

# TACKLED

The Class of 92 Star Who Never Got to Graduate



BEN THORNLEY  
WITH DAN POOLE

# TACKLED

The Class of 92 Star Who Never Got to Graduate

BEN THORNLEY  
WITH DAN POOLE



# Contents

The line-up . . . . .	9
Foreword . . . . .	13
Prologue. . . . .	15
1. Manchester United reserves vs Blackburn Rovers reserves, Wednesday, 6 April 1994 . . . . .	17
2. Childhood, 1975–86 . . . . .	23
3. Surgery, 1994 . . . . .	40
4. Growing up, 1986–88 . . . . .	48
5. Rehab, 1994–95 . . . . .	61
6. The house visit, 1988 . . . . .	74
7. Manchester United, 1995–98 . . . . .	81
8. Signing up, 1988–91 . . . . .	106
9. Huddersfield, Aberdeen, Blackpool & Bury, 1998–2004	130
10. Youth Cup run, 1991–92 . . . . .	158
11. Halifax, Bacup Borough, Salford City & Witton Albion, 2003–2008 . . . . .	183
12. Youth Cup Final, 1992 . . . . .	198
13. Semi-retirement, 2008–13 . . . . .	213
14. Class of 93, 1992–93 . . . . .	222
15. Present day, 2013–18 . . . . .	249
16. First-team debut, 1993–94 . . . . .	262
Epilogue. . . . .	285
Special thanks . . . . .	286

# The line-up

Everyone who has contributed to the book

**Michael Appleton**

Manchester United team-mate, 1992–97\*

**David Beckham**

Manchester United team-mate, 1991–98

**Clayton Blackmore**

Manchester United team-mate, 1993–94

**Dave Bushell**

England Schoolboys manager, 1990

**Cliff Butler**

Manchester United statistician, 1991–98

**Nicky Butt**

Manchester United team-mate, 1991–98

**Chris Casper**

Manchester United team-mate, 1991–98

**John Chappell**

Salford Boys under-11s coach, 1984–85

**Jimmy Curran**

Manchester United masseur, 1991–98

**Paul Devine**

Salford Boys team-mate, 1984–85, 1988–90

**Dion Dublin**

Manchester United team-mate, 1993–94

**David Fevre**

Manchester United physio, 1994–98

**Ryan Giggs**

Manchester United team-mate, 1991–98

**Keith Gillespie**

Manchester United team-mate, 1991–95

**Harry Hackett**

Salford Boys under-14s coach, 1988–89

## TACKLED: BEN THORNLEY

### **Denis Irwin**

Manchester United team-mate, 1994–98

### **Andrei Kanchelskis**

Manchester United team-mate, 1994–95

### **Steve Kelly**

Salford Boys under-15s coach, 1989–90

### **Jeff Kerfoot**

School friend

### **Joe Lydiate**

Salford Boys team-mate, 1988–90

### **Brian McClair**

Manchester United team-mate, 1993–98

### **Jim McGregor**

Manchester United physio, 1991–94

### **Colin McKee**

Manchester United team-mate, 1991–94

### **Paul Moseley**

Salford Boys under-14s coach, 1988–89

### **Gary Neville**

Manchester United team-mate, 1991–98

### **Phil Neville**

Manchester United team-mate, 1992–98

### **Jonathan Noble**

Knee surgeon

### **Geoff Ogden**

Primary school PE teacher, 1986–88

### **John O’Kane**

Manchester United team-mate, 1991–98

### **Paul Parker**

Manchester United team-mate, 1994–96

### **Mike Phelan**

Manchester United team-mate, 1993–94

### **Kevin Pilkington**

Manchester United team-mate, 1991–98

### **Tony Potter**

Junior school PE teacher, 1982–86

## THE LINE-UP

### **Mark Rawlinson**

Manchester United team-mate, 1992–95

### **Bryan Robson**

Manchester United team-mate, 1993–94

### **Anthony Rouse**

School friend

### **Jim Ryan**

Manchester United reserves manager, 1993–98

### **Robbie Savage**

Manchester United team-mate, 1991–94

### **Paul Scholes**

Manchester United team-mate, 1991–98

### **Andy Scott**

Salford Boys team-mate, 1988–90

### **Hannah Scott (née Thornley)**

Sister

### **Rob Swire**

Manchester United physio, 1991–98

### **George Switzer**

Salford Boys & Manchester United team-mate,  
1984–85, 1988–90, 1991–92

### **Lesley Tanner**

Partner

### **Elizabeth Thornley**

Mum

### **Lucas Thornley**

Son

### **Philip Thornley**

Dad

### **Rod Thornley**

Brother

### **Gary Walsh**

Manchester United team-mate, 1993–95

\*Dates relate to career overlap with Ben, not necessarily  
total time spent in role.

# Foreword

If I think of my early years, if I think about the Class of 92, I think of Ben. He was one of – if not *the* – most talented members of that team. He had everything. And while this may be hard to believe, he was quite good-looking too.

But then one huge, earth-shattering moment completely changed the direction of his life and he never matched the heights of his game pre-injury. I actually consider that one of the great losses of *my* career because of what I thought of him, the time that we spent together and the great friendship that we have. The low of seeing him get injured and fail to fulfil his potential was devastating; to my mind there is nothing worse in football.

I love Ben to bits. He's mad as hell, funny as hell, daft as hell, snappy as hell – all of those things. But I've never been able to get angry at him; whatever used to happen, on the pitch or off, I just used to laugh. There are not many people I can say that about because, to be fair, I'm a bit of a miserable bastard. As such, to be in the company of someone who constantly made me laugh was a joy.

Ben introduced me to alcohol: we used to drink two-litre bottles of Woodpecker together on a Saturday night after a game. There wasn't anything we didn't know about each other and he had – and has – a lovely family too. It was a wonderful time in my life and Ben was at the heart of it; the moments we had together were incredibly special.

## TACKLED: BEN THORNLEY

As we grew up, his personal life mirrored his football life: after his injury he was on a downer and floated towards things that he would have never normally done. In fact, he ended up becoming someone who, at times, he himself probably didn't like. But that was purely down to the trauma that he suffered, an experience that I can't even begin to imagine. I lived through it with him but you can never step into someone else's heart, mind and soul.

I've seen less of him in my later years but whenever we meet up, we go straight back into it like we've never been away. He's that kind of individual. He's a fantastic person and I'm just delighted that our paths crossed at the age of 13.

Gary Neville



# Prologue

It's very hard not to emphasise the tragedy of what happened to Ben because we felt it – we all did. But because everything came to a halt so young, everybody at Manchester United still has this image of what he could have been; he's never had to grow old and show himself to be incapable of fulfilling his potential. In the minds of everybody who saw him play in the Class of 92, he's still at the height of his powers.

What was most important to us was that we still had our son. No matter what he might have gone on to become, he was still our lad. He was, and is always going to be, Ben.

So yes, we lost out – but we also won.

Philip Thornley

# Manchester United reserves vs Blackburn Rovers reserves

## Wednesday, 6 April 1994

**Ben:** I knew I was in trouble. I'd heard the noise. I could feel it. My first reaction was to reach for my knee and I fell to the floor holding it – holding it together, basically.

I'd moved infield to pick up the ball and was running towards goal but, as I approached the penalty area, I was aware of Blackburn's right-back coming towards me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Clayton Blackmore galloping into the space I'd vacated on the left-hand side. There was no sense in taking on the Blackburn player so I passed to Clayton.

I didn't smack the ball. It was a side-foot, 15 yards, because I didn't need to hit it towards the touchline. The right-back had come infield so I wanted Clayton to have a diagonal run straight into the box. And I could see that gaps were going to open up so I wasn't going to stand there and watch – I wanted to get in there as well.

But their right-back was still coming towards me, even though the ball had gone. He had time to pull out; he didn't need to make a tackle. But he *wanted* to.

## TACKLED: BEN THORNLEY

**Gary Walsh:** You get to know the sound of a normal tackle and this didn't sound like a normal tackle. It sounded like a crack. And I heard it even though I was 60-odd yards away in United's goal.

**Ben:** I knew he was coming. I could see him coming. But while my left foot, body and arms were moving, my right foot wasn't coming with me yet. I'd planted it on the floor, ready to push off. I couldn't get out of the way quickly enough.

**Dion Dublin:** It was like a clap of your hands: there was one sound and it was very clear. It wasn't a crescendo of sound, it was 'Bam!' Gone. That's it. It was horrible. Horrible.

**Ben:** My momentum and the impact of his boot were opposing forces. The rest of my body was starting to go one way – he made sure that my knee went back in the other direction.

**Bryan Robson:** I was more or less on the centre circle, just coming up behind Ben, when it happened. When he went down, everyone started pushing and shoving because it was such a bad tackle.

**Chris Casper:** It was a shocker. I was injured so I was in the stands at Gigg Lane – Bury's ground, where we played our reserve games. I watched Nicky Marker come in and clean Ben out. I'll never forget that noise. It was so loud that I thought it was Ben's shin pad breaking. It wasn't.

**Philip Thornley:** We heard the crack. We were sat in the stands behind Alex Ferguson, who shot up, turned round and said, 'Come with me.' He knew straight away. He took me down to the edge of the pitch.

**Elizabeth Thornley:** I stayed in the stand with Rod and Hannah because they were only little.

## MANCHESTER UNITED RESERVES vs BLACKBURN ROVERS RESERVES

**Rod Thornley:** I remember being upset. I never really got upset when it came to Ben but I was that night.

**Gary Neville:** It didn't actually look like a really shocking tackle from where I was at right-back. Plus I was young, so I think that meant I didn't realise the severity of the injury at the time.

**Colin McKee:** I was right next to Ben when it happened. Straight away I signalled to the bench for the physio, Rob Swire, to come on.

**Ben:** Some people actually get up and try to carry on when they do their cruciate; I wasn't going anywhere. It fucking hurt.

**Rob Swire:** I ran on to the pitch to have a look and I could see that his knee was a mess because it was already starting to swell. If you sprain an ankle, say, it takes several hours to swell because normal joint fluid is produced slowly. But if a ligament tears, the blood vessels tear too and blood pumps out immediately. You also get a misshapen knee with a cruciate injury and Ben's was slightly out of line.

**Dion Dublin:** The pain he was in, the anguish – that's the word – the *anguish* on his face, was unbelievable.

**Brian McClair:** It quickly became apparent that he was in a bad way. Marker had come in at the kind of angle whereby it was going to be sore because the full force of his weight landed on Ben's leg – and you're always going to get hurt when your foot is planted.

**Rob Swire:** I tried to talk to Ben but he was in a lot of pain, so he wasn't communicating. I just stabilised the knee and called the stretcher on; I wasn't going to pull it around and examine it because you don't touch the serious ones.

## TACKLED: BEN THORNLEY

**Ben:** I wasn't really aware of what was going on around me as I was stretchered off; all that was going through my mind was utter devastation.

**Chris Casper:** Nicky Marker knew that there was only one outcome from that tackle – and the one thing that was never going to happen was Nicky Marker getting hurt. He knew exactly what he was doing.

**Clayton Blackmore:** It was dangerous. It was cowardly.

**Gary Neville:** When you're an experienced defender, your team's losing and someone's taking the piss out of you, sometimes you might think, 'Fuck it, I'll just go in for one.' It's not an unnatural reaction for a defender who's losing to lose his head.

**Ben:** The referee only gave him a yellow card. I've never understood that. And when the ref gave his witness statement for the legal proceedings that came later, he maintained that it was a mistimed tackle despite seeing a video of it. Why? To save face? I'd like to sit him down in front of that video again now and say, 'What the fuck are you playing at?'

**Clayton Blackmore:** He definitely should have been sent off – and sent down.

**Andy Scott:** I played with Ben at Salford Boys, then I signed for Blackburn – and I played in this game. Nicky Marker was a tough, hard player and I think he did know what he was doing, but I don't think his intention was to do the damage he did.

**Ben:** I agree, I don't think he could have envisaged the extent of it. But when you make a tackle like that, there's always a chance you're going to hurt someone.

## MANCHESTER UNITED RESERVES vs BLACKBURN ROVERS RESERVES

**Mike Phelan:** When it happens it's a shock. Then there's the reality of the fact that it's your team-mate and what's just happened is wrong. Then there's emotion. There's something that goes through your head ... it's hard to describe. There's a sorrow about it. It's an emptiness. Then there's anger after that, fury, because you realise it's career-threatening.

**Chris Casper:** I was in the treatment room with Ben, waiting for the ambulance. It was quiet. I think he knew there was a serious problem.

**Hannah Scott (née Thornley):** It was like someone had died. I don't think dad talked for a couple of days afterwards.

**Jim Ryan:** I followed Ben in but I couldn't say anything to him because he was ... he wasn't ... well, I just didn't know what to say to the kid, you know? By that time we'd realised that it was bad. I didn't want to say something stupid like, 'You'll be OK.' I think I ruffled his hair.

**Dion Dublin:** I just wasn't interested in the game after that.

**Jim Ryan:** When I went back out to watch, people on the bench were asking me how he was and I told them it looked terrible. It's not something you can shrug off. I just hoped that everything was going to be alright. Ben was such a cheery, chirpy lad. He didn't deserve that.

**Bryan Robson:** I spent the last 20 minutes trying to get Marker back but I never got the chance.

**Mike Phelan:** The aftershock of treatment and stretchers leaves you wondering what's going on in the game, where the next tackle is coming from. You've got a sick feeling in your stomach and the

## TACKLED: BEN THORNLEY

match becomes challenging for different reasons. You want a result, you want to do it for Ben. You want to do it as payback – you don't want them to get away with it. All of these things go through your head. Something else too: thank God it's not me.

**Rob Swire:** It was, by a long way, the worst knee injury I saw in about 30 years as a physio. To the extent that I didn't expect Ben to play football again.

**Ben:** While I was lying there it suddenly dawned on me: this could be it.