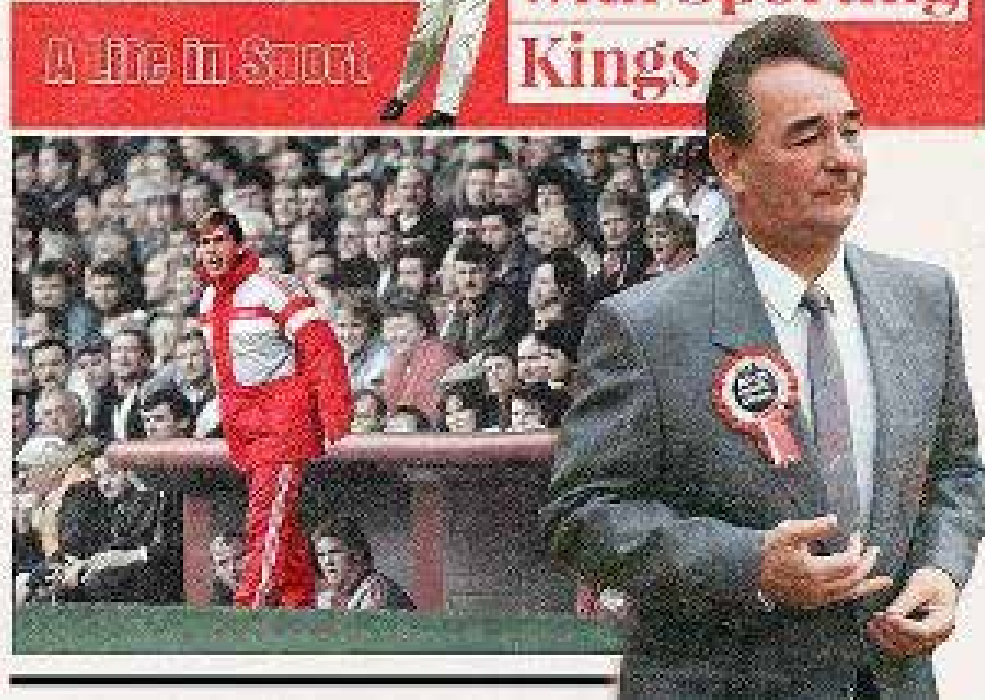


The **Back Page**

By Steve
Millar

**Fifty Years
of Headlining
with Sporting
Kings**

A Life in Sport



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CHAPTER 1

THE CALL came out of the Algarve blue as I stretched my creaky bones to shuffle off the sunbed to answer my mobile in the kitchen of our Coelha beach holiday apartment. It was the *Daily Star* Sunday office back in Bamber Bridge near Preston. The sports editor, a fresh-faced rookie called Michael Ham, had bad news to darken the holiday mood.

‘Steve, I’ve had a call from the management and they are looking at sports desk cuts. I’m afraid your job is at risk,’ he coolly and calmly reported in a detached manner.

That was back in September 2018. And eight months later, after a reprieve while the bosses deliberated and reluctantly agreed to a modest pay-off, the axe fell brutally to sever 50 years in journalism, man and boy.

I admit I felt isolated, especially when the good luck phone calls stopped. I wasn’t ready for retirement and felt I’d been elbowed into obscurity. The job I loved was no longer. At 67 I felt I had another 12 months to professionally cover the role I was born to fulfil. Anyway, I wanted to leave on my terms and not suffer the knee-jerk reaction of some suit in London.

Despair with a capital 'D' saturated my body, my scrambled mind unable to face the reality of waking up every morning without a phone call to the office or a press conference to attend. But in the following months of feeling that I'd been scrubbed from the journalistic history books as the forgotten man, I remembered wise words from the legend that is Sir Alex Ferguson.

Fergie himself was nearing the day he'd turn off the infamous hairdryer for the final time and pulled me to one side after a Manchester United press conference at the club's Carrington training ground.

'Whatever you do Steve, when the big day comes and you retire, always keep your brain on the go. When that switches off, so does your ticker,' the great man informed me with a serious look in the eye.

So, here I am, keeping the brain cells active with a nostalgic, and I hope humorous, look back through the half-century of years to when my career started with my very first job in journalism.

I was just a teenager living in a Manchester overspill estate called Partington with dad Stan, mum Pat and sister Anne. College was over and I'd somehow scraped through from two years at Timperley with five GCE 'O' levels to my name.

And then came the lightbulb moment with a quick look through the Partington edition of the *Stretford and Urmston Journal* back in the summer of 1968. There on the back page was an advert looking for a trainee reporter with the proviso that the applicant must have five 'O' levels, including English language.

Bingo. That's me, I thought, and I applied for the big job, being told for certain that I was the only one in Partington with those qualifications. Sure enough, the editor, Maurice Brown, was happy to take me on, so the incredible journey began from Urmston to Manchester to the far-flung lands of Singapore, Japan, South Africa and infinity and beyond.

It was a great four-year training period under the guidance of editor and *Sunday Mirror* Saturday casual Maurice, plus fellow reporters Trevor Coombes, Angela Kelly and little Bob Bayliss. I learned everything about the job, from calling in every morning at the Urmston police station to scribble down the previous night's incidents to covering courts, inquests, road traffic accidents and golden weddings – I couldn't believe anyone could be hitched for 50 years. I know now.

The *Journal* offices were based in the centre of Urmston, a location right up my dad Stan's street, so to speak. He worked around the corner as a postman at the local delivery office and I lost count of the number of times reception would call upstairs to tell me, 'Steve, your dad's here to see you.'

The words never altered. 'Son, can you spare a couple of quid? I've got a cert running in the 2.30 at Doncaster.' I always coughed up but the bookies never did.

How could I say no, though, to the Belfast man who brought me into this world after marrying my mum Pat at RAF Changi, Singapore, where they were both stationed? I arrived on this earth on 15 July 1951, just nine months after they tied the knot, sparking endless family jokes that

I was born with a broken hand – trying to hold on until after the wedding.

Stan did well to get Pat's hand in marriage after she'd first dated future stage and TV legend Bruce Forsyth, who worked with her in the RAF station's signals room. Obviously my dad played his cards right.

I'm told my first few months on the planet were shared with chameleons falling from the ceiling on to my cot net, and a pet monkey bought by my dad, who wasn't the happiest at saying goodbye to Singapore to return to England. Reluctantly, he boarded the ship to sail him home, supposedly alongside mum and me. But that was the last we saw of him, Mum said, for the whole six-week voyage. Stan spent every day with aircrew, eating and drinking in the mess before bedding down every night in his bunk absent of wife and child.

He was certainly a character, my old man, happy to please my Roman Catholic mum by converting to her faith to marry and renouncing his strict Protestant background after being brought up in Argyll Street, Belfast, just off the Shankill Road. Stan didn't have the courage to tell his family of Orangemen on his return home that he'd taken Catholic vows and Holy Communion, such was the hatred of the religious enemy. His silence lasted seven years before his dad William – a riveter on the Titanic – and the Orange Lodge brothers were informed and, amazingly, accepted his switch to the enemy camp without rancour.

During that long period of sectarian silence, we'd visit the Irish folks on a regular basis and would be strictly sworn to secrecy. I was innocent of the hatred of

Catholics in the Millar family's Protestant stronghold and wonder now what they would have thought of me, later educated by nuns at a convent near RAF Lindholme, Doncaster.

Funny now to think back to the days when I'd sit on the step of their terraced house in Argyll Street drawing pictures of priests at altars with me as an altar boy. Christ, my dad would go mad and rip up the evidence before you could say Holy Sh**. I still smile about how I was probably only the one Catholic to walk in Orange Day parades through the streets of Belfast with my unsuspecting uncles. Not a bad claim to fame.

Yes, I was heavily into religion in those early, formative years of mine. I became an altar boy at RAF Lindholme's Roman Catholic church and was happy to serve the local priest at every Mass. In fact, I got so wrapped up in the religious world that I wondered whether one day I'd become a priest. The nuns had always told me that if I ever got the calling from above I should answer 'yes'.

Every day I dreaded getting that heavenly thumbs-up. I didn't want to be a priest and I was scared God would summon me to the priesthood. The only thing I liked about living the Catholic altar life was having a sly slug of the altar wine in the vestry after every service.

I think that's where my love of drink started – as a seven-year-old. That and getting an egg cup filled with Guinness from my grandma Kitty every Sunday when we came back from Mass at Withington Hospital.

She was a character. Kitty was born the illegitimate daughter of her mum, a maid in then affluent Moss Side in

Manchester who never saw husband Jack for all five years of the Second World War.

Jack the Lad joined up with the Royal Marines in 1939, was posted to Portsmouth, and for some reason never left these shores, getting Marine pals to send postcards to Kitty from their battlefields in France. I was always told as well that Jack had a secret family in Portsmouth, with kids from the 'marriage' who we obviously never met.

Kitty was a wonderful, wonderful lady. Imagine now being born in 1900 before planes and automobiles and living through two world wars, seeking bomb shelters in the garden at the height of the Manchester bombings.

I promised I'd write a book like this about her amazing life but never fulfilled it. I really regret not penning her life story for my kids and grandchildren to read. A truly remarkable life and lady. I can still see Kitty now in a powder-blue coat and matching hat held on by a massive hat pin. And I can still recall leaving her one day in my Ford Capri while I shopped in her home town of Chorlton-cum-Hardy. On my return an hour later I discovered Kitty almost unconscious on the back seat as she sweltered in her coat and hat on one of the hottest days of the year. Imagine that, killing your own granny. Sorry Kitty.

Kitty, I must add, lived the last 40 or so years of her life with a glass eye, a scary sight for a kid growing up. And I was still haunted when I, wife Syl and sister Anne went to Wharton Avenue in Chorlton to clear out her belongings after her death.

I wondered all day whether we'd come across her spare eye, and sure enough, when I cleared the last room

of the house, her downstairs bathroom, I found a tiny wicker box.

Nervously lifting the lid, there it was. The blue eye. Christ, I swept the box into a bin bag and hurriedly stuffed it into the boot of my Capri. Then, to my horror, the bag toppled and out popped the box containing the eye, which rolled all the way down Wharton Avenue, where it stayed. I couldn't have asked neighbours whether they had seen a rolling eye, could I?

Back to normality. My early life was totally entrusted to the armed forces, remembering as a toddler living on a base in Cirencester before Dad's posting to RAF Oldenburg in Germany, where my sister Anne was born.

I still remember the first time I saw baby Anne in hospital along with my dad. My mum cradled Anne in her arms and handed me a present from my new sister. A red London bus and a letter saying how proud she was to have me as a big brother. I couldn't believe it. If she couldn't even walk, how could she get to the shops to buy the bus, let alone write me a letter? But then again, she always was the clever one of the two siblings.

I went to the local school, and although I can't remember a word now, I did speak a little German and can still recall singing a local song that I think was on the lines of 'Fire, fire henschen'. Or something similar lost in the translation.

Looking back now, mine was a joyous life, which could have been cruelly cut short at just five or six years old when Mum and Dad took me and my baby sister on a trip to Winterberg, a winter resort in western Germany. It's famous for its ski slopes and massive ski jump. Certainly an

impressive place for a wide-eyed kid who wanted to take a better look at this impressive resort.

So Dad took me up to the top of a watchtower to gaze at the exciting panorama, but a high wall on the viewing floor prevented a proper look for this inquisitive child. So I took a run and jump and reached out for the top of the wall, only to horrifically misjudge the height and start to slide head-first, 100 feet to the ground. Thankfully, Dad was alert and grabbed my legs to basically save my life. Thanks super Stan.

We returned to England after three years at Oldenburg and had temporary transit accommodation in Blackpool, where this German-speaking kid helped out on the Pleasure Beach. The Love Boat ride to be precise, dragging in the craft after loved-up couples had departed for dry land.

Stan's next move was to RAF Lindholme, where Anne and I were taught by those nuns at the convent in Stainforth near Doncaster. I was into my writing even then as a confident nine-year-old but, suddenly, for no reason, I developed a serious stutter – a curse quickly picked up on by the cruel teaching nuns.

The morning register became a nightmare, with the daunting prospect of having to answer to the question: 'Stephen Millar?' To which I had to reply: 'Present Sister De Lestenac.' Well, you can imagine how difficult those explosive words were to a boy with a stammer. So I hoped to get round it by stuttering, 'Present ster ...' That clearly wasn't good enough, and although she knew about my horrible speech impediment, Sister De Lestenac made me stand in front of class for ten

minutes, stuttering away to my complete embarrassment amid the class laughter.

As I grew, the stutter began to ease and my confidence returned with a move to senior school at St Peter's Comprehensive in Doncaster. I was in the grammar stream and my love for writing developed even more, with essays marked highly by the teachers.

My football skills were praised, too, although I had trouble getting into the first XI at my favoured position, right-back. I still don't know why, other than the automatic choice was some little snotty kid called Kevin Keegan. I reminded Kevin about breaking my footballing heart generations later at a charity dinner at Blackpool FC, before Christmas 2021.

Okay, fair enough, he may have played 230 times for Liverpool, scoring 68 goals and winning 63 England caps. Oh, and he managed our country, Newcastle, Fulham and Manchester City. But did he really think that he was a better footballer than me and deserved to play in the St Peter's XI ahead of Steve Millar? Kev, on tiptoes, looked me in the eyes and smiled that knowing smile. Sorry mate, that's where we begin to differ. I too was a great player – and a lot taller.

He played another part in my life later, when in 1980 he was playing for Hamburg. My colleague Vince Wilson ghosted Kev's column in our *Sunday Mirror* newspaper, for which he was paid an incredible £30,000 a year. Vince told me that Kev had revealed he was signing for Southampton and the sensational move would be announced on 11 February 1980 by Saints boss Lawrie McMenemy.

What a great scoop for us then on a sensational Sunday. At least that's what Vince, sports editor Peter Shaw and I thought, as I started to design the back page and inside spread.

That was until Lawrie told Vince that we couldn't print a word of our would-be world exclusive because Southampton wanted to surprise the footballing world on 11 February, a Monday. Thanks Lawrie – and thanks again Kev that we couldn't break the big one 24 hours before he was unveiled as Southampton's new signing in a plush city centre hotel. We should have published and been damned.

Anyway, back to Doncaster and RAF Lindholme, which was a great place for a kid to grow up, especially in the summer holidays when officers would agree to decommission a veteran bomber, mainly Wellingtons. The twin-engine long-range Wellington would be towed to the far side of the airfield and us RAF kids would be invited to play on this Second World War veteran of the skies.

Nothing was off-limit. We'd buckle up in the cockpit or take a seat in the rear bomber glass dome with the guns still in position. Or we could climb out on to the wings and release the rubber dinghy to ride on it to the runway below. Helmets and goggles were stored in the cockpit, so the fun, as you can see, multiplied for us excited kids.

Imagine that scene today, with health and safety fanatics ruling the world. No way would we have been allowed to clamber all over a world war flying machine, pretending to shoot the Luftwaffe out of the Doncaster skies.

Back down to earth again, and my next school was at Casterton near Oakham in Rutland, when Dad, now

a corporal, was posted to RAF Cottesmore. My sense of humour and the desire to be the class favourite showed no bounds.

I thought one day that it would be funny to lift the lid on the geography teacher's desk and take and hide his white, size 12 plimsoll he used to smack class-mates across the bum for indiscretions. I placed it in the desk of a kid I didn't like, and when Sir looked for his punishment pump, he demanded to know where it was. The nerd pointed to me and the teacher immediately summoned misbehaving Millar out of class. The school bell was rung and every girl and boy pupil assembled around the playground, where I was frogmarched into the middle, with the geography teacher pulling down my shorts and underpants for a bare-arsed flogging. Imagine that happening now. The teacher would be jailed.

Anyway, the bum deal made me think. Obviously. Later school years saw me develop into a more sensible student with prefect jobs at St Pius the Tenth in Rusholme, Manchester, after Stan left the RAF because he didn't want to take the family to Aden at the start of the Arab uprising in the early 60s.

It was an arduous journey to St Pius the Tenth, taking two buses from Partington. But I was happy at the school, where one of my class-mates was Moors murder victim Keith Bennett. What a bloody horror story.

My final school was Blessed Thomas Halford in Altrincham, Cheshire, where I became head boy – carefully distancing myself from one of my good pals, Steve Derbyshire. Derby had somehow decided that the final

terms of school weren't for him, so he missed two of them by playing truant. Every morning his mum would pack his school bag, hand him his blazer and wave him off at the door. Steve would hide around the corner, wait until she'd left for work, then nip back home and spend the day in the shed.

Unlike Steve, I loved school. Loved the sports fields and stage where I starred as a Chinese officer in 'A Letter from the General.'

And then it was off to further education when I enrolled at Timperley College just down the road to study in a two-year commercial course, which taught me the typing and shorthand skills later used successfully in journalism.

I often think back to those treasured school days – apart from the playground beating – and cast my mind back to those Belfast trips of keeping tight-lipped about Dad's Catholic vows. Stan would often laugh about the deception, but although a convert to the Catholic faith, the Ulsterman in him was deeply engraved. Stan, as I said, loved his horses, football – and drinking, of course. When I was 16, he walked me from our Partington home to the nearest boozer, the Saracen's Head at Warburton, and asked me what I wanted to drink. I asked for a coke but he thrust a pint of bitter in my hand and said, 'If you're going to drink, I want you to sup beer in front of me and not behind my back.'

Great advice. He had that in abundance. Stan always told me to shake another man's hand with the firmest of grips and to look him in the eye. He also coated me one day for disappearing into the toilet when it was my round to buy him and his brothers pints in a Shankill pub.

‘What are you bloody doing?’ he barked out in the urinal when he caught me counting out my money in my hand. ‘If you can’t afford to buy your round then don’t bloody come into the pub.’

I learned so much from Dad, who was taken away way too early at the age of 44 on 16 December 1970, just as we were getting to know each other as men with regular pint-supping nights.

I received the dreaded call from the police when I was in the *Stretford and Urmston Journal* office. They informed me that he’d been rushed into Park Hospital, Davyhulme, after collapsing in the street. I drove like a madman to the critical care unit, explaining over and over again that he was only 44. A fit man who walked miles every day as a postman. He’d done 30 press-ups the other night, I told the medics.

But Dad didn’t stand a chance and never regained consciousness from a brain clot, passing away the following morning with me, Mum and Uncle Peter by his bedside. Our broken hearts never ever mended.

I had to identify my own dad in the morgue. And I can still picture the scene as the white sheet was peeled back to reveal my dear dad’s handsome face. God, that was hard to take. My dad. Dead. Park Hospital filled me with dread from that moronic morning – although later events in its wards did finally return a smile to my face.

I feel uncomfortable recalling one mad moment but, hey, here goes. I was quite friendly with Bernard from the mortuary after meeting him while reporting inquests. He had a wicked sense of humour just like me, and when my

mum was admitted for heart checks, I devised a plan. I told Bernard which ward Pat was on and, following my instructions, he got his tape measure out and sized her up from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet. Mum told me later (after a huge telling-off on my part) that she asked Bernard what the bloody hell he was doing.

‘Just measuring you up for the coffin if anything goes wrong,’ he told a startled, horrified Mrs Millar, who clearly didn’t see the funny side when he said it was Stephen’s little joke. Oops!

Mind you, the smile was back on Mum’s face many years later when in the same hospital my wife Sylvia gave birth first to Nicola on 30 December 1975, followed by Anthony on 11 January 1978, to make our life complete.

But before then, my newspaper adventure was really developing at the *Journal*, with mentor Maurice polishing the rough diamond in his charge.

I made good contacts around the Stretford and Urmston area. None more so than the young CID lads at the nearby nick, who became good drinking buddies. I’ll never forget one night before Christmas when they invited me to their police party at The Wishing Well Club in Swinton, where legendary comedian Bernard Manning was top of the bill. After a boozy night we got a taxi back to Urmston where I’d parked my sky-blue Ford Escort with a dent on the bonnet in the station’s car park behind the cop shop.

Well, the madness continued inside with the detectives letting off fire alarms in Urmston shopping centre in the early hours. We drank whisky, beer, anything alcoholic in

fact, and at 3am I felt I'd had enough and asked them to call me a taxi.

'Taxi?' one said. 'You've got your car outside. Drive that.' I just laughed and pointed out my distressed, alcohol-blasted body.

'Are you serious?' I answered. 'How can I drive home when I'm so pi**ed – I'll get done by the cops.'

Within minutes they had solved my predicament as they called for two Panda cars with flashing lights to escort me and my car back to Partington, with one at the front, the other at the rear. The journey through one eye was a success.

Yes, there were many, many lighter moments working on my first newspaper – and darker times, too.

I'll never forget 14 April 1970, when I caught the bus to Urmston only to be turned back at the office by editor Maurice. News had just come through of a major incident on the Manchester Ship Canal near my Partington home. Workers who had boarded a boat at Bobs Ferry – the ship canal crossing to Cadishead – had been engulfed by 60-foot flames in what became known as the Partington Ferry Disaster.

Seemingly, a tanker being loaded at the Shell Chemicals Partington basin had leaked fuel and chemicals flooded into the canal. The tide of death had floated down to the ferry crossing. It's understood that one passenger discarded a cigarette into the water and the explosion could be heard ten miles away, with nearby Lock Lane in Partington being evacuated.

I could only venture as far as the police cordon at the top of the path leading down to the ferry decking and I

waited all day for news of any victims. Tragically, there were six fatalities, including my mate from Partington, Brian Hillier. What a shock. My footballing pal burned to death and his body was recovered a week later. That was one difficult, tearful story to write.

Four years later another close Partington pal, Michael Waugh, was killed along with ten other soldiers when the IRA blew up a coach carrying army heroes back to camp in Catterick. The vehicle had only just left Manchester and was travelling to the top of the M62 in Yorkshire when the bomb on board detonated. Michael, God bless him, was just 22.