant that an insurance payment was due, but for Greaves that headgear was to have an entirely different significance. 'Every time for years to come that I was to make a major decision in my football career, the bowler hat would be around,' he said.

A young member of Chelsea's playing squad, defender John Sillett, had been as impressed as Thompson by his first sight of Greaves. 'I saw him in a game at White Hart Lane,' he remembers. 'I think it was for London Schoolboys. Him and a lad called David Cliss. I thought, "These two can play." Next day, Jimmy Thompson came into the club and asked if anybody had seen the game and what did we think of the players? I said, "Cliss impressed me a lot and the feller up front, Greaves, he scored a couple of good goals." Jimmy said, "They are both coming to Chelsea." That was the first time I really took notice of him.'

Thompson had called Drake after watching Greaves score five goals in a game to tell him he had seen 'a player of a lifetime'. A man on a mission, he introduced himself at the family's front door and walked confidently into the kitchen to announce, 'Put the kettle on, ma, and we'll have a cup of tea.' Mary, far from being affronted, was charmed, even if this smooth talker did always

seem to be speaking out of the side of his mouth as if suspicious of spies behind the sofa. To Greaves senior, Thompson issued the instruction that Jimmy should sign for Chelsea, while laying out all the supposed faults of the set-up at Tottenham.

As part of his period of contemplation, Greaves's dad went to see Ernest Allen, father of Les, who had grown up in the same neighbourhood and was in the early days of a professional career at Stamford Bridge. 'I was from just close by to Jimmy,' Allen explains. 'I was in Bonham Road, where a few of us turned out to be professional players: for instance, Ken Brown and Dickie Walker, who were centre-halves for West Ham; my brother, Dennis, who played for Charlton; and Terry Venables, who lived opposite us. I don't know if Jim's dad went to the same working men's club my father went to on a Sunday for a pint at lunchtime, but he did talk to him. My dad told him what a good club Chelsea was for the young players.'

Another factor in the Greaves family's decision was the ill health that had struck down Arthur Rowe, the man so admired by Jim senior. Forced to take six months away from the manager's role at Spurs before he would finally step down in the summer of 1955, it meant Thompson could not have timed better the visits that became more frequent as he further recognised the talent before him. 'As the glibness rushed on in a torrent so I moved farther and farther away from White Hart Lane,' recalled Greaves, who was being swayed by the presence of other East Enders at Stamford Bridge and the club's push towards that season's League Championship, their first major trophy.

Intriguingly, Bill Nicholson, the man who – as an eventual successor to Rowe at Tottenham – felt most closely the Greaves family's change of heart, cast a shadow of impropriety over the decision in his autobiography three decades later. 'Arthur Rowe anticipated that Greaves would sign as one of his apprentices,' he noted. 'Why Greaves chose Chelsea can only be answered by him. Tottenham failed to sign many good young players through

the years because they never paid inducements to the parents of schoolboys.'

Meanwhile, West Ham manager Ted Fenton had also made a couple of visits, but his powers of persuasion were limited by his club's struggle to get themselves out of the Second Division. Future England colleague George Cohen, born four months before Greaves, recalls the buzz around the London football scene over his impending decision. 'He was the one people were watching,' he says. 'He was a sensation and people were asking, "Where is Jimmy Greaves going?" I first met him at Arsenal. We were sitting next to each other on the bench watching London Boys play Scotland Boys, I think it was. He had a big name and when I asked him where he was going he said he was going to stick with Chelsea. He was very, very self-assured as far as his football was concerned.'

A further career option, a job as a compositor at *The Times*, where his dad had set him up with an interview, was never likely to be considered seriously once Thompson had taken his wide-eyed target to tea at the Strand Palace Hotel, offering him a glimpse of grandeur he had only seen in magazines and movies. Nor was remaining at school, where he had battled through exams in spite of being 'a tortoise when it came to reading', requiring twice as long to get through a textbook as his classmates. In later years, it was discovered that he suffered from dyslexia.

In the end, despite his father's loyalty towards White Hart Lane, the decision was in Jimmy's own hands. Chelsea it was. Tottenham and West Ham would both have to wait.

'I should like to take you to the ground personally to meet Mr Drake,' a triumphant Thompson told him on hearing of his choice. Thinking that he was to be given a private audience befitting an apparently prized prospect, Greaves was surprised, and a little crestfallen, to discover a whole group of young players waiting to be given train tickets by Thompson when he reported to Liverpool Street Station. Among them were Shellito and Cliss, two boys he'd been particularly impressed by during a game for London Schools.

The boys were offered a Polo mint and handed a Tube ticket to Fulham Broadway, from where they made the short walk to sit outside Drake's office inside Chelsea's stadium.

One by one, they were summoned by Thompson, the numbers in the waiting area steadily reducing as they were ushered out of another door into a billiards room, unseen by their fellow hopefuls. 'It was all pretty nerve-wracking,' Greaves remembered, eventually getting his turn in front of Drake. There were few personal comments, merely a reminder of the duties of boys assigned to the ground staff and an assurance that, 'I expect you to be a distinguished player in the years ahead'.

Waiting in the billiard room he found Chelsea's youth manager, Dickie Foss, whom he would later describe as 'one of the few people who really helped me develop as a player'. Greaves was to sign amateur forms and be paid £5 a week for his duties around the club, with £2 of that being an accommodation allowance that his mother had to sign for to prove she had received it. There was the promise of an extra £2 when he turned 16 several months later.

For now, it was hardly a life-changing milestone for the Greaves family. They had not even managed to finagle any of the white goods, sofas or new overcoats for mum that many clubs were offering in exchange for junior's signature – despite Nicholson's later innuendo. They didn't go entirely empty-handed, though. Just back from a trip across the water to watch some racing, Thompson, who loved to gamble on the horses as well as schoolboy footballers, handed Greaves's dad £50 worth of Irish five-pound notes.