



YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE

SHANKS, YANKS AND JURGEN

***THE MEN BEHIND
LIVERPOOL'S RISE AGAIN***

BOB HOLMES

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Preface

IT'S A bit of a stretch, but one that a man for whom exaggeration was an art form would surely have approved. Put simply, this book maintains that while much of the credit for Liverpool's return to their perch goes to their German manager, American owners and players from the four corners, Bill Shankly still had a hand in it.

These pages are a reminder of what he stood for and his 'voice' is heard throughout. It's argued that in finding a kindred spirit in Jürgen Klopp, Liverpool have reverted to the Shanks template in relating to both players and fans – or at least as much as being a 21st-century conglomerate allows.

It's through Shanks's rheumy eyes that we look at the game's evolution since he emerged from the coal mine to stamp an indelible mark on its history. Although there are aspects of today's game that we can be sure he would have found repugnant, they wouldn't have stopped him conducting the Kop on big European nights.

It's 39 years since he died, but founding fathers, inspirational leaders, commanders-in-chief, spiritual

guiding lights – and he was all of those – are entitled to a slice of any belated dividend. And as a larger-than-life figure whose premature death felt more larcenous than most, a few posthumous achievements are bestowed upon him.

He has no greater legacy than the Boot Room, the cubby hole-cum-dynasty that went on to rule Europe. And besides a statue, gates, a hotel and union in his name, there are those who took a while to accept that he really had heard the final whistle, leading scribes among them.

Stephen Kelly begins his biography with the line, ‘I swear I saw him recently ... the last man out of Anfield ... switching off the lights.’ Hugh McIlvanney mischievously hinted that by having had his ashes scattered at Anfield, Shanks might still come to Liverpool’s rescue by ‘getting in the eye of a visiting forward about to shoot’. And just a dozen years ago, James Lawton maintained that ‘Shanks becomes not less but more relevant to the football of today, his dictums shining like ancient wisdom ...’

In a game unrecognisable from the one Shanks knew, the club is again benefitting from their glow. After losing its way for two decades, it has rediscovered its stride – the Liverpool Way. Anfield is back as an impregnable fortress after almost being abandoned, the current team ‘goes through brick walls and comes out fighting’, and the Kop still ‘frighten the ball’.

Certainly, the massive part played by supporters can be traced back to Shankly. And although he died before the global Kopite diaspora emerged, it was because of

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his communion with ordinary fans that he was likened to an evangelist. Many believe it was his missionary zeal that inspired the fierce loyalty to the club still in evidence today.

But it wasn't just the fans – it was everything. When Shanks arrived, he found a club languishing in the old Second Division. It badly needed a revamp and by devoting every sinew to the cause he built what now might be called Liverpool 2.0. – a vibrant, all-conquering, irresistible force that dominated the English and European game for three decades in the second half of the 20th century.

And it was in the late 70s and 80s especially, under successors Bob Paisley and Joe Fagan, that the most convincing of all the claims about Shanks's supernatural powers can be made.

But these foundations were shaken by Heysel and Hillsborough, and both the game and the club changed out of all recognition. There were cowboy owners, a near-desertion of Anfield and the threat of administration. Rescue came with the current owners, the fans playing a pivotal role. The leading lights called themselves Spirit of Shankly, what else?

The question many still ask is: What would Shanks have made of it? A very different club to the one he took over – like the game itself and having to reconcile his socialist values formed a century ago in the poverty of a pit village with today's Instagram millionaires.

Shanks was no dinosaur – far from it; throughout both his playing and managerial careers he was a man

ahead of his time. Nor was he shy about badgering the board for big sums to buy players. And what was the Boot Room if it wasn't for discussing improvements and getting an edge on opponents?

Opinions differ but many ex-players feel he would have adapted as he was nothing if not competitive. Which is why Fenway Sports Group (FSG), for all their early ignorance of Liverpool lore, might just have been tolerated.

This book dares to suggest that the modern club's return to greatness has been achieved at least in part by remembering many of its founding father's principles. Had *Time* magazine been staging its 100 Most Influential People awards in his day, Shanks should have been a shoo-in ... long before Mo Salah. Although he was no soaring orator, his words resonated with the man in the street. And still do.

With Liverpool FC, all roads lead to Shankly. He has become a beloved reference point to anyone seeking to understand how wealthy, capitalist owners and his socialist values co-exist in a vastly different game. As Lawton put it: 'He becomes not less but more relevant to the football of today.' Especially to Liverpool FC.

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‘Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that.’

Bill Shankly

LIV-ER-POOL. SAY it slowly, say it quickly, say it in a Scouse accent – those three syllables evoke more sound and fury than any city in the world. Pound for in-yer-face pound. The chant belongs to another era but whether it’s the Kop or The Beatles, Mersey beats still resonate with much of mankind. Football and music: they are, above all else, what the place has been about since the 60s.

Liverpool is a city of dynamic duos: Shankly and Paisley, Lennon and McCartney. And stark contrasts: grand buildings and Robbie Fowler houses; great ocean liners and a ‘Yellow Submarine’. It grew rich on the slave trade yet is the birthplace of the man who abolished it.

Once the second city of the British Empire, for half a century it has been a hotbed of socialism. It's a city of 'A Hard Day's Night' and 'You'll Never Walk Alone' and, in the 60s, whether the sound was coming from The Cavern or the Kop, it was the most happening city in the world.

In football, those three syllables never meant more than when delivered with an Ayrshire rasp. There was something in the way Bill Shankly spat out his words, according to *The Guardian*, 'as if with a Gatling gun'. Long before it was claimed that Scottish was the most reassuring of British accents, Shanks had listeners in the palm of his hand. It wasn't that his voice was that deep or his accent that strong, but his tone, combined with a gaze that could penetrate the soul, got attention, respect and fear.

He wasn't religious but when it came to football he possessed an evangelic zeal. His tongue could be silver but had a serrated edge. And when he was silent, none spoke more eloquently for him than those he sent on to the field. Football is 'terribly simple', he used to say, and he got his players to let their feet do the talking. 'Pass and move' was his mantra and he called it 'the Liverpool Way'. For three decades the Reds dominated the club game and, although he didn't stay to reap his full share of the harvest, he had sown the seeds, created the template and built the foundations. Bob Paisley would win more silverware but Shankly was the founding father, the guiding light, the Merseyside messiah.

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The Red half will never forget its early European nights when the Kop cascaded like a human Niagara and the Liver Birds nearly took off in fright at the din. For years, the club has been desperate to return to the glory days but was striving – and frequently stumbling – in an unrecognisable game. No longer simple, it's now a global business complicated by three of Shankly's pet hates: high finance, agents and greed.

Shankly has been dead for 39 years but for those seeking to make sense of the current circus, his name crops up more than ever in both search engines and conversation. As many still mourn him, new converts embrace his principles, his beliefs, his way.

By 1991 – ten years after Shankly died – the Reds had taken their tally of league titles to 18, but they didn't add to it until 2020. In that time, they sometimes took their eye off the ball, strayed from the template and forgot his values. They have inscribed his words of wisdom on the training ground walls, but they also spawned the misplaced swagger of the Spice Boys. Shanks's dad was a tailor but white suits at Wembley? That was just one of the contrasts. Another was: kings of Europe in 2005, nearly bust in 2010.

Liverpool will be forever scarred by tragedy at Hillsborough and shame at Heysel, innocent victims at one, a few bad-apple perpetrators at the other. It can be a caring, Shankly socialist city but also one of attitude, cynicism and edge. It's a great city and a horrible city; the people can be the salt of the earth, the scum of the earth. Its finest hours can be spine-

tingling, its worst moments heart-sinking. It's a people and port city, where millions have been welcomed and waved off, and where certain people have been told to fuck off.

Most of all, it's a spunky, don't-suffer-fools kind of place. All the more amazing then that a pair of 21st-century cowboys, six-shooter patter blazing, could swagger through the Shankly Gates as if they were the swing doors of a Wild West saloon. Even more incredible that they should get their trigger fingers on the crown jewels – Liverpool FC. That's what happened – give or take a freight train of bullshit and smarm – when Big Tom and the Wisconsin Kid conned their way into becoming the first foreign owners of the five-time European champions. And they did it by playing a £300m card trick on a panic-stricken sheriff.

They had spouted false optimism about 'a spade in the ground' and were carried shoulder high after a win over Barcelona. The bearers still have the scars. For the club and Shankly's legacy, Tom Hicks and George Gillett couldn't have been worse. Showing serial disdain for this fabled institution along with their true vulture-capitalist colours, they lied about their wealth and plunged Liverpool FC into debt. The 2008 financial crash came, and oblivion loomed. For Kopites it was the ultimate nightmare.

In their dreams, Shankly and Paisley wouldn't have allowed it to happen. Bob would have parked his tank that helped defeat Rommel outside while Bill would have growled, chewed them up and spat them out. The

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phrase ‘turning in his grave’ might have been invented for this scenario – even though Shanks was cremated. It was already more than a quarter of a century since his death, and everything he had built and all the values he stood for in life were under threat. To the Red half of Liverpool and its great global diaspora, there was nothing more important than that.

Rescue came from unlikely quarters: a Chelsea-supporting toff, another American venture capitalist and, ultimately, a manager from Germany. Martin Broughton, who was drafted in by a bank and was a season ticket holder at Stamford Bridge, played a blinder. FSG proved the acceptable face of capitalism and Jürgen Klopp ... well, many feel Shanks would have loved him.