

Pantomime Hero

Jimmy Armfield

Memories of the man
who lifted Leeds
after Brian Clough

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MY BOYHOOD footballing hero was Jimmy Greaves of Tottenham Hotspur and England. Dashing, handsome, prolific scorer of goals, he was everything I wanted to be when I grew up. Then when I became a man, or rather a middle-aged man, and finally saw that there was more to life than sheer sporting ability (though I never lost my admiration for Greaves nor awe at his talent), my hero became Jimmy Armfield. Yes, Jimmy A was a footballer who loved the game and its people. Yet, beyond that he was a rounded human being with an astonishing array of interests, one who loved life in all its guises and with all its vagaries, and people in general.

Never meet your heroes, goes the old adage. In Jimmy Armfield's case, I will be eternally grateful that I did. I like to think that in the last quarter of

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his life he might even have considered me a friend; I certainly did him. I will feel forever blessed to have had his example of humanity at its most generous of spirit. Football isn't always kind to its stalwarts, but its propensity for fostering bitterness due to that treatment rarely, if ever, assailed him. To be at his moving, magnificent funeral in February 2018, as one of the few journalists for whom room was found, was to be reminded through tribute after tribute, listening to friend after friend, of the warmth and admiration people had for him. In all my time around the sport, whenever Jimmy's name came up I never heard a single bad word spoken about him from anyone. Some achievement in a sport of politics and personalities, intrigue and insecurity.

But first, rather than final, things first. As a boy, though obsessed with Jimmy G, I was aware of Jimmy A – except that, in all honesty, as a right-back, he did not especially interest this budding forward. No, what I loved was that tangerine – not orange, tangerine – shirt of Blackpool FC in which he was often pictured, as their marquee player, in the magazines of the

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1960s that I bought with my Saturday pocket money: *Goal*, *Charles Buchan's Football Monthly* and such. They seemed to abound then, even before a new generation of the likes of *Shoot!* and *Match!* arrived. Jimmy would be kneeling, hand on ball, smiling widely at the camera, or essaying a staged volley with the Bloomfield Road terraces in the background. Blackpool were still a big club then, a legacy of the Stanley Matthews era, before the abolition of the maximum wage in 1961 gradually meant that the bigger-city clubs with larger fan bases could more afford the better players. The rule change of 1983 to allow home clubs to keep their own gate revenue favoured the bigger clubs more too than the Blackpools, who no longer saw a 25 per cent share from, say, Manchester United's support, cementing the change in the game's landscape.

In my own seaside home of Weymouth in Dorset as a seven-year-old becoming football daft – mainly through those magazines and the *Daily Mirror* that my parents took – I was also aware of the 1962 World Cup. I knew that Jimmy was the England captain and even though none of it was

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live on TV, just some black-and-white highlights that were on too late for a primary school boy, I noted that he was voted the best right-back in the tournament.

A year later, he captained England against the Rest of the World at Wembley, pride on his beaming face as he led out the team alongside his opposite number, the great Argentine, and serial European Cup winner with Real Madrid, Alfredo Di Stefano. The photograph would grace the front cover of Jimmy's 2004 autobiography, *Right Back to the Beginning*.

Quite probably, Jimmy would have been the England captain at the 1966 World Cup, and won many more than his 43 caps, but for a serious groin tear that kept him out of action for almost two years between tournaments. Bobby Moore, of course – pictured just behind Jimmy in that Rest of the World match line-up – was Alf Ramsey's choice as successor. By the time Jimmy was fit again, George Cohen had been installed at right-back and Jimmy could not win back his place. At that time, as an 11-year-old, I was more concerned – tearfully mortified actually – that Jimmy Greaves could not

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get back into the side for the final after an injury in a group game.

The reactions of the two men that day of the 1966 final could not have been more different. Looking back at footage and stills, poor Jimmy G is painfully sad and silent, even sulky and sullen, unengaged with it all despite the tense excitement of the endgame as he stands by the England bench. ‘The loneliest man in Wembley Stadium that day,’ he later said. How huge the pain must have been: the man the country most expected to score the goals that would secure the 12-inch golden trophy missing out on English football’s greatest day.

Jimmy A, meanwhile, is a smiling participant, though he hadn’t played a minute of the tournament. Dressed in his ‘lucky’ red V-neck sweater and grey polo neck, despite it being the last day of July, Jimmy raises his arms at the final whistle and looks to the heavens before embracing the unemotional Ramsey. The perfect squad member, the leader of the reserve XI, the man Ramsey had asked to look after the reserves – whom Jimmy would describe as ‘my lot’ – and to keep their spirits up.

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This is not to judge either man; they were just different people with different natures who approached their struggles from often opposite directions.

The next day, the nation still *en fête*, Jimmy G hid himself away – part through melancholy, part through not wanting to inflict that on others – and would quickly escape the country for a holiday as the rest of the players basked in the glory. While the following season he bounced back with Spurs as an FA Cup winner and the First Division's top scorer, in the following years, he even descended into alcoholism, though thankfully he sobered up, becoming a hugely loved figure all over again as a TV personality, all quick wit and trenchant opinion delivered with warmth.

Jimmy A too would tread the path to national affection, but his was strewn more with flowers than broken glass. So grounded but broad a life did Jimmy A go on to have that he made manifold marks nationally and locally, in football and outside. One-club men tend to be revered forever – as he was (indeed, still is) in making 627 appearances for Blackpool from 1954 to 1971. (He was, incidentally,

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booked only once throughout it all, for two fouls in quick succession against Norwich City in an FA Cup tie; some record for a defender.) It could, however, have been tragically different had Sir Matt Busby succeeded in signing him for Manchester United just weeks before the Munich air disaster of 1958, but fortuitously the Blackpool manager Joe Smith refused to let Jimmy go.

Instead, Jimmy developed as an innovative overlapping right-back in the days before wing-backs, making runs with the zeal and cheek of youth in getting beyond the veteran right-winger Stanley Matthews, who was often being double-marked, to receive and cross the ball. It annoyed Smith sometimes, as he liked full-backs who defended, but the fans loved it and it became the pacey, energetic Armfield's trademark.

From playing the game Jimmy became a manager, initially with Bolton Wanderers, then later worked for the Football Association and Professional Footballers' Association as headhunter of England managers and champion of players' causes. He learned, too, the trade of print journalism and TV and radio broadcasting, his

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mellifluous Lancastrian voice rightly revered when tone and delivery still mattered significantly. This from Daniel Gray, in his 2016 book *Saturday, 3pm: 50 eternal delights of modern football*, is apt: ‘His voice is a blessing not only because it helps us float happily to sepia days but also because it conveys his continuing adoration of football... His is a blurring brogue which resonates with depth and honesty, where so much now is sensation and surface.’

Jimmy trained properly in an era before pundits just turned up to the studio or press box thinking their playing career was enough to guarantee them authority. And he opined understatedly but incisively despite a growing preference for shouting and despite perversity of opinion becoming more highly prized by those who hire and commission emptier vessels in search of more youthful listeners.

Away from football, Jimmy played the organ at his parish church, St Peter’s. He became a director of the local NHS Hospital Trust and a governor of his old school. He was president of a branch of Age Concern, vice-president of Lancashire Outward Bound and a member of Blackburn Cathedral Council. What else? Well, OBE and CBE, High

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Sheriff and then Deputy Lieutenant of Lancashire, all performed with a desire to see young and underprivileged people given help, and a love of life that a serious cancer and subsequent chemotherapy in 2007 unwisely decided to challenge.

I have another hero in the American rock musician Bruce Springsteen, to whom there is devoted a guided tour of his haunts in the small town of Freehold, New Jersey, where he was born and grew up, and venues he first played in the seaside town of Asbury Park. Whenever I visit Blackpool, I feel as if there should be something similar for Jimmy, given that his presence, his spirit, still feels vivid along the now tarnished Golden Mile and in the town's faded backstreets. The town ran through him like its name through a stick of rock bought on the seafront, his physical manifestation still apparent in his statue outside Bloomfield Road and the huge wall mural on the side of a house across the road.

Driving towards Blackpool from Preston after turning off the M6 reminds me of the approach to Atlantic City, another of Bruce's heartland venues, through 'the swamps of Jersey'. As the Jersey Shore

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nears, big shiny casino hotels loom; from the M55 Blackpool's landmark Tower looms similarly. Often Jim was pictured with it in the background, most notably in that period of injury between the 1962 and 1966 World Cups when the *Evening Gazette* (now the *Blackpool Gazette*) captured him bare-chested running on the South Shore sands. It would be the front-page picture of their loving, rightly award-winning supplement published the day after Jimmy's death on 22 January 2018, aged 82.

Ah, the *Gazette*. Our tour should take in West Street, up near the North Pier, and once the offices of the newspaper where something remarkable happened with Jimmy that would never happen these days – which will be one of the underlying themes of this book, even if modern times carry many echoes of Jim's heyday. From 1959 to 1971 at the height of his fame and football career, Jimmy spent three afternoons a week writing columns for the evening paper, even covering local Wednesday league matches, to gain a grounding in constructing match reports. (Today, in the way of the modern media, where local journalists have little time to mingle with their readership and instead primarily

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pick up stories from the internet, the *Gazette* is now housed in a business park.)

Perhaps we'll also go to Stanley Park, where Jimmy covered games from an often freezing touchline with no team sheets, just his wits and a pen and notebook. We can see the zoo from there, where the lion ate Albert in that darkly comic Stanley Holloway monologue that began so beautifully: 'There's a famous seaside place called Blackpool/That's noted for fresh air and fun.'

Where to begin the tour? At Tyldesley Road probably, one street back from the Promenade near the Central Pier. It was to a flat above a butcher's shop here that Jimmy's mother Doris brought him from his birthplace at Denton, in Manchester, to escape the bombing in the Second World War. Doris took work at a nearby boarding house and his father, Christopher (Jimmy's middle name), visited at weekends.

After that, rugby union-playing Arnold School, where he excelled even at that sport, right through to the first XV. Football came more informally, learned with a bald tennis ball in the streets and then through more organised Sunday

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school and youth-club teams, where a Blackpool scout spotted him. He was a natural, though there was no history of the game in his family.

We'll go of course back up by the North Pier, to Talbot Square, where the Town Hall stands. As a 17-year-old junior on Blackpool's books, Jimmy joined the crowds here when the team stood on the steps with the FA Cup after the legendary 4-3 victory over Bolton Wanderers at Wembley in 1953 and what became known as 'The Matthews Final'.

It was to Talbot Square too where Jimmy and his team-mates would later head every Friday afternoon, to the National Provincial Bank to pick up their wages. Now, though the Town Hall is still there, it feels less imposing, the square bisected by tram lines and the surrounding buildings taken prisoner by the modern seaside trade of apartments, bars, kebab shops and 'Blackpool's Premier Lap Dancing Club'. When I last visited, in lashing rain in early August 2022, down The Strand side street gulls picked at bin liners and betting slips littered the pavement. And three things occurred to me.

The first was that, if I concentrated hard as I stood receiving a soaking in Talbot Square and gazed

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at the Town Hall, I could just imagine Matthews making a speech here, according the plaudits to his team-mates, especially Stan Mortensen, who had scored a hat-trick in the final. The second was that I could also picture an excited teenaged Jimmy Armfield, then playing for the club's junior side, deciding in that moment that he was going to make it as a professional footballer and was going to redouble his efforts to secure an apprenticeship. It would not be long in coming. The third was that – just as I never heard him disparage anyone – never did I hear Jimmy denigrate Blackpool despite its fall into disrepair due to decades-long lack of investment that the 2010s began to address. He remained ever fond of the place and would stand up for it.

Which brings us to St Peter's Church, on the Lytham Road, at the hub of what is now one of Britain's most impoverished, and drug-blighted, areas. The church became Jimmy's 'local' after his marriage to Anne – a remarkable, grounded and intelligent woman who was a nurse by training – and their move to a club house in Rosedale Avenue. At St Peter's, they took Sunday school classes and

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Jimmy, having had piano lessons as a boy, agreed to have a go at playing the organ. He did so for more than 50 years in the church that would house his memorable funeral.

For many years, people urged Jimmy to play the mighty, celebrated Wurlitzer organ in the Tower Ballroom but he never felt confident enough. Until his 80th birthday, that was, when a dinner was staged in his honour in the famous hall familiar to generations of dancers and viewers of *Strictly Come Dancing*. For the occasion, Jimmy was finally prevailed upon to play, knowing probably that there might not be another chance, and alongside the expert organist Peter Jebson he essayed – what else? – ‘I Do Like to be Beside the Seaside’, the organ gradually lowering him beneath the stage to warm applause. There is footage on YouTube that is well worth viewing.

The Tower Ballroom would have to be on any tour itinerary also because in 1959 Blackpool Corporation arranged for Jimmy to be presented there with his Young Player of the Year award by the then England captain Billy Wright, who was about to retire. The place was packed with Saturday-

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night revellers and, in order to overcome his nerves, Jimmy – then unused to public speaking – needed to draw on all of the calmness that characterised his game and would stand him so well in his life.

From there, we could head back south, to Bairstow Street near Central Pier, and take in the site of the grocery shop that Jimmy's dad took over after joining his family for good after the War, and the flat above it where they lived. From here, Jimmy made deliveries on his bike, even on some Saturday mornings after he made the first team. A few of his friends met him here at lunchtime and together they all walked to Bloomfield Road, where his mates headed for the terraces while Jimmy disappeared through the players' entrance.

We would, naturally, have to take in the rebuilt home of Blackpool FC, a compact all-seater these days rather than the vast-terraced ground of the 1950s that mirrored the club's decline amid the new money and cityscape of the Premier League. There's the stand named after him, of course, and the statue outside, decorated with hundreds of scarves and bouquets of flowers after his death. These days, too, there is that huge mural of him on the side

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of the house bought by a group of supporters and now called the Armfield Club, a hostelry and social venue for Blackpool fans.

On our way back out of town, before we reach the M55, there are a couple of other places we need to visit. There is his and Anne's final house at South Shore, a few streets back from the Pleasure Beach, in Stony Hill Avenue. No gated community here for Premier League players fearing contact with the real world. It's a pleasant, leafy road and a lovely sizeable semi-detached family home – one for a man, though both local celebrity and well known nationally, at ease among people, his people. The perfect red roof slates tell of the order and neatness of this tidy residential road. At the back of the house is the conservatory Jimmy loved sitting in to admire his manicured lawn that was bordered by his prized geraniums and roses.

From Stony Hill Avenue, it is some 500 metres to the small Blackpool Airport and, adjacent, the Squires Gate training ground of Blackpool FC where our tour could even start but, if not, should certainly finish. Having been effectively sacked as manager by Leeds United in 1978, in the subsequent

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months and years Jimmy would head to the training ground of his playing days, this time to offer his help – taken up by club managers – as an unpaid coach. He was not too proud nor his ego so large that he couldn't muck in. He needed something active to do in the game after being hurt by his Elland Road departure – somewhere familiar and comforting.

Indeed, the experience meant that, despite contemplating the odd job opportunity, he never again subjected himself to football management, a profession that had been revealed to him first hand as brutal and unforgiving, even if he thought he was good at it and had a suitable temperament, mixing carrot and stick. The sheer ruthlessness of it was certainly seen in Brian Clough's dismissal at Leeds as successor to the revered Don Revie, though it was not Jimmy's initial experience in 1974/75 after being appointed, in turn, as Clough's successor. That season would be one of the most remarkable in English football during an astonishingly eventful and earthy time for the game.