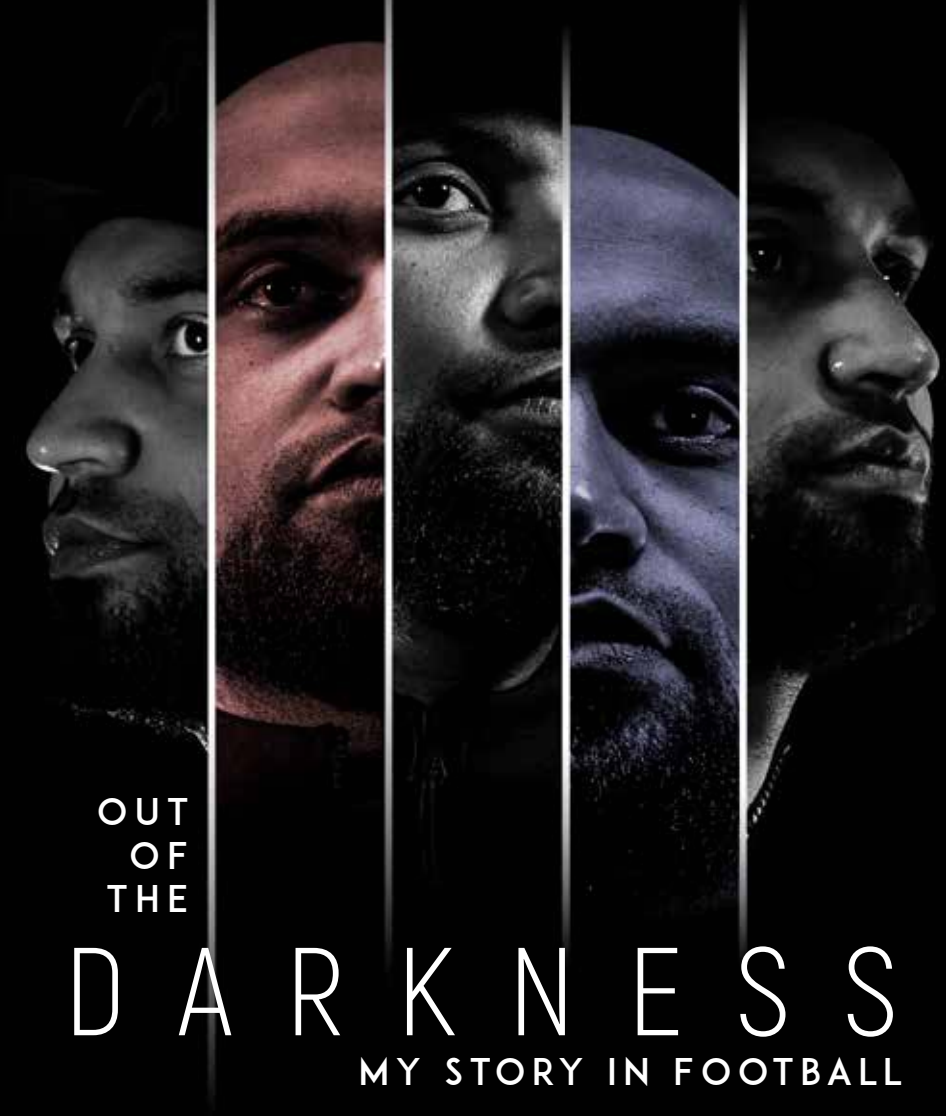
MATT PIPER

WITH
JOE BREWIN



OUT OF THE DARKNESS

MY STORY IN FOOTBALL

FROM
TOP TO
ROCK
BOTTOM

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Foreword

By Brian Deane

WHEN YOU go into a new football club as a senior professional, you immediately scout around and survey your new environment. I joined Leicester City from Middlesbrough in November 2001, when the club was struggling in the Premiership* relegation zone. Not much was going right for them back then.

But it wasn't all bad. I remember speaking to someone who told me, 'We've got a lad here who is going to be something special. He's quick, his feet are ridiculous, and technically he's going to go all the way.'

I hadn't heard of Matt Piper before that conversation – he'd only made his senior debut the previous month – and in fact, he wasn't even at the club when I arrived. He was on loan at Mansfield for a couple of months and returned to Leicester that January, having done very well in his time away from Filbert Street.

Then I quickly started to see what the fuss was all about.

What was really nice was how humble a young lad Matt was – he wasn't cocky or anything like that. The other players of his peer group were a lot chattier than he was, but Matt was just generally a lovely kid. It made me think, 'I want to help and look out for him if I can.'

At first, I told him to remember that he was in the first-team group because he was good enough. Sometimes, young lads come up to train with the pros but don't believe they should be there; that they're just making up the numbers. In fairness, sometimes they are. But because Matt was a quiet guy, it was important to stress that he was there for a reason. It was his opportunity to grow.

And he did. I remember the skinny legs and that people already knew he'd had some issues with his knees by then, but he seemed to glide whenever he had the ball. I never saw the pace that everybody talked about, but I remember left-back Jordan Stewart – who was rapid himself – telling me that Matt was on another level to him. He had a different gear. I thought, 'Wow – he's got all of that *and* he's quick?'

In early-February 2002, we played Chelsea at Filbert Street. Matt put Marcel Desailly in a world of trouble, and I knew then that he had something to get excited about. He had come into that environment at 20 and proved very quickly that he could do it against a guy who'd won the World Cup, European Championship and Champions League. When I got a bit older, I started to take more of

an interest in sports psychology – but I didn't need any special expertise to see that Marcel realised he'd had a very hard time with Pipes that afternoon. Generally, you learn to give off certain signals as an older pro to suggest you're having no problems, but Marcel couldn't even manage that in this particular game.

Sadly for Matt, his time at the club came to an end sooner than he would have liked it to. Leicester were relegated in 2002, and there were good reasons why the club needed to sell him that summer; their financial problems at the time were well documented. He didn't want to leave, but asked a few of the older pros for some advice about what to do – so I gave it to him straight. 'The club want to sell you, Matty – you've got to go. If you stay, you might not be welcome. You'd be going to a Premiership club, and that's the best stage for you right now.' He was better suited to the top flight at that time, anyway.

I tried to be like a bigger brother to Matt and a few of the other lads at Leicester who were coming into the game. I was at the end of my career and facing a time when there wouldn't be football in my life for much longer. I remembered being a young lad myself, thinking that I was going to live to be 100 years old and do everything I'd ever wanted to do, but you start to see your own mortality when you get a bit older. All I was trying to do was say, 'Look guys, nothing is going to last forever. You have a massive opportunity now, so make the most of it; be the best you

can be. That way, you'll learn about what you are going to become. But if you don't take it seriously, then you have a problem.'

As it turned out, it wouldn't be the last time our careers crossed paths. When I arrived at Sunderland for a brief spell in 2005, it was obvious that Matt had suffered some problems there. We didn't really talk much about them at the time, but the move hadn't gone the way he'd wanted it to. He felt like he'd let people down – including himself. But sometimes, it just doesn't work out for you. Transfers create challenges in themselves: he'd gone up there with a big pay rise in an environment that was nowhere near as familiar to him as Leicester; far away from familiar faces and what he knew. I didn't stay at the Stadium of Light for long before heading to Australia, but we kept in touch afterwards when his life began to take a darker turn.

I nearly fell out with Matt once. I had a friend who knew that he meant a lot to me and introduced herself to him once as a pal of mine. He wasn't particularly nice to her – apparently, worse for wear and steaming in a club – and it was reported back to me. I got on the phone to him and told him he was out of order. 'If that's how you're going to be, then fine – you and I are done.' I was willing to fall out with him at that point. It hurt me. I'd always spoken glowingly of him, but that made me re-evaluate. I wasn't willing to say to him, 'What's going on?' – instead, it was 'stop being a dickhead'.

People who knew Matt during his football career and know him today wouldn't recognise that in him. The way he has turned his life around since then has been nothing short of amazing, and he has actually inspired me in a lot of ways along the way. He started coaching, and I looked at some of the things he was talking about doing – his own YouTube channel, for example – in awe.

It was all so positive. Matt had looked up to me for a lot of his career, but there were times when I needed some guidance, too. I took some inspiration from what he was doing, and whether he knows it or not, it helped me through some of my own more difficult times. You're never too old to learn.

By seeing what he was doing and how he'd transformed his life, it inspired me. I know at one point he was in a dark place with a young family, wondering what might happen next. But eventually, he found the resilience he needed to get him through life and into a place where he's now making a real positive difference to others.

I'm so proud of him.

**The Premier League was called the Premiership from 1993-2007.*

PROLOGUE

The cat with no more lives

19 January 2006

I am no longer a professional footballer. It's over – all of it. The dreams I had when I was a kid? Gone. I am no longer Matt Piper the Premiership player at Sunderland.

And do you know what my first thought is?

Thank fuck for that.

When I look back on that day, I remember the feeling was pure relief. My knees had been a mess since I was 16 years old – by the end, I'd lost count of the operations, injections, physio sessions and consultations; the constant rehab that seemed never-ending. Twenty years of development for 55 professional games over five years. Sunderland owed me over £1.1 million to the end of my contract, but I couldn't care less. I took a quarter of that and ran.

A few months before the end, there had been an incident. During my rehabilitation, I would go into Sunderland's

training ground early and swim 50 lengths before I went in to see the physio each day – I was dedicated to getting back fit every single time, no matter what. But that day, I had a panic attack in the pool; the only one I'd ever had as a footballer … if not the last I was to have in my life. If only it had been the last.

At the time, I didn't want to tell anyone because I was worried that the club would get rid of me. All of that stress building up inside me, constantly injured with nothing I could do about it, had tipped things over the edge. There was no sports psychologist or anyone I could talk to – not that I would have done anyway. As most footballers do, you put on a front and don't let anyone know how you're truly feeling inside. Bury it all and hope for the best.

You can go a couple of ways with it – but I used to take the self-deprecation approach. You'd get the jokes coming in from staff and players: 'Fucking hell Pipes, if you were a horse you'd have been put down by now.' My nickname at Sunderland became 'Mr Glass', because of Samuel L. Jackson's character in the film *Unbreakable*. 'Have you broken an eyelash this time?' To get by, you end up making those jokes before other people do. I became that guy. But when you come away from the training ground, there's no lower point if you're injured.

You think you're never going to get back fit, and when you do, you know it's going to be short-lived. *Oh my God, it's happened again.* Then the jokes continue. They're trying

to have a laugh with you, but they don't realise that every 'Mr Glass' joke kills you a little bit more inside each time.

Injuries ruined my career way before I ended it – they took the joy, confidence and belief in my own ability away from me. They injured my mind way more than they injured my body.

I honestly believe things would have improved if I had been constantly playing and doing well, like in those carefree early days at Leicester City. Everything seemed so easy then. But after my breakthrough season of 2001/02 at Filbert Street, the most games I ever played on the bounce was nine, in my first season at Sunderland. After that? No more than three, for over three years.

There was a pattern at both clubs. Yes, I was nervous before playing, but to nowhere near the same level as those feelings would affect me later on. It was no coincidence that I played my best football then, when I wasn't facing months out of action every few matches.

Brendan Rodgers often talks about dealing with pressure in a routine – the reality is that you have to at a high level. But it's also very difficult to achieve when you can't string a run of games together. Routine is built from consistency.

Those worries and stresses kept me in a disabling state of mind. When you're not sure whether you can even make it through the next game, you start to dread the games you get fit for. I began to fear the build-up to any game.

My best times were the night after I'd played well – it was what I thought being a footballer would be like all the

time. For that night, and that night only, I used to think it was the best job in the world. And that was it: straight on to preparing for the next match; straight on to preparing for an inevitable disaster.

The dread evaporated more or less as soon as the first whistle went, every time. You knew then that if you were having a bad game, you were having a bad game – nobody was going to snipe you down from the crowd because of it. How I felt also annoyed me – I knew the nerves would vanish, yet I'd still be paralysed by them beforehand. I just didn't want to let anyone down.

There was someone else I played with at Sunderland who went through something similar with injuries, but was more honest about it than I was. I even remember thinking at the time: *my word mate, are you not intelligent enough to know you shouldn't admit that?* He said he was down, depressed; that his head wasn't right. At that point, I thought *I* was the stronger one for keeping it all inside and just trying to put on a brave face. He asked for time off, but the club told him that they wouldn't pay him anymore. He went back home anyway, though, and we didn't see him for ages. The Sunderland crowd could be harsh, but internally it could be, too: I remember the murmurings with staff and other players that basically said, 'He hasn't got it upstairs.' It was unfair, and a massive shame.

I'm sure some players – both current and former – feel like this now, even if they wouldn't like to admit it. A lot of

them love reading *The Chimp Paradox* by Steve Peters, for example, which I think shows you that this kind of thing is happening to more of them; almost as a way of validating their feelings. As you get older, you realise that you can't have been the only one. Niall Quinn told me recently that even he struggled to deal with stuff as a seasoned pro and Sunderland legend. Apparently, he used visualisation techniques to take himself back to carefree football, helping him to manage the nerves and pressure.

I still justify quitting football when I did, because my knees have gone again even now; my surgeon, Dr Richard Steadman, told me that they would before I was 40. It's still a way to protect myself, to think that I didn't just throw my football career away. Of course, there will always be that thought of unfinished business – there was a lot of potential there once upon a time. But if I'm being raw and totally honest? I could have carried on. The idea of taking that load off my mind won out, though, and it wasn't even close. After a string of ridiculous injuries, I went back to Sunderland and played the 'poor me' card. In reality, I wasn't bothered one bit.

I've now reached a point in my life where I know what I did, and what I achieved. Now it's time to just tell the story. Exactly how it was – with everything that happened next. If people think less of me because of it, that's fine. But here it is.

Everything.

CHAPTER 1

Rock bottom

IT'S A good job that I'm not conscious – I wouldn't want to hear what they are saying about me. To be honest, I wouldn't even understand them: what does being sectioned even mean?

As I eventually begin to drift in and out, the only thing I know is that my mum is having none of that talk from the doctor. Most things are a dull fuzz, as I lie on the hospital bed feeling like death barely warmed up, my body a broken shell of toxins from booze and too many pills.

I don't remember much about waking up that day, but it doesn't matter – I almost hadn't at all. This was rock bottom.

When you come out of professional football at 24 years old, it's exciting at first. Money in the bank; freedom; no injuries. You could do *anything*. You don't know what, but you're sure that you'll find your calling in time. *Something* will come along. Won't it?

When you're still asking yourself that question after two years because you haven't found anything you want to do, it's not exciting anymore. It's panic. Your money is running out, and you have no idea where to turn next. No prospects … no hope.

Nights out are fun at first, not least when you're having them twice a week. Then Monday comes around – boring, hopeless Monday. Everybody else is at work. Might as well get the juices flowing with a little tipple. *Is it 12 o'clock yet? It's always 12 o'clock somewhere.* Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday – they're all the same. Soon, you're having parties in the living room with your dog, and the reason to get up every day is *Jeremy Kyle* washed down with two litres of whisky.

Soon, you start to feel depressed about that, so you turn to Valium and ease all of those fears away. Soon, you start to worry that what you're doing isn't healthy, so you roll up a joint and smooth it all over in your mind. Soon, you become a person that you and everyone close to you begins to hate – but you don't stop. You can't: you're not ready to. Bell's and *The Real Housewives of New York City* – they're the things worth getting up for every day now.

Soon, you end up doing something stupid – or in my case, lots of things – and it almost costs you everything. But when you've hit the bottom and are still alive to tell the tale, the only way is up.

I want to tell you my story in full now, because I hope it will help others out there who are struggling with their own issues. I know what it's like to be in a place of complete despair, but I'm so happy to say that I have come through those dark days and reached a place in my life where I am happier than ever before. People think I'm mad when I say that these days, having first played in the Premiership when I was 20 – but it's absolutely true.

Football wasn't kind to me as a player, and neither were the years afterwards. But life has given me everything I could have ever wanted since then – I've just achieved dreams of a different kind. I have an incredible wife, and between us we have four unbelievable children who I am grateful for every single day.

In September 2017, I co-founded the FSD Academy in Leicester; an idea that first formed when I was getting the help I needed at Sporting Chance, and that has rewarded me in ways beyond anything I could have ever hoped for. As a result, I'm not writing this book to sell cheap stories – all the profits will go to those two organisations which saved my life in different ways.

So now *this* is my story: the football-mad kid on the streets of Leicester who played in the top flight for his local team and somehow earned a place in club history; the injuries that ruined life at Sunderland and crazy dressing-room tales in between; life after football, with the truth about those horrors which came next.

This is what it's like to be a professional footballer when things don't go right – but most importantly, it's also a story of hope.