

# GORDON MILNE

**Shankly, My Dad and Me**



**with Steve Younger**

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## Chapter 1

FOOTBALL FOR me began on the streets, and I loved the winter fixtures the most. As the nights drew in and the streetlights flickered into life, excitement began to build. I was lucky, my house was directly opposite a lamppost, so I was always playing home games. From somewhere long forgotten we'd acquired the match ball – actually, a battered old tennis ball – the safeguarding of which was my responsibility. So precious and highly treasured, under no circumstances could we allow it to go astray; between games it remained locked away safely in the garden shed. It also fell to me to provide the goalposts – four tin cans, filled with sand for stability (enabling us to play 'rebounds' – we were no mugs), and painted white to stand out in the seemingly ever-present gloom. These I stored under the hedge in my parents' front garden, instantly available whenever they were required. They were safe there; what would anyone else want with four tins full of sand?

All the houses had coal fires, which in winter were rampant. Coupled with the poor streetlighting, the smoke these fires produced created an eerie, almost unreal atmosphere. This was a time when Wolves entertained the likes of Honvéd in early European fixtures, some of the first night matches to be televised. Floodlights were rare, but such occasions – smoke and smog

from the house fires mixing with the steam and smoke from the terraces, all drifting through the floodlights and the shadows – were incredibly atmospheric; there was a magic to the murkiness. And to us, under our streetlights, it felt the same, as if somehow, something special had been added, something very different to playing in daylight.

As soon as enough reprobates had gathered, a game would start, although kick-off couldn't take place until I supplied the goalposts and the ball. The pitch itself – commonly known as the road – was around ten yards wide and bordered by a kerb on each side, ready-made touchlines off which the ball would constantly rebound (the 'ball-in-play' statistics were unusually high). We'd begin with a relatively well-proportioned pitch, which, over the course of the game, would be extended several times; as the numbers grew, so would the pitch. When it became too crowded – and it always did – we'd simply move the goalposts further back. During peak participation, all sense of pitch proportion would be lost and could lead to a playing area ten yards wide but a hundred yards long.

Three against three was enough to commence, but that would quickly become four vs four, five vs five, and so on. There was no limit, and you'd often go a long time without getting a kick. Players would drift in and out – 'You're playing this way; you're playing that way.' But so long as the teams were equal ('Hang on, they've got two more bloody players than us!') the game would roll on. Lads would pop up from nowhere, appearing out of the shadows, then you'd look around and couldn't see someone who was there five minutes ago.

What fascinated me, and still does, is that no matter how many players made up a team, and despite chasing a small ball around in the gloom, you could always identify who was a team-

mate and who wasn't, even though players were clad in all sorts of garments and came in all shapes and sizes: the one with the big mouth (who couldn't play); the one with the torn trousers who never said a word (but who could play – the quiet ones could always play, it seemed); the one who ran around all night, never got near the ball, but never stopped smiling, loving every minute.

There were few cars around then so, despite the odd interruption, we weren't stopping and starting all the time. And if someone came along on a bike, they'd simply ride along the footpath next to the touchline. None of this was of any real consequence though; this was a time of innocence and freedom. Parents didn't worry because they knew where their kids were (in my case, invariably outside my own house). And in those magical moments, we were all playing at Wembley, for sure. We'd play two or three times a week, at least. Some games were bigger than others, but Friday night was always the biggest, a key component of the build-up to the weekend and the real business of First Division football.

As the evening ran its course, players would slowly disappear with a myriad of excuses: homework, tea's ready, tired, fed up, had enough, I shouldn't be here anyway. See you tomorrow. The numbers would dwindle back down to three-a-side, frequently the same six who had started the game all those hours ago (we'd have played all night if we could). The game would gently peter out, the goalposts stashed back under the hedge and the tennis ball returned safely to the shed. Until next time.

\* \* \*

My dad Jimmy joined Preston North End in 1932, transferring from his first professional club, Dundee United. He and my

mother, also from Dundee, married in June 1934. Preston owned several houses near Deepdale, the club's home ground, all within walking distance of each other, and they encouraged players to rent them for a nominal monthly fee as an incentive when signing. It was a fair deal for both parties and my parents duly moved into their first real home. Soon to join them in the neighbourhood – directly across the road, to be precise – were a new team-mate of my dad, and his wife, a Mr and Mrs Shankly, fellow Scots from similar stock.

After training it was quite common for Mr Shankly to call round for a cup of his favourite herbal tea (he was always extremely dedicated, looking after himself, trying to eat and drink well). I remember Mum's good-natured exasperation at having to buy it in specially – herbal tea wasn't easy to find in Lancashire! Shanks was always friendly and very family oriented, never failing to ask, 'How's the wee man coming along?' as I slept in my pram outside the front door. In later years my dad wrote in his journal: 'Bill was always playing football in the street with my son Gordon ... Bill was a lad; if Gordon went out with the ball, Bill would be there. I think he must have been looking for him coming out.'

How could one ever imagine, more than 20 years later he'd call at that very same house to offer that very same 'wee man' the opportunity to join him at Liverpool Football Club? You wouldn't throw your toys out of the pram at that offer.

\* \* \*

It was every boy's dream. On Lowthorpe Road I lived practically next door to the football ground my favourite team called 'home'. Preston North End have played at Deepdale since 1875 and were

founder members of the Football League in 1888. Now, in the mid-to-late 1940s, PNE was my world. What's more, my dad, who played for the club for almost a decade prior to the Second World War, was now an integral member of the staff. He even held keys to the ground!

Late on Friday afternoons before home matches, one of my dad's many responsibilities was to provide plenty of hot water available for baths and showers the following day. This was produced by a coke-burning boiler the size of a small bus, which also provided heating for the rest of the main building. The boiler could never sleep, and every Friday had to be full to the brim, guaranteeing Tom Finney and the boys a hot shower after the match. I'd stoke the boiler with my dad before Saturday's big match, although every match was a big one to me. On entering the boiler room, close to the treatment room at the far end of the building, my dad and I would be faced with a mountain of coke piled to the ceiling as the hungry boiler roared away.

My dad also had to ensure the home dressing room was in pristine condition. Preston North End was a club with a great tradition and took pride in doing things well and in the right way. I'd help lay out the kit, a truly special task. I felt important; I was a crucial member of the backroom staff and loved every minute. It was paradise. Shirts were placed on hangers and hung on the pegs above the benches, with the numbers facing outwards, 1–11 in numerical order. The shorts (anything but short) were neatly folded and placed on a lilywhite towel (PNE's nickname was the Lilywhites, after all) alongside the thick, woollen, hairy socks. These were well matched with the shinpads, which were truly something else: leather facing, with cane strips woven in and filled out with an unidentified material that resembled modern



sofa stuffing; far from attractive but, when ‘take no prisoners’ was a primary tactic of all teams, absolutely essential.

Boots were placed neatly on the floor beneath the benches, facing outwards. Made of leather with built-in toecap, their leather studs were hammered in with nails then filed down to the players’ preferred lengths, a practice that on matchday habitually led to chaos: with kick-off looming, players would be filing away frantically to achieve the most suitable stud length for the condition of the pitch.

I vividly remember taking much longer over Tom Finney’s boots. Picking them up, putting them down, even smelling the dubbin (a type of wax used to preserve and soften the leather, which supposedly made the boots more comfortable). This had a unique and potent aroma, one long associated with dressing rooms up and down the country. It was the smell of football, the memory of which remains with me to this day. My hero’s boots were in perfect condition, correctly placed, just waiting for the great man himself to step into them. What magic would they produce tomorrow? I’d go to bed dreaming of what was to come.

Also neatly presented and ready to go were the ‘kicking-in’ balls – ‘T-Balls’ as they were known, due to their stitching resembling the letter T. (I’d been well trained by my dad in the art of lacing footballs, first by watching and then by practising. Armed with a lacer and a tightener I soon became quite competent and eventually earned the honour of preparing the ‘T-Balls’ for matchday kick-ins.) These balls had an inflatable bladder that was carefully inserted before being inflated by a hand pump. Once inflated the balls were carefully laced up: parallel lacing with no kinks; any kink meant ‘start again’. The lacing was the most important step, not only for appearance but because players’

foreheads would meet that part of the ball on a regular basis; any knots or kinks would only add to the discomfort of what was already a painful practice. And if there were any knots – whoever prepared that ball, watch out! Placed in a corner of the dressing room, tomorrow these balls (by now gleaming with dubbin too) would be carried out by the players just before kick-off.

After a final check to ensure the boiler was full, we'd exit past the treatment room where an hour earlier I'd witnessed my dad massaging (another of his responsibilities) my idol Sir Tom Finney in preparation for tomorrow's match. In the long empty corridor, the silence was only broken by the echo of our footsteps, creating a sense of mystique. We'd check the home team's dressing room door was locked before taking a sharp left turn towards the players' entrance at the end of the corridor beyond the match officials' room. The remaining lights were switched off, the double doors securely locked behind us, and we'd step into the night. I was always reluctant to leave what was to me a privileged and magical world. I'd laid out the kit, the boots, the balls, had ensured there would be plenty of hot water for the bath at full time, and had witnessed my idol receiving treatment from my father. In my young mind the coliseum was ready, the main gladiator was ready – let battle commence. I'd sleep well that night.

Public transport, bicycles and of course shanks's pony were the main means of transport to the matches (this even included the players), and living so close to the ground I decided to start my first-ever business enterprise: looking after supporters' push bikes and motorcycles. A reasonably sized front garden sat alongside our concrete drive leading to a wooden gate built by my dad that sat on top of an old air-raid shelter he'd also

constructed, one with just enough space for all the family. (Had any enemy aircraft dropped a stray one on Dad's masterpiece we'd have known about it; I'm no expert but with just a corrugated iron roof covered in turf, I'm not too sure the shelter was bomb-proof!) The gate accessed the back garden, also a decent size. I'd fashioned a wooden sign that I fastened to the gate post, white letters on a black background: 'Road cycles 3d, Motorbikes 6d, Cars 1/'. There was only space for one car, though, and as this would take up most of the drive, I realised it wouldn't be good for business. I quickly removed the car option from the sign. The venture proved popular, and on matchdays both front and back gardens were packed, mainly with bicycles.

Supporters travelled from far and wide, in all weathers too. One chap cycled from Longridge, half a dozen miles away, but confessed he'd gladly walk both ways just to watch Tom Finney play. He used to bring half a dozen eggs for my mum and as a result always parked his bike, at no charge, in pole position for a quick getaway. And we always had boiled eggs for breakfast on Sundays.

Because of my dad's job I received a pass, giving me access to the main stand. Ten minutes after kick-off I'd sprint down the road, leaving my mum and my Aunty Grace (Mum's sister who lived with us) in charge of the 'parking'. They'd keep watch and deal with any latecomers (there were always plenty). I'd tear down the road as fast as I possibly could, desperately hoping I hadn't missed a goal, although being so close to begin with I'd already know from the roar of the crowd.

Fifteen minutes before full time I'd have to leave, again hoping not to miss anything important, to manage the inevitable post-match chaos and to ensure my clients all got away safely – and

on the same bikes they arrived upon! While disentangling three or four machines, tempers could and would flare as everyone wanted to leave at the same time; the prevention of civil war in the back garden of a semi-detached Lancashire home was my chief priority. Fraught situations would often be defused, however, when someone mentioned Tom's second goal, or was it three or four players he went past before squaring for Tommy Thompson to tap home? Men in flat caps and raincoats reliving these moments by telling anyone who would listen, many with bicycle clips already around their ankles. In these five-minute shows of genuine emotion, they'd be pirouetting and gesticulating, waving their arms and raising their voices, attempting to explain the magic they'd just witnessed. Eventually, with the last few bicycles disentangled, handlebars and saddles thankfully facing in the right direction, my customers would head off into the evening, by now – and again, thankfully – contented. Like them, I also had so much to thank Sir Tom for.

\* \* \*

There was another big Tom at Preston at that time: Tommy Docherty. Another strong Scot, much like Shanks in character, build and background. Both were hungry, aggressive, took no prisoners and would play all day. Football was their lives. And, of course, they both adored Tom Finney too. If you were making a movie about Shanks, the Doc would have been ideal for the role, and he wouldn't have needed to rehearse either!

His route to Deepdale would take him past our house and he'd often call in to say hello to my mum or Auntie Grace. Grace was an integral part of the family who had worked in a munitions factory during the war, so when it came to chit-chat and banter,

she could mix it with the best of them. She loved the Doc and could give him a run for his money any time. He'd only stay for ten minutes or so, long enough to have them in stitches and to take on board a couple of wee sherries: 'Good for instant energy,' according to him. He was a one-man whirlwind, always fully motivated, ready and able to light up the dressing room, which, with his sherries inside him (not that he needed them), he did time and again. Even the senior players let him get on with it; he was never pulled up because he brought the passion and atmosphere at vital times – and no time was more vital than pre-match. The Doc would get everybody on their toes.

To this day, even having passed away in 2020, Tommy remains one of the funniest men in football. My memories of that Preston team in which he played are of a dressing room and training ground full of good humour, mickey-taking and great camaraderie. Certain boundaries could and would be crossed on occasion, in ways that wouldn't be tolerated today, but as was befitting of the times, it was always done in good faith, never with any spite. Some things the Doc used to say to Willie Cunningham, it's unbelievable how Willie never strangled him! And those two were team-mates for Scotland too! Willie accepted it for what it was, though, as we all did. Alongside the enjoyment, this behaviour also brought togetherness, both vital to any dressing room. It became contagious, even more so when mixed with the desire for victory. Tommy Docherty, and that team, only knew one way to play: they played to win.