



Tales from
the Front Line

LUKE FLETCHER

“The best teammate you
could ever have, he’s one of
life’s energy-givers.”

Stuart Broad

LUKE FLETCHER

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In The Beginning

AS BEFITS a finely tuned athlete, I made my entry into the world just as the opening ceremony of the 1988 Seoul Olympics was concluding.

Alan and Jane Fletcher's new arrival was a big lad, nudging 9lb at birth. 'He was almost a tenner,' my dad kept repeating as his mates took him out to wet the baby's head.

The number one record in the charts that week was 'He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother', something appropriate for my elder sibling to utter.

Tom is two years older than me, and Mum and Dad kept things at regular intervals because a third son, Sam, followed a further two years after I arrived.

Dad worked as a coal miner at Annesley Colliery, disappearing underground to graft in some of the toughest conditions known to man.

His shift work and long hours of absence left Mum with the challenge of rearing three permanently hungry lads.

My earliest memories were always of the three of us playing together, either in the garden or on the street. Our neighbourhood seemingly had lots of youngsters all around the same age, all sharing the same hobbies and interests and all getting into the usual scrapes that kids of that age seem to attract.

It was usually football that kept us occupied, playing matches between ourselves until it was time for tea. The summer months were taken up with the occasional game of cricket, apart from the really hot days when we'd have massive water-fights. The Fletcher boys were usually more than a match for anyone that dared to take us on.

Football began to take over my life. I regularly played in goal and joined my local side, Bulwell Rangers, at an early age, playing matches at weekends, with one evening a week set aside for training.

Cantrell Primary, a five-minute walk away, was my first school and I really enjoyed my time there, particularly as there was always lots of sport to play – either organised or among ourselves.

Ralph Surman was one of my early teachers and we still keep in touch now.

* * *

Ralph Surman: 'Luke started in my vertically grouped infant class of 1992–93. The class contained those reaching their sixth and seventh birthdays, in a mixed ability setting.'

‘He was larger than his contemporaries and could be mistaken for a Year Two child when you saw them all together.

‘Luke was very popular and was well liked by all the other children. He was very calm and relaxed and undertook schoolwork at his own pace.

‘He learnt to read very quickly and was competent in basic maths. I wouldn’t say he was enthusiastic to undertake written tasks but was more than capable. One feature was always the great support he received from his parents with his studies. They were lovely.

‘Our school concert in 1993 was based on Elvis Presley, and I always remember Luke playing “My Teddy Bear”. He wore pyjamas and carried his own teddy bear under his arm while dancing to the classic Elvis number.’

* * *

I also had a teacher called Mr Osborne and during my time with him I was given a very strong life lesson. He believed in rewarding his pupils whenever they did something well, so had a pack of strawberry bon-bons on a shelf.

The teacher would dish one out to anyone who’d done outstanding work in his classroom. I liked strawberry bon-bons but there was a pretty slim chance of me earning one the conventional way.

One breaktime I hung around in the classroom until everyone else had gone out to play and climbed on a chair to reach them.

I was just helping myself to a load of the tasty confectionery when Mr Osborne walked back in.

Oh s**t. Caught in the act. Bang to rights.

Feeling sure I'd be given lines, a detention or maybe even the ruler, I was a little bemused that I seemed to have dodged any form of capital punishment.

But Mr Osborne was crafty.

What's the worst way a kid can be punished?

He waited until my mum and dad came to pick me up and told them what I'd been up to. Grassed up, good and proper!

The next day was a Saturday and my dad took me down the road, at the back of our house, to Bulwell Police Station, which was only a five-minute walk away.

A policeman took me from my dad and put me in a cell.

Genuinely.

I was six years old and petrified.

Nowadays, I'm sure a cocky youngster would demand to know his or her rights and refuse to speak until their solicitor was present.

That wasn't for me. Even if I'd been a bit more worldly-wise I knew this wasn't a time for showboating.

The policeman gave me a strict talking-to about stealing and what would happen to me if I did it again. A life behind bars and more porridge than Goldilocks seemed to be my fate if I ventured near to the strawberry bon-bons again.

He frightened the life out of me and the floodgates opened. I began to sob, then I cried, then I screamed the place down.

'I'm sooooooooooooooooooooooorryyyy,' I wailed.

I was really upset, so upset that my dad obviously felt a little guilty about what I'd been put through and he took me to the sweet shop and bought me a choccy bar afterwards.

Years later he told me that it had all been set up. He'd popped into the police station and asked if someone could have a word with me but even he didn't think they'd go to the extremes of putting me in a cell and scaring the life out of me.

Not funny, Dad. Not funny.

His reasons for doing it were sound enough, though. He didn't want anything else to go missing at school and me get the blame for it, he didn't want me to have a reputation and he didn't want me to be known as a thief, so thought he'd nip it in the bud early.

There was one other time that my dad taught me a lesson for not doing as I was told.

The five of us were in Majorca on holiday – I would be about ten or 11. The beach was absolutely rammed full of tourists, hardly a spare space to be found.

Tom and Sam were doing their own thing but I wanted to go down to the sea and pestered my parents until I got my own way.

'All right, go and play but stay in this section here,' they said.

It wasn't long before my attention span wandered. I could see a speedboat moored up a little way along from where I was. Although the more I paddled towards it, the further away it seemed to be getting.

The boat was probably 200 or 300 yards away from my original starting point but it seemed as if I'd wandered even further and when I looked back I got quite a shock – I didn't know where I was. Still, I was having a good time.

I'd probably been gone for about 40 minutes or so when a helicopter started doing low runs over the beach. They were clearly looking for something ... or someone!

Wandering back through the crowds of people, I bumped into my dad, who had formed his own one-man search party for me. He gave me a right roasting for going off like that and told me that I'd been reported missing and that the helicopter had been sent up to search for me.

Naturally, I believed him and felt awful and didn't leave my parents' side for the rest of the holiday.

I felt guilty at having put so many people to so much trouble. Emergency services have better things to do than search a crowded beach for a little boy who can't do as he's told.

That guilt stayed with me, into my teens, into my 20s and almost into my 30s, when it cropped up in conversation again and Dad confessed that he hadn't reported me missing at all!

You may be surprised to hear that, even in primary school, I was a big lad and so was easily spotted in all my early school and team photographs. When we were able to play sport I liked to go in goal for the football and chose to keep wicket on the rare occasions we played cricket.

In the photos I was usually thrust in the centre of the back row, towering over my mates.

I loved running about and playing sport and couldn't wait for breaktimes or for school to be over so we could start up our matches again.

Every day Mum gave us a couple of quid for our dinner but I would always be up to no good and used to gamble it before school started.

We used to play a game called 'Wally' (pronounced Wall-E) and sometimes I'd be on a hot streak and have about 12 quid in my pocket.

The game involved standing about two metres from a wall and throwing a coin at it; closest to the wall took the cash.

It was usually 50p a go and I became good enough to hustle at it, getting to know the surfaces pretty well and working a system to ensure I'd be the winner.

More often than not it worked out well for me but on other days I'd lose badly and have nothing left. Desperate times call for desperate measures but I'd thought this through because Mum was a school dinner lady.

I would go and see her and make out I was still hungry and scrounge a couple of cream buns or something for lunch. I did that for about five years; it was great. All the other ladies in the kitchen knew me as well and they'd spoil me, slipping me slices of pizza or whatever was on the menu that day.

Perhaps that's the reason I'm such a big lad now!

Football was everything at that time. Morning, noon and night, I would play as often as I could. Big for my age, I was a natural to go in goal but I also enjoyed playing outfield

as well and managed to have a little bit of success in both positions.

My senior year at Cantrell Primary coincided with the school entering the football team in a nationwide competition, the Adidas Predator Cup.

This was a fairly drawn-out event, lasting many local district rounds, before becoming regional and then national.

Somehow, we kept winning.

It was a seven-a-side tournament on a pitch that was around three-quarters of the size of a full one. Our progress through the rounds made us more and more excitable and suddenly there were huge opportunities ahead of us.

We qualified for the county finals, to be played at Nottingham Forest's City Ground. The match should have been played on a Monday – maybe during a half-term holiday, I'm not sure. But I couldn't wait. I was so much looking forward to it but then, disaster struck.

Over the weekend I was larking around on a high wall and fell off.

I badly hurt my knee and that was that, I had to miss out and my City Ground experience was limited to just cheering the rest of the lads on.

Without my cat-like reflexes, Cantrell Primary had to make alternative arrangements. A lad by the name of Paddy Gamble was put in goal. I don't recall if I gave him any tips or not but I'd like to think I was instrumental in setting him on his way towards a career that eventually saw him on the books

of Nottingham Forest, Mansfield Town and several successful non-league sides.

Paddy had a blinder and was a hero as we won on penalties. The opposition were Fernwood Primary from Wollaton and the decisive moment came when a lad called Eddie Somekh slammed his spot kick against the crossbar. I didn't know him at the time but a few years later Eddie and I became good mates and played a fair amount of cricket together for Papplewick and Linby CC. Needless to say his penalty miss rarely got mentioned!

Although I'd only been cheering from the sidelines as we won at the City Ground, I was more than happy to join in the celebrations and look forward to the regional heats that followed.

We had to go to Retford, to play a team from Sheffield or Barnsley. The precise details aren't important; what you really need to know is the part I played in getting the win that took us through to the finals.

The coaching staff had decided to stick with Paddy in goal but brought me into the side as a deep-lying, ball-winning central defender with the licence to pop forward and show off.

Immediately we went a goal behind and the omens weren't good. We were still trailing deep into the contest when I had a foray forward and bundled home a loose ball to make it all square.

Another penalty shoot-out seemed likely as we approached the final seconds. I was on the halfway line when the ball dropped to me. Instinctively I took it on the volley and gave

it a mighty left-footed thump and could scarcely believe my luck as it flew over the goalkeeper and into the top corner.

What a screamer!

Pandemonium followed as my teammates swallowed me up in sheer disbelief. One or two of them were wide-eyed and wearing expressions that I have become used to in later life whenever Samit Patel is confronted by a dessert trolley.

Our victory meant that we were through to the finals and they would be staged at Old Trafford before a Manchester United home match. It's fair to say that we were pretty chuffed by this turn of events.

We travelled up the night before and stayed in a hotel, with our parents joining us on the day.

Now how do you reward your semi-final hero, the guy who popped up with two goals to hand the school their most prestigious day of all time?

You drop him. Yep, that's right, they told me I was to be sub. Some lad, whose folks were very influential and in with the teachers, was named in my place. He was a Manchester United supporter and I think they thought he deserved it more.

So, I was somewhat sour-faced and miserable when I took my place on the bench for the first half. We went 1-0 down and I was brought on as an outfield player at half-time but there was no more magic left in the tank and the score remained the same.

The main event on that April 2000 afternoon was Manchester United against Sunderland, a match that featured a

couple of goals from Ole Gunnar Solksjaer as the home team won 4-0.

I remember we had seats – good seats – right at the top of the stand and it seemed to take forever to walk all the way up there.

When Beckham, Neville, Scholes and co. popped off for their half-time oranges we went back on to the pitch to be presented with our medals and to do a lap of honour.

Heady stuff for a group of young lads from Cantrell Primary. Funnily enough we have all remained in touch since leaving school and have our own WhatsApp group these days, ‘The Class of 2000’.

While most of the lads were pretty down in the dumps, I was surprisingly chipper. That’s because I had another treat lined up, just around the corner.

My goalkeeping performances for Bulwell had got me noticed and I’d had a representative call-up for the Nottingham City Boys.

They had also entered a nationwide competition and made good progress. Such good progress, in fact, that we had qualified for the finals, which were to be held at Wembley Stadium.

As with my goals for Cantrell Primary, I stepped up when it mattered by saving three out of five penalty kicks in the match that got us through to the finals.

Once more we had another brilliant day but lost 1-0, with former England goalkeeper Peter Shilton presenting us with our medals.

We then settled down to watch an England versus Scotland match from the stands but I can't remember whether it was a schoolboy or university international.

Up until this point I'd had a bit of a playground soft spot for Liverpool, yet bizarrely the first shirt I owned was a white Spurs one, with the badge on. I'm not sure where it came from; it was possibly even a hand-me-down.

That all changed once Dad started taking me to the City Ground to see Nottingham Forest play.

David Platt had taken over as manager and I absolutely loved everything about the experience, particularly the noise and the passion of the fans.

We didn't go all that often but Forest had become my team and I started to follow their fortunes closely.

Our exploits in those two competitions had drawn a bit of attention from the scouts and I was invited to go for trials at Forest, Leeds United and Notts County.

Purely because a lot of my mates played there I chose Notts County but it turned out to be a terrible decision and I regret it to this day.

I carried on going until they released me when I was aged 13 or 14, citing in my final report, 'Luke is a good shot-stopper but lacks agility' – at least they managed to pick up on that fairly early!