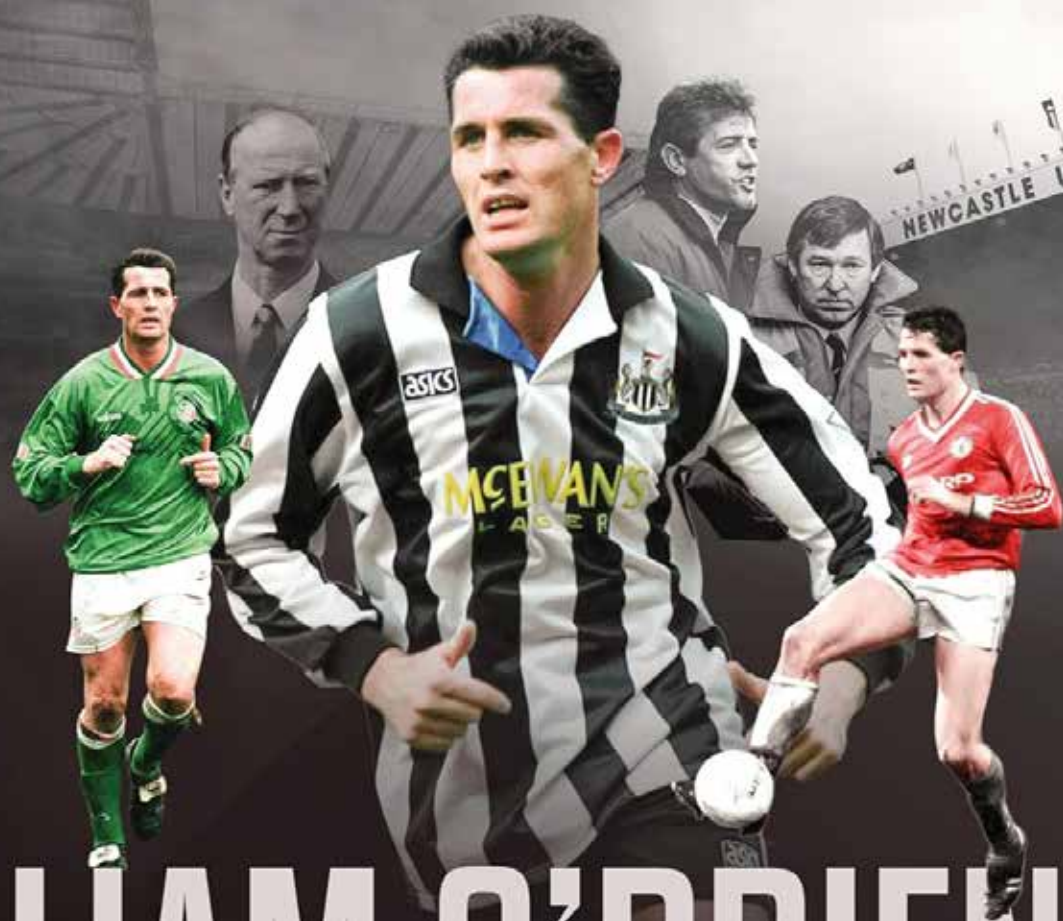


# PASS MASTER



# LIAM O'BRIEN

**FOOTBALL, FERGIE, BIG JACK, KING KEV**

and My Life in the Beautiful and Sometimes Brutal Game

**WITH JIMMY GEOGHEGAN**

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## A FAMILY STEEPED IN FOOTBALL

DURING THE second half of the 1972 FA Cup Final, the centenary final, Leeds United launched an attack. They moved the ball upfield, hoping to catch out the Arsenal defence. The ball was passed by the great Peter Lorimer out to the right wing, where Mick Jones ran on to it. He got a yard or two away from Bob McNab and whipped the ball into the Arsenal goalmouth.

Up to then, both teams had had chances to find the net but had failed. The game remained scoreless. Then, in an instant, it all changed. Changed utterly. Waiting for Jones to deliver his cross was the one and only Allan Clarke, otherwise known as ‘Sniffer’, an appropriate nickname, because he was generally lethal at converting half-chances into goals.

This time, good old ‘Sniffer’ used his head to make contact with the ball. It was a firm contact. Millions watching the game on TV, including me, and a packed Wembley Stadium crowd, watched as the ball flew past Arsenal goalkeeper Geoff Barnett and into the net. Clarke raised his arms in celebration while the rest of the Leeds United players smothered him in congratulations.

It was the only goal of the game. It was also the only time to date that Leeds United have won the FA Cup; a sad reality for anybody who supports the Whites.

I watched that 1972 FA Cup Final at my home in an area known as South Lotts in Ringsend. In those days, the final was

the only full-length game from English club football shown live on Irish TV during the year and I was transfixed from the moment I sat down to observe how Don Revie and his boys, in their all-white strip, took on the Gunners, who were wearing their distinctive red shirts with white sleeves.

The coverage of FA Cup Finals in those years went on for most of the day, starting early in the morning. The pre-match build-up included interviews with the players; cameras were even allowed on the buses that took the teams to what was, for many, the biggest game of their lives.

I was particularly taken by Johnny Giles that May day in 1972 as he stroked the ball around from his midfield berth, keeping Leeds on the front foot; rarely, if ever, it seemed to my young eyes, did he give away possession. Even then, I knew he was a midfielder with special qualities. To make things even better, he was from Dublin, my town.

Billy Bremner, with his flame-haired presence, was another who I admired and Eddie Gray, Norman Hunter and Paul Madeley were just some of the other wonderful players in that great Leeds team. I loved Peter Lorimer and the powerful shot he could launch like a rocket. As a kid, I used to pretend I was Peter Lorimer, because I loved to strike the ball from distance and see it flash into the net like a cannonball.

Another Leeds United winner that day was Jack Charlton, who attended to his defensive duties with typical diligence. I was to get to know Big Jack very well later in life.

That FA Cup Final – the glamour, the colour and glory of it all, as it seemed to my youthful eyes – was one of the reasons I became obsessed with football. Watching that game also helped me develop my burning ambition to be footballer. It seemed to be the perfect life, playing the game in a stadium like Wembley on that pristine, green surface.

Another reason why soccer captured my imagination may well have been down to the fact that, from the start, I was steeped in the game – literally. When I was growing up, you could walk around my home district of Ringsend in Dublin's south inner city area and there was a very decent chance you would bump into a footballer or ex-footballer. An international footballer at that.

Down the years, a stream of talented players had emerged from the area, many of them going on to make their names in the famous green and white hoops of Shamrock Rovers, a club who became one of the most successful and famous names in Irish club soccer.

Rovers were originally formed in the Ringsend area – in Shamrock Avenue in 1899 – so it was understandable that local people should identify with the Hoops and that young, talented footballers from the area should want to wear their colours. Rovers were an expression of pride in the community.

Among the legends from the area was Bob Fullam. He played for Rovers and also played in some of Ireland's earliest international games in the 1920s. There was another Rovers man, goalkeeper Tommy Godwin from Ringsend Road, who was between the posts when, in September 1949 at Goodison Park, Ireland became the first country from outside the home nations to defeat England on their home soil. Ireland won 2-0, a shock, in football terms, if there ever was one.

Then there was Arthur Fitzsimons, who played for a number of clubs in England, including Middlesbrough, Lincoln City and Mansfield Town, as well as winning 26 caps for Ireland. Jimmy Dunne, who became a scoring sensation in England with clubs like Sheffield United, was another hero from the area. There were so many more from the area who achieved great things in the game. Great players.

In more modern times, there was Davy Langan from Stella Gardens, Ringsend. Davy, of course, went on to have a fine career

in England in the 1970s and 80s, playing for clubs such as Derby County, Birmingham City and Oxford United – and, of course, for Ireland from 1978 to 87.

I saw him play for Ireland several times at Lansdowne Road, now the Aviva Stadium, which is located very close to my family home. After one of those matches, I was heading back to my home when I saw something, an image, that has stayed with me ever since.

It was the sight of Davy walking along the street after playing a game for Ireland as if he was just another punter, his bag slung over his shoulder. He walked over London Bridge Road, which would have been an easier way for him to go to his home near Ringsend Church. Shortly before that, he had been in the middle of an international football game.

There he was, a famous footballer who had made it big in England, returning to his roots without any fanfare. Someone who never forgot where he came from. Sadly, his career was blighted by injury and he was to painfully miss out on going to the 1988 European Championships. Even though Davy was from the same area as me I only got to know him when he got into the Irish squad.

Then there was my grandfather, Tom Caulfield, my mother's dad. He was also from Ringsend. He, too, was a footballer who enjoyed his fair share of success. He didn't play for Ireland but he was part of the great Shamrock Rovers team of the late 1920s and early 1930s who really started to assert themselves as a major force. Maybe it was from him that I inherited my footballing ability.

Tom was, like so many other men from the area, a docker and most of his sons ended up working as dockers. So many people from Ringsend made a living in that ancient trade, because the Dublin port and docks were so near. The area was known as Ray Town, because of the fishing. A lot of people from the area would go out fishing as well and eke out a living from that.

When Shamrock Rovers were playing on a weekend, my grandfather turned his attention to defending and doing what he could to turn Rovers into the powerful force they became. He was a centre-half and played his part as Rovers won four successive FAI Cup Finals between 1929 and 1932.

I remember Tom from my childhood days. He died in 1978. When I was a youngster, he was my grandad who happened to play football but, from time to time, I would hear about his achievements as a player. Perhaps hearing those little stories also helped to stir in me a desire to be a footballer, to follow in his footsteps.

One of those FAI Cup Finals my grandfather won with Rovers was when they defeated a team called Brideville 1-0 in 1930, the goal scored by David 'Babby' Byrne. He was the youngest in a family of 11. Babby was one of the legends who were part of Ringsend's rich history in soccer.

Big families such as the 11 in the Byrne household were the norm in Ireland right up to the 1960s and 70s. By comparison, our family of four boys and one girl was relatively small. I'm the oldest and was followed by Declan, Michael, Rosemary, who married Irish international footballer Graham Kavanagh, and the youngest, Thomas.

To stir the pot a bit and create a little humour, I would to say to my mother: 'Ma, why didn't you have me last rather than first? If I was born ten or 15 years later, I might have made a few more quid out of football!'

If I was ten years younger, I would certainly have earned a lot more money playing football with the likes of Manchester United and Newcastle United than I did. That's the reality. We would have a laugh about that, although I suppose I'm only half-joking when I do churn out that old line.

It's truly mind-blowing what players in English football earn now compared to back in the 80s and 90s but I don't begrudge



them; good luck to them and, hey, we had great times, too – and maybe the pressure wasn't as intense as it is on players now. Maybe times were better in some ways.

At least in those days if a footballer went for a night out and had a few drinks, he didn't have to face the prospect of having his photo taken on someone's mobile and sent to God knows where on social media. At least for a footballer back then there was less intrusion into their private lives.

We might have played in relatively impoverished times but there were some compensations. I have some great memories from my career – great days but also other days which weren't so good. It's all part of the package of being a footballer. One week you are in the first team, in demand, the next you can be left out, grappling with an injury or edged out by a colleague who is taking your place.

It's just the way your fortunes in professional football can change – and fortunes can change very quickly indeed. It's the same in life. Overall, though, I would have to say that Lady Luck smiled on me – and you do need a little luck to help make it through.

The good times are, well, the good times. When the tough times do arrive, the important thing is how you get over them. How you react. It's easy to go under and feel sorry for yourself when things go against you; when you pick up an injury, for instance, and are sidelined for ages or are dropped.

You have to have that determination to say 'No, I need to stay positive, I want to get back playing. I'm not going to wallow in this'. You have to learn to develop a strong resilience, a certain toughness. For some people, that's something they can tap into naturally. Others have to work harder at it. A sense of optimism helps; it is an important ally for anybody, especially footballers.

Throughout my career, I had bad injuries that forced me out of the teams. Sidelined me. Times when I would have felt left out of things. You could be stuck in the gym on your own for days, weeks

even, trying to get back some fitness and looking out at the lads on the training pitch, working away, having what, in your eyes, is a good time. You're stuck. The outsider. I hated that.

That was always difficult. That's when you have to dig deep inside yourself and find the good stuff. The positive stuff. That's the hard part of the game for players who find themselves left out of a team for one reason or another.

I was always aware of that throughout my career; the need to be able to bounce back from setbacks. It's one of the essential requirements of anybody who wants to play sport, especially at a high level, and finding that resilience has, in my view, a lot to do with the way you are brought up. The values you learn as a young person.

I certainly didn't learn from a sports psychologist how to strengthen my mind. They were a very rare species in professional football in the 1980s and even into the 90s. If you got a blow, some kind of setback or other, you simply had to delve into your own resources to find a way out of the morass. It was much the same as a youngster. In big families, especially in working class environments, you had to develop a certain toughness and steel.

Thankfully, I grew up in a loving, warm-hearted environment. We were well looked after at home and there was a wonderful sense of community among the people of Ringsend back then. People helped each other out, looked out for each other, but life was far from easy, either.

You had to assert yourself, too, develop a sense of independence. The kind of qualities that helped me in the hard, demanding world of professional football.

I was working from the age of nine, driven by the desire to earn my own money and I did – in the newspaper business!

I was almost ten when I got a chance to sell newspapers from a stall or 'perch', as we used to call it. I was based on Mount Street, a

fashionable street near the city centre. I would go down there after school. I also had a little paper round.

One evening in 1974 remains firmly etched in my memory. I was there seeking to sell some of my stack of newspapers, editions of both the *Evening Press* and the *Evening Herald*.

Next thing, I hear this massive explosion going off not too far away. That evening, three bombs went off in Dublin city centre area – one in Parnell Street, one in Talbot Street and another outside Trinity College, which was not that far away from where I was located, manning my newspaper stall.

As the crow flies, it was probably no more than three or four hundred metres from where I was standing on my perch on Mount Street, beside Merrion Square, when I heard this massive bang. It was a Friday evening, so many people were making their way home from work.

I didn't know what it was until I came home and saw it on the news. Turned out a series of bombs had been primed to go off in Dublin city centre that evening. It was part of a co-ordinated attack. Without warning, the explosions went off. The bombs killed 35 civilians, including an unborn child. Approximately 300 people were injured.

The explosions were part of The Troubles that continued to rage, mostly in the north of Ireland, at the time. Hardly a day went by when there wasn't news of an explosion or a shooting.

I was particularly glad to return to the safety of my family that May evening in 1974. When someone comes from a home where they feel the warmth of parental love, they already have the essential foundations for success in life. I was lucky in that I had that.

There was nothing fancy about where we lived. Our modest, terraced two-storey house, where we all grew up, is located on Hastings Street, across the road from the local greyhound racing venue, Shelbourne Park. My mother, Rosaleen, is a Ringsend

lady through and through. She was born and bred in the area, in Cambridge Road. She was one of eight in her family and they all grew up in the area.

There were seven in my father's family and they moved from nearby Haddington Road in Irishtown, which is beside Ringsend. Once my parents married and settled down, they went about the serious business of raising their children. There have been plenty of laughs over the years but tragedy, too. One of the babies born to my parents was a still birth. We named her Julieanne and she's very much regarded as part of the family. My mother carried Julieanne for almost the full nine months.

My father's name is also Liam but everyone knows him as 'Billo'. As a young man, he worked as an usher at the cinema – or picture house, as they used to call it – in the more affluent Ballsbridge. From there, he went to work for the gas company and the Irish Glass Bottling Company in Ringsend. He was involved in the making of glass bottles there and the company was a big employer for a time.

I went to primary school in Baggot Street, which is a considerable stretch from Ringsend. We covered the distance by foot from our terraced house in the South Lotts. That helped to keep me fit. Years later, I asked my mother: 'Why did you send us to school in Baggot Street?' She said it was because by attending there, we would have a better chance of getting into Westland Row, where there was a school run by the Christian Brothers and, apparently, that was the place to be.

So that's what I ended up doing. I attended the Christian Brothers School in Westland Row. I was there for much of the 1970s. There were teachers there who were kind and helpful but others were not so nice.

I think those teachers forgot that children grow up to be adults. I was never expelled or anything like that. I would have been afraid

of my life in case I got a bollocking from my mother or father! If you got in trouble at school, they'd want to know why.

I stuck around Westland Row until I did my Intermediate Certificate examination, which students sit after three years at secondary school. After that, I said goodbye to my school days. I wanted to get out and into the world, find a job, earn some money. I also wanted to pursue my increasingly obsessive ambition to be a footballer.

An ambition well and truly sparked by watching the great Leeds United team that day in the 1972 FA Cup Final when they shot down the Gunners to take home the famous trophy for the first, and so far only, time in their history.