

STEWART TAYLOR

Foreword by Tony Adams

II

# STUCK IN A MOMENT

THE BALLAD OF  
PAUL  
VAESSEN

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STUCK IN A  
**MOMENT**

THE BALLAD OF  
**PAUL VAESSEN**

**STEWART TAYLOR**

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# Foreword

*'There are all kinds of addicts, I guess. We all have pain. And we all look for ways to make the pain go away.'*

Sherman Alexie in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007)

PAUL PLAYED for Arsenal but was forced to retire due to injury and fell into a life of crime and drug addiction before dying at the age of 39. Some people get it but most people don't. I am one of the lucky ones. I have lived for 17 years now, a day at a time, alcohol-free but more importantly clear of mind and, most of the time, emotionally well: no prison for me in the last 17 years and no A&E.

Football-wise I just missed Vas. He was just leaving the Arsenal after having had his day and I was just starting my football career as a 16-year-old kid who had not yet had his. I think our paths crossed one pre-season training as I was invited along as a 15-year-old schoolboy to take part with the pros and Vas was one of those young pros. Paul made his league debut against Chelsea on 14 May 1979 and I signed schoolboy forms for the Arsenal in October 1979.

Paul turned professional in July the same year, scoring five goals in 18 appearances in 1979/80. The most famous of

these goals was the one he scored against Juventus at the Stadio Comunale. I remember Arsenal manager Terry Neill sending Vas on as a substitute after 75 minutes and Paul heading home at the back post from a Graham Rix cross in the 88th minute to make the aggregate score 2–1 to Arsenal and put the Arse into the final. I can still see the sheer euphoria on his face after scoring.

I watched Vas's story and his career unfold, first through my beer spectacles then sober ones. The denial of addiction is so strong that all the time I was drinking my judgement of Vas after his enforced retirement was that he was a druggie and a no-hoper – probably so I didn't have to look at my own problems. Here was I married to a crack addict and so deep in my own alcohol addiction that I just could not see the similarities between us. My thinking was genuinely, 'At least I am not as bad as him.'

As soon as I got sober I could see this illness for what it was and I could identify with Vas's problems, thoughts and feelings. This disease wants you dead and sadly for Vas and his family it took him to his grave. I don't know why I have been freed from the bondage of self-destruction but I am truly, deeply grateful that I have been and that I have been given a second chance. I wish the Sporting Chance Clinic had been there to help Vas, I wish I could have helped Vas, I wish Vas had found recovery, I wish he could have had some peace of mind here on earth and I wish we could have shared some sober/clean days together.

Unfortunately, all I can do is, by writing this foreword, support Vas's story and pray that someone out there may read this book and identify with Paul's story and seek help.

This is a family illness as we, the addict, affect everyone around us. So now my prayers are for Paul's family and friends, that they may find acceptance and peace around Paul's situation. Paul was a sick man who never found his medicine.

Finally, I have a smile on my face remembering Vas's goal against Juventus but a tear in my eye and sadness in my heart for a fellow footballer and addict who didn't make it.

**Tony Adams, October 2013**

# Preface

*'Life is never easy for those who dream.'*

Robert James Waller

THIS IS the story of a human tragedy and a football tragedy.

Paul Vaessen, born in Gillingham to a footballing family, joined Arsenal as an associated schoolboy in March 1977. By the summer of 1983 injury had ended his career. By the summer of 2001 drugs had ended his life.

Paul Vaessen packed a lot into his relatively short life; some of it good, some of it bad, all of it unforgettable. This book tells the story of the lows as well as the highs.

The case of Paul Vaessen is one of the reasons why football and the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) has focused its attention much more on lifestyles for footballers, noting that a support system is essential for those hours away from the club when things can go wrong, particularly if a player doesn't make the grade or has to retire early due to injury.

Mental health, welfare, and rehabilitation are all key words now in the football family. The Sporting Chance Clinic set up by Tony Adams is used extensively by the PFA and there is a whole network of trained therapists now available to help players through difficult times when so many are in danger of repeating the tragic story of Paul Vaessen.

Whilst today's professionals can become multi-millionaires in just a short time, this book is a timely reminder that the game also has an overriding obligation to look after those youngsters who, for one reason or another, do not make it and then find it impossible to cope with the feeling of let-down.

I hope this book can be used as a lesson to be learnt by all youngsters entering the game and helps make sure that Paul's life was not lost in vain.

**Gordon Taylor, Chief Executive, PFA  
February 2013**

# Introduction

*'I learned...that no one is perfect but most people are good; that people can't be judged only by their worst or weakest moments; that harsh judgements can make hypocrites of us all; that a lot of life is just showing up and hanging on...Perhaps most important, I learned that everyone has a story – of dreams and nightmares, hope and heartache, love and loss, courage and fear, sacrifice and selfishness.'*

Bill Clinton, *My Life* (2004)

'F--KING HELL!'

I was getting pretty used to this by now, this sort of reaction.

To be perfectly honest, it was something I hadn't anticipated when I'd first started out. I just assumed that people would know, that word would have gotten around, like bad news usually does.

So, I hadn't expected to hear, 'How is he?' or 'What's he up to these days?' I didn't imagine I'd be the one breaking the news ten years down the line. And, similarly, I don't think those on the other end of the phone were expecting the answers they got in return.



But it sort of said it all though really and just acted to reinforce my motivation for writing Paul's story. Not that, I should say, it was their fault. Some of these people had once been close to Paul in some capacity but you just move on, don't you? Sometimes you just drift apart. No. If anything, it was more a reflection of something somebody once described as 'a very absent-minded community'.<sup>1</sup>

The truth is that Paul Vaessen had been forgotten and discarded by the sport he devoted his young life to long before his passing in August 2001. I'm not going to pretend Paul was my football hero. He was not by any stretch of the imagination one of the great players of his generation, or even at his club. And like thousands of other success-starved Arsenal fans I was far too distracted by Arsenal's struggles on the pitch during the early eighties to follow the trials and tribulations of Paul's life.

There was one exception, though, and I was reminded of this a short while back when researching an article I was writing for the official Arsenal magazine. I came across my old scrapbooks and the immaculately kept volume covering the 1984/85 season made for particularly grim reading.

Things were going okay up until about mid-October, with Arsenal topping the old First Division table. But after that things began to fall apart as I documented my dismay at Charlie Nicholas being dropped by boss Don Howe (along with legendary goalkeeper Pat Jennings) for the visit of Luton Town at the beginning of December, a horror exacerbated by the fact that his replacement, the decidedly straight-laced and unglamorous Ian Allinson, scored one of the goals in a 3-1 win.

By March 1985 the Gunners had been knocked out of the League Cup by lowly Oxford United, had required a second game to get past even lowlier Hereford United in the third round of the FA Cup (even Charlie managed to score in the 7-2 replay victory at Highbury) and then suffered the ignominy of defeat at even lowlier still Fourth Division York City in the following round. On top of all that I reported how once again we'd missed

out on a raft of supposed transfer targets, including French ace Jean Tigana.

And then, on the very last page, was the most shocking item of all under the headline 'VAESSEN STABBED'. This page was devoted entirely to the news that the former Arsenal star was critically ill in hospital after being stabbed off of London's Old Kent Road.

I had clearly already by my early teens acquired a predilection for the morose, a contemplative tendency which had been nurtured through years of avoiding parties, discos, snooker halls and all other usual forms of pubescent social interaction, in favour of staying in, doing homework, watching (rather, studying) old black and white films with my dad and by generally being Very Serious and Mature way before my time. They were inclinations which I successfully developed into full-blown depressive and anxiety disorders by the time I'd reached 20 and which set me off in search of the company of fellow tortured souls.

And football – indeed, sport in general – is not a bad place to find them. For so many involved in the game, it is quite simply an addiction, the only thing they know how to do and the only thing they want to know how to do. It is an obsession fuelled by promises of glory and fame but which in so many cases delivers only heartache, anonymity and institutionalisation, leaving its casualties ill-equipped for what often turns out to be the infinitely more difficult challenge of living the rest of their lives.

Paul Gascoigne, Jimmy Greaves, George Best. They are all stories with which – due to their honesty but in large part to their celebrity – we are familiar. But what of those for whom the whistle blew a lot earlier than expected, those who fell for the allure of the football dream and then faded into obscurity when injury robbed them of their only purpose in life? Those who weren't around long enough to write many chapters in footballing history, let alone their own life stories. Those such as Paul Vaessen who died a lonely death at the age of 39, practically disabled by the sport in which he had invested his dreams.

The idea of writing a book about Paul was, quite understandably, an uncomfortable proposition for some. Polite as people were initially being, I could sense a distinct scepticism and nervousness about the whole thing. It wasn't just that the market was apparently already awash with similar hard luck stories. It seemed more that Paul just wasn't deemed famous enough nor his story cheery enough. I lost count of the number of times I was asked, 'Who's going to want to read a book about Paul Vaessen?'

It is true that Paul's story is not one of back-slapping bravado and bonhomie and I warn you now that if that's the sort of thing you're looking for, this book is probably not for you. There were good times but they were over all too soon. No. This is a sombre tale about the fragility and fickleness of sport, a story without a happy, uplifting ending, at least as far as Paul and his loved ones are concerned.

And, yes, it is true that Paul was not well known outside of London N5 or his SE16 home. Paul's time in the spotlight was fleeting and it came well before the hyperbole, razzmatazz and fiscal vulgarity of the Premier League. It was a time before sponsorship and product endorsement, before Sky Sports, a time before *Hello!* and *OK!* and exclusively featured weddings, sports supplements and WAGs.

It was a time when you could almost go unnoticed if your face didn't appear in the latest Panini sticker album and even now Paul's name is rarely mentioned until fate throws together Arsenal and Juventus, the club against whom he enjoyed his crowning moment in that April 1980 European Cup Winners' Cup semi-final tie. Indeed, these were the days before the advent of the lucrative Champions League, an era when the Cup Winners' Cup not only still existed but was actually considered something quite important.

No. Paul was not one of the most significant footballers of all time. He doesn't even make it on to the list of 'Untimely Deaths' in the *Official Arsenal Miscellany*, nor is there mention

of him under 'RIP – Gunners Who Died Young' in the *Official Arsenal Encyclopedia*. But his tale is, nonetheless, one of the most significant and heart-rending you'll come across. And his is by no means the only one.

I do admit, however, that I let this general uneasiness about the project get the better of me at the start and that I consequently packed it all in after little more than a few weeks. I found, though, that in the ensuing weeks, Paul nagged at me relentlessly. I didn't realise how deeply, in such a short amount of time, I'd got involved. Once put off, I am usually put off for good. But Paul had got under my skin and I began to feel that I'd let him down, his family and the countless others like him too, that I'd been dissuaded too easily.

This most uncustomary doggedness was, however, soon rewarded as gradually more and more people came forward in support. Word was seemingly getting round and Paul started becoming of more interest than I could have hoped for. Fans and friends responded to appeals in local newspapers, ex-playing colleagues were more than happy to help and I was delighted when Gordon Taylor of the PFA and then Tony Adams gave the project their personal endorsement.

I was a little unsure as to what reaction, though, I would get from Arsenal. Certainly there were those who felt that 'once he got injured, (Arsenal) just chucked him on the streets, he had nothing'. I was not confident the club would be willing to talk about what one contributor called their 'dirty little secret' but my fears were soon allayed in the form of director and gentleman Ken Friar who in turn put me on to former manager Terry Neill and the ball started rolling. The club was also happy to place appeals for assistance in both the match programme and on its website for which I am very grateful.

Indeed, just as there were those still pointing an accusing finger towards London N5, so too were there those who had found themselves in circumstances similar to Paul's – professionally, at least – who were sincere in their admiration for

the club and the support it provided them. Just about everybody connected with the club were adamant that Arsenal, when it comes to looking after their own, are (still) quite simply a cut above the rest. Arsenal *are* in a different class. It's the main reason so many of us support them and why, on the evening of 23 April 1980, so many of us were elated by the events unfolding in Turin, Italy.

For let us not forget it was Arsenal who provided Paul with the platform from which he sprung that evening to head in Arsenal's historic winner at the home of the mighty Juventus. Indeed, for that fleeting moment, Paul was on top of the world. But one way or another it was a moment in which he would become entrapped, a moment which effectively became the point of reference against which he and others would measure and assess the rest of his life, a moment he would later revisit and relive with anybody willing to listen.

It was a hell of a height from which to fall. Could Arsenal, or anybody else for that matter, have done more to cushion the impact? He was, after all, injured in the line of duty. Did his club, his sport, the system, fail in their duty of care to a former employee struggling to cope with life without them? Where does that duty of care end? Where do you draw the line? 'Am I,' as Terry Neill proffered, 'my brother's keeper?'

In Arsenal's defence, there is no reason to believe Paul was treated any differently to anyone else at the club at the time. Arsenal had made an investment in Paul and persevered until it was clear he could no longer go on. After that, what more could or should they have done? Paul's path into drug addiction was probably predestined and therefore inevitable irrespective of whether he'd played first class football or not.

As one of Paul's school friends told me, 'The thing with Paul was he was quite addictive in anything he did, you know? It was all or nothing. Even the bad things. He was the same in that. I don't know how his life would have panned out if he hadn't had football because I think he was always going to be faced with

situations where he was going to do things he shouldn't. The football kept him on the straight and narrow for a long time.'

His brother Lee agrees that, 'He was a proper manic compulsive. Whatever he did, he had to do it full on or not at all. That's why he's dead now, in a way.'

And the chances are that, having got to 'know' Paul as I have, all the help in the world wouldn't have made a blind bit of difference because nothing could bring back the one thing he craved: football. The pain in his left leg which he carried around with him for the remainder of his days was a constant reminder of that. In any case, it is not the purpose of this book to apportion blame or to judge. Too many raw nerves have been touched already for that. This is, after all, not an investigation, a post-mortem or a cold case review. My objective has been merely to have Paul's story told and listened to and that perhaps its significant lessons be learnt.

In order to do all this I had to get as close to Paul as someone who never personally knew him possibly could. I wanted to get inside his head, think his thoughts, feel his feelings and find out what exactly it was like to be Paul Vaessen.

He walked me through the streets he had once walked, we hung around the same estates he had once hung around, we listened to the music he used to listen to. There were tears on occasion. One of those came when, sitting in the basement of the British Film Institute's archive, I watched what is apparently the only tape in existence of the Juve game. As the final few minutes approached I was shaking with the sort of sickly tension, expectation and emotion that is only ever matched when watching re-runs of Michael Thomas at Anfield in May 1989.

There were many other occasions on which we fell out. There were also a lot of times when Paul went missing and was difficult to pin down and I should therefore apologise in advance for any omissions.

Of course there were many, many people who joined us along the way, many of whom are speaking publicly about Paul for

the first time. I conducted over 60 interviews with those with whom Paul grew up, with those he went to school with, those he played with, those he used with. I spoke to former managers, coaches and physiotherapists, playing colleagues from Arsenal, journalists and fans. And, of course, there was Paul's family: his mother Maureen, his father Leon ('Big Lee') and brother Leon ('Little Lee') whom I am now proud to count among my friends.

The Vaessen family have gone through an incredible amount, drawing upon inner strengths which are difficult to comprehend and some of which Paul could probably have done with himself. Paul's mum, in particular, is an amazing human being and considering what she has had to face, it is quite simply astonishing to find her still standing. And standing proud.

They all let me – a stranger – into their lives and made me welcome where often I felt I was trespassing. In doing so they have candidly shared with me their innermost thoughts and feelings, as well as many, many memories, both good and bad.

I wish to state that it has never been my intention at any point – as one or two seemed to assume – to go around 'digging up shit'. There was definitely shit there for the digging and a lot has been omitted from this book. Admittedly there were a lot of times when I felt I should perhaps back off, that I should maybe let sleeping dogs lie.

Indeed, Paul was approached on at least a couple of occasions during his lifetime to do a book but had turned the opportunities down, ashamed by his addiction. Paul's family were of the mind, however, that it was time for his story to be told and remained adamant throughout that we continue and that we tell it how it was.

'I'm not going to paint him as an angel,' Maureen told me at the outset. 'He wasn't an angel. Let people see the good side and the bad side and make their own judgements.' It was one of her hopes that such candour may prevent just one other family from being decimated by drugs. I cannot thank them all enough for their honesty and for allowing me to write this book.

## INTRODUCTION

There are many others to whom I owe a debt of gratitude: Liam Brady; Steve Brignall; Terry Burton; Clifford Cant; Gus Ceasar; Gary Chivers; David Cork; Paul Davis; Dermot Drummy; Ken Friar; Steve Gatting; Perry Groves; John Hollins; Don Howe; Pat Jennings; Robert Johnson; Gary Lewin; Brian McDermott; Raphael Meade; Terry Neill; Sammy Nelson; Richie Powling; Kenny Sansom; Brian Sparrow; Frank Stapleton; Fred Street; Nicky Sullivan; Alan Sunderland; Brian Talbot; Dean Tonkin and Steve Walford.

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Also thanks to: Richard Clarke, Andy Exley, Joanne Harney and Vic Wright at Arsenal; Rob Hughes at *The New York Times* and *The International Herald Tribune*; Jamie Jackson and Amy Lawrence at *The Observer*; Pat Mooney at *The Hampstead & Highgate Express*; Gav Hollinder and Jon Surtees at *Southwark News*; ace commentator Martin Tyler, and Kevin Whitcher at *The Gooner*.

I must also pass on my gratitude to the authors and publishers of the various newspapers, books and publications from which I have quoted, and to Arsenal statistician Fred Ollier for the details contained in Appendix 2. Sorry you had to do it twice, Fred.

A special mention must go to: Bobby Barnes, Christian Smith, Gordon Taylor and Jemma at the PFA; Colin Bland at Sporting Chance; John Devine, whose cheerfulness withstood my constant phone calls; Steve Gorham, who managed to get



hold of many of Paul's former school mates; Nicky Law, Paul's partner in crime; Roger Thompson for his friendship; Warwick Bean and Graham Rix for their hospitality, and Jem Maidment whose enthusiasm for the original project often reinvigorated me and helped convince me to keep going when self-doubt came knocking.

Arsenal colossus Tony Adams took the time to write the foreword for this book. They say you should never meet your heroes but Tony blew that old adage out of the water for me. Thank you, Tony.

I think it is fair to say that this paperback edition would not have come about had it not been for Spencer Honniball. A talented author and screenwriter, Spencer has been my champion these past few years and it is largely down to him that Pitch Publishing have taken me on. My thanks go to Jane Camillin, Paul Camillin, Derek Hammond, Duncan Olnier and the entire team for taking a chance on me, and I wish Spencer all the luck in the world in getting Paul Vaessen on to the big – or little – screen. Greg Adams, who originally published this work in August 2014, also helped with collating material and providing me with contacts and advice for this edition.

I would also like to acknowledge the role Ronald Reng played in the writing of this book. His magnificent, touching biography of the tragic Robert Enke, *A Life Too Short*, inspired me to complete this project at a time when I had very nearly let Paul Vaessen slip away from me.

There were indeed times over the past five years when I let things get on top of me. But I admit rather selfishly that writing this book has also been somewhat cathartic ('I write some shit but it's good for me/Pick up a pen and paper and you will see.'<sup>2</sup>).

In fact, when I finally finished the book I felt somewhat deflated, empty and lost because it had been such a huge part of my life. It also proved a more than useful diversion away from my own problems and in redirecting our therapy sessions away from OCD and depression and towards progress on the book

(yes, I did notice!), Nick at the Bethlem Royal Hospital helped as much as any during the crucial early stages.

We also found we had a shared love for *El Diego*, perhaps stemming from the fact that we are supporters of the two English clubs for whom Diego Maradona so very nearly signed – Sheffield United and Arsenal. Bearing in mind what Diego did to England back in Mexico in 1986, our conversations and opinions if overheard would probably have amounted to high treason.

I want to say thank you to my long-suffering wife, Amanda, for not just allowing me to do this but for the encouragement she gave, which she has given me from the first day we met. I'm sorry I've not always been there for you and I'm sorry I've been so distracted these past five years. Thank you for our three wonderful boys to whom I wish to say sorry for the intrusion and the grumpiness. It's out of my system now, boys.

Finally to Debbie, Ernie, Sally, Jackie, Charlie, Nelson and Eddie, Red and Archie, and, of course, Leon, Lee and Maureen. I hope this brings you some closure.

It was only in speaking to so many people that I felt I could justify writing this book. In fact, they painted such a vivid picture of Paul that I decided the best way to tell his story was primarily through their words. They knew him best and there was simply no reason for much elaboration or literary intervention from me. I have therefore kept my interference to a minimum and can't really take credit for anything more than being an editor.

From a personal perspective, undertaking this project has brought me into contact with a lot of good, honest people, something which has gone some way to restoring the faith in humanity which I, like Paul, found I was losing.

I was on the trail of Paul Vaessen for quite a while. He has been in my head every day for the past five years. He became something of an obsession and it's not surprising, therefore, that he featured in many of my dreams during that time. One

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in particular sticks in my mind. I dreamt one night – it was in January 2013 – that Paul’s spirit paid me a visit. He was standing outside my window, looking in, watching over me, keeping an eye on what I was doing, what I was writing. He was silent and I like to think that had he been uncomfortable about what I was doing, he would have said something. But he seemed content. I tried calling out to him a couple of times but barely made a sound.

Then he was gone.

And that’s the closest I ever got to Paul.

Time to move on now.

Rest in peace, Paul.

# Prologue

## The Moment

*'Heroing is one of the shortest-lived  
professions there is.'*

Will Rogers in *The Will Rogers Book* by Paula  
McSpadden Love (1961)

*LA VECCHIA Signora* was well into her preparations for the evening. It was to be a big night and a special reception had been prepared for her guests. She enjoyed nothing more than the spectacle of a public execution and, after all the acrimony of the past two weeks, this was one she was going to savour.

The brutality of her legions during the first encounter in London had stunned their hosts and ignited a fuse which had been smouldering away ever since. It had been a war of attrition. Gladiators had fallen, casualties accrued and an antagonism born which had continued long after the end of the confrontation as the two sides cast aspersions upon each other from afar. The Italians had been 'violent', 'disgraceful', 'savages'.

In return, they had called for English heads to roll. The diplomats had tried to intervene in the ensuing days to calm tempers but could do little to persuade the *bianconeri* from

venting their anger. The Old Lady was not used to being spoken to like this and as the day of the return meeting approached, she had little intention of acquiescing.

Through the ancient streets of Turin, the condemned were embarking upon what was meant to be their final journey, accompanied by a furious black and white procession of taunting *tifosi*, out in force to defend the honour of their Lady, impatient for the formality of victory and baying for the blood of the English invaders.

Inside the intimidating fortress, in a small enclave up high on the slopes, a small travelling army had tentatively gathered, torn now between their desire to voice their loyalty and their instinct to remain as inconspicuous as possible. Sure enough their presence in the amphitheatre would later prove intolerable to their Latin counterparts.

They were used to things going their way here. There was a certain order to things. Sentence had been passed and would now be carried out in the customary manner; slow and painful death by suffocation courtesy of the *catenaccio* noose, a fate which no British force had ever before had the luck or audacity to cheat. And the Old Lady was not in the mood for her authority to be challenged now.

Eventually, the two factions emerged into the arena to a cacophony of noise, ritualistic chanting, drumming and whistling. Explosions lit the sky, forewarning the English trespassers of the fireworks which would soon follow. The foundations of the ancient city would indeed be rocked tonight and the reverberations felt all the way to the basilica on the Superga hills overlooking the city.

Back in the arena, hostilities were about to be renewed.

Dressed in black, the executioner started the proceedings.

There would, of course, be an initial struggle. That was only to be expected. But nothing could delay the inevitable. Soon enough the pretenders would realise the futility of resistance and would yield. And, indeed, as the evening wore on and everything

fell into place, the hordes lit fires and sang in celebration of their imminent triumph.

Lost in the moment, perhaps the Old Lady had forgotten that the last time these crusaders had visited Italy, the likes of Kennedy, Radford, George, Kelly, McLintock et al had fought toe-to-toe with the *Aquilotti* on the streets of the capital; that 40 years prior to that a lone combatant by the name of Copping had almost single-handedly decapitated Mussolini's *Azzurri* during what legend would recall as the 'Battle of Highbury'.

Perhaps she should have known that this opponent would not concede quite so easily nor go so quietly. This was a stubborn foe who had already recently marched undefeated through a tempestuous Istanbul and communist East Germany. Maybe she should have known that despite the exertions of the past nine months they would find an inner strength and the fresh resources to produce one final effort to slip the noose.

And sure enough, driven by the unbreakable spirit of the likes of Rice, O'Leary, and Brady and with time fast running out, it was Rix who managed it, in a blur, catching the home rear-guard by surprise and bursting down the left flank to supply the ammunition for the killer blow, delivered unforgivingly by an unknown soldier.

In a matter of a few seconds, the tables had been turned, leaving the Old Lady and her legions – Zoff, Gentile, Cabrini, Bettega, Scirea – gasping for breath, on their knees amid the deafening silence which had now enveloped their citadel.

Stunned by the impudence of the imposters and the abruptness of events, the indignation of the Italian masses would momentarily turn to a venomous rage. And it would be unleashed upon the small pocket of gate-crashers whose wild celebrations up high on the battlements had all of a sudden blown their cover.

The home forces charged as one like the bull on their city's municipal coat of arms. Running battles ensued as their missiles rained down upon the *Inglese* retreating in the stands. But once

again, although unarmed and hopelessly outnumbered, they would not surrender and fought back as the melee spilled out on to the streets where they were joined by reinforcements in the form of local insurgents loyal to the Old Lady's sworn enemy, *I Granata*. Bones were broken, blood spilled and weapons beared as the visitors fought their way through the skirmishes to their battered transport and made haste from the city.

Turin had not witnessed such scenes for years. It had been razed to the ground by Hannibal on his descent from the Alps in 218BC; it had been occupied by Napoleonic armies in the early 19th century and ransacked by the retreating Nazi army only a few decades ago.

And now, as the *conquistatore* sped with his comrades from the scene of the carnage towards the relative security and serenity of their rustic Asti retreat, the smoke billowing out into the Turin sky informed the city that she had fallen once more, this time to a young Saxon warrior with Dutch blood coursing through his veins who'd foreseen his glory in a dream just the night before and whose name was not yet even well known in his own land.

# 1

## In the Beginning

*‘The deepest definition of youth is life as yet  
untouched by tragedy.’*

Alfred North Whitehead

A MILLION miles away from the baroque palaces, piazzas and botanical gardens of Turin are the concrete tenements, paved backyards and parks of Bermondsey, south-east London.

With the former boasting its colonnaded walkways, museums and grandiose royal apartments and the latter its shopping parades and council flats, it is true that there are few similarities between the two. Both do have their ruins. Turin’s – in the form of the impressive Roman Palatine Towers – are, however, somewhat more admired.

In the former Italian capital you’ll find the headquarters of industrial giants such as Fiat and Lancia. The business of Bermondsey is conducted by the small enterprises and local traders operating from its warehouses, industrial estates and marketplaces.

Turin gave the world Martini. Bermondsey gave birth to the chocolate biscuit. And for the Stadio Comunale, read the New



Den. The former is of course the home of Juventus, two-times champions of Europe and one of the most prestigious football clubs in the world. In contrast, Millwall Football Club's fame struggles to extend beyond these shores and owes more to the notoriety of its past than it does to any footballing prowess. It is true that not many people like Millwall and it is also true that they just don't care.

From an away fan's perspective a visit to Zampa Road, SE16 is not quite as daunting as running the gauntlet down Cold Blow Lane. But the New Den has managed to retain the intimacy and – when full – ferocity of its grim predecessor a quarter of a mile away in New Cross, closed a record five times by the Football Association and finally shut for good in 1993.

However, if you've got any sense at all, you still don't wear your colours down this way on a match day and you still get in and out as quickly as your legs will carry you. Fortunately, to facilitate this, there is a walkway which runs directly from the North Stand to South Bermondsey station which should get you to the relative neutrality and safety of London Bridge within minutes via Southern Rail.

Running as it does along a viaduct, you can't miss the New Den from up here on the station platform, poking up through the cranes and incinerators. It's not that welcoming, it has to be said, and it's already looking its age, like it has been left out in the rain for too long.

With the contrasting affluence of the silver city skyline shimmering in the background – as much an altogether different world as Turin – I walk down the steps and along the slope, past the aforementioned chicken run. It's closed off today. There's no police presence today. This is not a match day and I'm not here for the football.

I'm here to see Paul.

So I continue on, six-yard skips piled up high in the Welcocks yard to the right, the residential boxes and caravans of a permanent travellers' site to the left. It was built by the

council some 20 years ago to stop the travellers from pitching-up illegally. At Christmas the site was lit up like Vegas, the result of a bit of nifty hot-wiring involving the nearby street lamps.

You reach ground level and there at the bottom of the steps is – quite unmistakably – Paul’s mum, Maureen.

It is amazing, knowing what Maureen has been through, that she looks so well. We’ve spoken on the phone a few times before but this is the first time we’ve met in person. She is not the downtrodden, broken figure you might expect. We greet like old friends.

‘It’s nice to meet you at last.’

‘How are you?’

‘How’s Ernie, the birds, the dogs?’

‘They’re all fine.’

We come out on to Ilderton Road, turn right and there’s the parade of shops, a bakery, a post office, a general store and the Vaessens’ former home, the flat above the bookies at number five. It’s not pretty and it’s not a great deal different to how it was back then, except the bookies was a launderette.

Across the road is Maureen and Ernie’s current home in Delaford Road. The intercom’s not working. A solid shove with the shoulder against the communal front door and we’re in. Maureen’s place is first on the right.

You get quite a welcome here.

‘F--k you,’ squawks Nelson as you pass him in his cage in the hallway. He and Eddie are apparently having some sort of argument.

It’s a modest little place. Maureen is proud of it. She has come full circle having been brought up in a house which used to stand not 50 yards away in the same street. That was when Victorian places stood here.

There are surprisingly few pictures around. There’s one of Paul and his brother Lee, a few of the grandchildren. None of Paul in his playing days. Nothing to hint at his choice of profession, his former illustrious employers or the high-profile company he