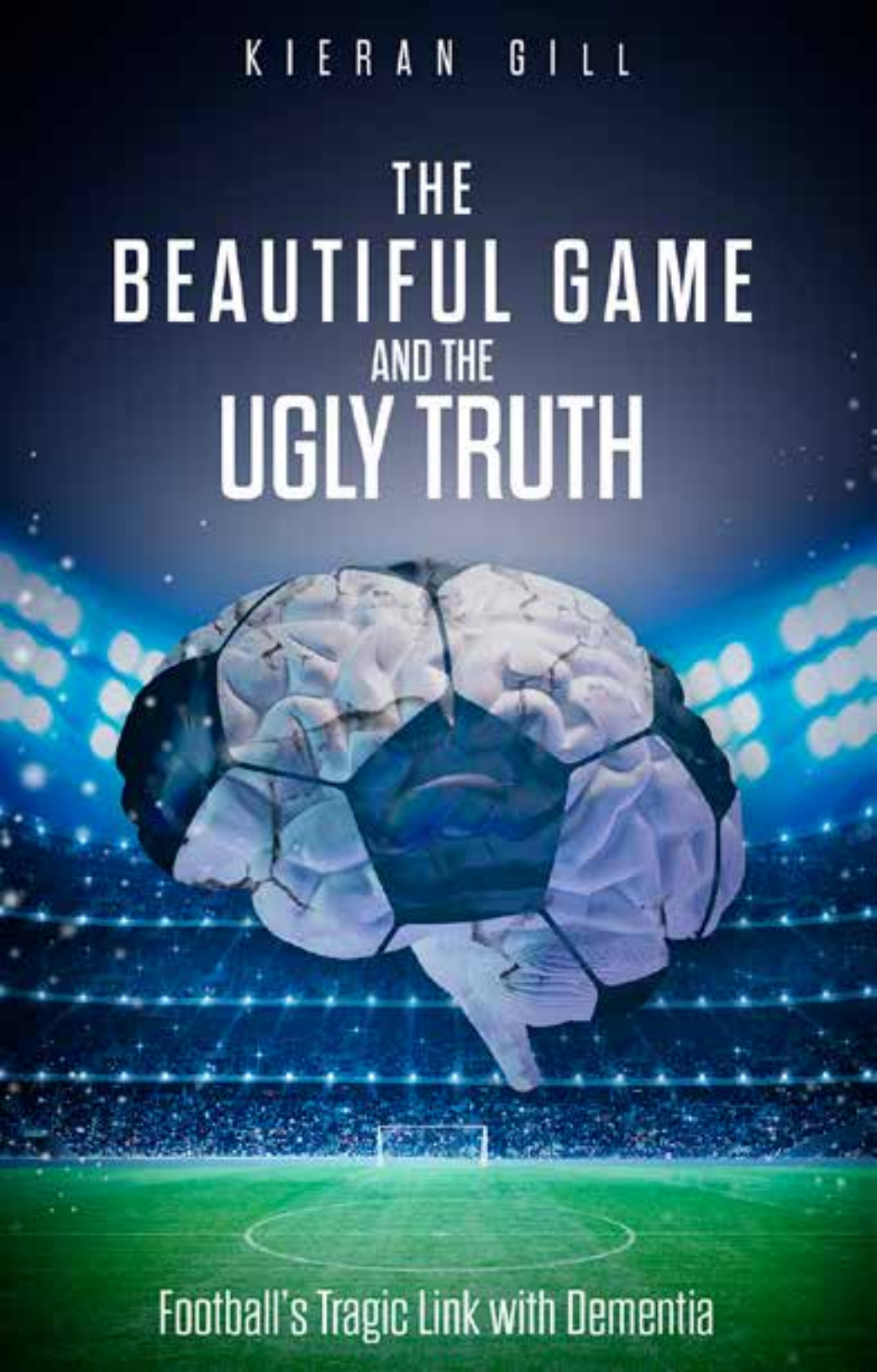
KIERAN GILL

THE BEAUTIFUL GAME AND THE UGLY TRUTH



Football's Tragic Link with Dementia

THE BEAUTIFUL GAME AND THE UGLY TRUTH

Football's Tragic Link with Dementia

Foreword by Chris Sutton

KIERAN GILL

pitch

Contents

1

A History of 'Punch-Drunk' Players

Football's custodians cannot say they weren't warned amid a century of cautionary tales

ON 4 August 1939, the former captain of Manchester United, Charlie Roberts, was sitting in a private room at Manchester Royal Infirmary. With him was a reporter from the *Daily Mirror*. 'They have found a growth at the back of my skull which has developed as a result of heading heavy balls so often over 20 years ago and are going to extract it,' said the 56-year-old retired centre-half. 'I have been almost like the living dead for the last two years, especially after my active life.' Charlie's chronic dizziness and headaches had alarmed specialists who said he needed surgery. 'When I was told I was to have an operation I refused point blank,' continued Charlie. 'But when I thought it over I decided that anything was better than going on as I have for the last two years.'

Three days after speaking to the *Mirror*, Charlie was dead. Those paying a penny for a copy of the next day's newspaper would read the ex-England international's parting words, spoken prior to him entering surgery. 'A month in here and a few weeks' holiday, then I will be able to go and see United play again.' He lived for football, then he died for it, his doctors said.

Cases could be made for Roy Keane, Bryan Robson and a few others as the club's greatest captain. Hardly anyone can say

they surpassed the achievements of Charlie, however. He is right up there in the pantheon of United greats, a leader of leaders and man with morals. Signed from Grimsby Town for £600 in 1904, he captained United to their maiden First Division titles in 1908 and 1911 and FA Cup glory in 1909. Yet away from the crunching tackles, terrific clearances and exhilarating evenings at Bank Street and then Old Trafford – that stadium switch coming midway through Charlie's time at the club – he was an equally powerful force off the pitch.

With United colleague Billy Meredith, he co-founded the players' union, known today as the Professional Footballers' Association. It followed a footballing tragedy when their team-mate Tommy Blackstock died during a reserve game against St Helens Recreation in the Manchester suburb of Clayton on 8 April 1907. Reports say the 25-year-old from Kirkcaldy headed the ball close to the halfway line, collapsed and never got back up. A sturdy Scottish defender whose desire to deny opposition strikers was so strong, it was written he would 'go at a stone wall if the stone wall seemed likely to score a goal'. Yet as touching as these tributes were to Tommy, hailing his fearlessness and dedication, the Blackstock family received nothing in compensation. That appalled Charlie and so he sprang into action, almost as quickly as he would to clear a cross.

At the Imperial Hotel in Manchester on 2 December 1907, Charlie chaired the union's first meeting. He complained about footballers dying and families left destitute, about the Football Association and their cap on wages. Although it cost him his England career – no caps followed after picking this fight with the FA – Charlie won in the end. Today's PFA exists, in no small part, thanks to this pioneer. The union celebrate that fact, too. In 2015 they spent £30,000 at auction to secure the shirt he wore in United's 1909 FA Cup Final win. That's £30,000 more than was spent on investigating football's link to dementia that

same year, and the year after, and the year after that. Research, which would finally provide answers, started in 2018 with the PFA funding it to the tune of £125,000. Good news, at last, though the game's custodians have long been accused of looking the other way when the warnings were there in black and white and in front of them.

Headaches have been making headlines for more than a century. There were red flags before Charlie Roberts and the seven-and-a-half-hour operation on his brain and many more raised after. Surveying a century of clippings from newspapers and magazines, sifting through papers provided by researchers, speaking to historians who specialise in the subject of neurology – you soon realise football's dark relationship with brain damage wasn't exactly hidden.

In the *Lincolnshire Echo* on 16 September 1903, for example, was a report about Sam Nicholls, the former West Bromwich Albion centre-forward who was in a serious condition at Queen's Hospital, Birmingham. 'He is suffering from an affection of the brain and this is the persistency with which he used to head the ball. Doctors say that the practice is fraught with considerable danger,' the newspaper said. Also reporting on the health of Sam, who scored in the 1892 FA Cup Final, the *Barnsley Chronicle* wrote, 'This is one of the great drawbacks of the association game, the practice being unquestionably dangerous.' In the *Northern Daily Telegraph* on 14 April 1910 was a story about a 16-year-old called Walter Truelove who played a match on the Saturday, complained of a headache on the Sunday then passed away on the Monday. 'Continually heading the ball whilst playing football would cause the condition,' read the report, mentioning he died with acute meningitis. 'A fall on his head would also do so.' And then there's the article in the *Burnley Express* on 28 February 1931 about a 24-year-old called Horace Harrison who headed for goal, staggered to the sideline and then

collapsed. He died, and a doctor told an inquest into his death that it is 'extremely dangerous to head a heavy wet ball' because it can have 'the effect of sandbagging'.

Just a few examples. It's easy to fall down a rabbit hole of research once you get going. Players have died on the pitch after freak accidents. John Thomson was the supremely talented 22-year-old Celtic goalkeeper kicked in the head by Rangers striker Sam English on 5 September 1931, dying later that same day. It occurred in front of 80,000 supporters at Ibrox and 40,000 crammed into the small Scottish town of Cardenden, Fife, for his funeral. His Celtic team-mates carried his coffin from his home on Balgreggie Road to Bowhill Cemetery. Hundreds climbed on to the roofs of houses for a better view, their caps removed from their heads and pressed against their chests as John passed by. Such fatal accidents aren't common in football, thankfully. Death by dementia is, however, and one headline of old is direct and to the point. 'Football's corridors awash with punch-drunk former players' it declares, with *The Guardian* likewise pondering 'punch-drunkenness' among footballers in a piece published on 28 November 1969.

The term 'punch-drunk' was coined in a paper published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1928 by an American pathologist called Dr Harrison Martland. It talked about prize fighters feeling the consequences of considerable head punishment and how boxers were also derided as 'cuckoo', 'goofy' and 'slap happy', among other crude terms. Champion boxer Del Fontaine – real name Raymond Henry Bousquet – was hanged on 29 October 1935, convicted of shooting and killing his 21-year-old girlfriend Hilda Meek in a jealous rage over a phone call about a late-night rendezvous with another man. Naturally the newspapers were all over this case, publishing the police statement taken at the scene of the crime in Kennington, south London. 'She has broken my heart and ruined my life,'

the attending officers were apparently told. 'She had her fortune told by a gypsy some time ago, who said she would be murdered in three years. I said, "My God, never," and to think I should be the one to murder her.'

His defence was described as one of the most unusual ever heard in the Old Bailey as it was claimed the Canadian had a 'confused brain' and was 'so punch-drunk as a result of his fights that he could not have known the nature of his act'. He had fought north of 100 fights in his career and taken some batterings. His last bout in Newcastle did not even last a round. 'Bousquet was knocked down three times,' read one report. 'The third time the back of his head struck the floor violently.' Witnesses were called to explain their experience of his 'punch-drunkenness' in court. Boxing manager David Edgar described it as a 'vacant look, far-away thoughts, and general unbalance'. Welterweight world champion Ted 'Kid' Lewis said he had seen this affliction in plenty of his peers, adding the accused had endured 'more punishment' than anyone else he had ever seen.

Though alarm bells were ringing about how regularly this boxer's bell had been rung, the insanity defence didn't wash with the jury. They took only half an hour in their deliberations to find him guilty of murder and Del Fontaine was duly sentenced to death at Wandsworth Prison. A petition containing more than 20,000 signatures was presented to the Home Office three days before his hanging, but it was dismissed. There would be no reprieve; no saving this former fighter from the rope and scaffold. 'They have hanged an insane man,' said the anti-capital punishment activist Violet Van der Elst, leading a protest on the morning of his passing outside Wandsworth.

It was two years after the conclusion of the Del Fontaine case that the less derisive term 'dementia pugilistica' was introduced to replace 'punchy' and those other primitive expressions – some of which were made in reference to boxers in Martin Scorsese's

1980 film *Raging Bull*, starring Robert De Niro as the troubled Jake LaMotta. Today it's more commonly known as Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, or CTE. Currently it is a disease which can only be diagnosed after death, by dissecting the brain and analysing what lies beneath the surface. The symptoms in those suspected of living with the condition vary. It isn't simply forgetfulness. It's fits of rage. It's paranoia. It's depression and suicidal thoughts. It's piercing headaches and Parkinsonism. It's dementia, and it's been reported in footballers, boxers, American footballers, rugby players, even a 33-year-old circus clown who was repeatedly fired out of a cannon. Those who share a history of blows to the head, in other words, both concussive and subconcussive.

Some in the scientific community warn it is a condition still in its infancy, with lots to learn about who gets it, who doesn't and why. 'Contrary to common perception,' explained an editorial in *The Lancet* in 2019, 'the clinical syndrome of CTE has not yet been fully defined, its prevalence is unknown, and the neuropathological diagnostic criteria are no more than preliminary.' Others say there is more than enough evidence of its presence in contact sports.

Whether 'punch-drunk' or 'dementia pugilistica' or CTE, there is proof of this affliction causing concern over the last century. Not only among those who throw and take punches for a living but those who would put on a pair of boots and pull up their socks for our entertainment each Saturday. 'You don't have to go into the boxing ring and get one on the point for the K.O. to become punch-drunk,' readers of the *Gloucester Citizen* were told on 9 November 1944. 'You may quite as easily achieve this undesirable condition at football.'

In the season before the 1966 World Cup, supporters could pick up a copy of *Soccer Review*. Over the next decade this journal of the Football League would become a big hit. At its peak it's

said to have enjoyed a circulation of 350,000 and early editions indicate this magazine was trying to highlight a growing issue in the game. One copy from November 1965 carries a 'GIVES EM HEADACHES' headline on its front cover. Former Leeds United footballer-turned-journalist Tom Holley is the author. 'As an old centre-half in league soccer,' he writes, 'I can simply report that I have suffered countless headaches from head work, let alone concussion. Most players have. And still do, but how many punch-drunk footballers have been reported?'

In October 1966, the same magazine, now renamed *Football League Review*, carries a column by Harry Brown with the headline 'DANGER IN HEADING THE BALL?' The write-up explains how boxing is not the only sport in which 'punch-drunks' can be found. 'Time and again after a game I suffer from headaches, obviously from all the heading I do,' says Derek Dougan, the Leicester City forward. 'I never had headaches before I started playing, and I've never really got rid of them,' adds Tom Holley. Apparently Tommy Lawton – described by his England colleague Sir Stanley Matthews as the 'greatest header of the ball I ever saw' – suffered from the same problem, while Everton goal machine Dixie Dean always carried aspirins with him. An unnamed club medical officer is unsure whether heading the ball is to blame but he does say, 'Continual jarring of the brain tissue could and does affect players sometimes.'

And there you have it. Another warning, scarcely two months after England's greatest achievement in football. Harry concludes his column by pondering why more isn't being done in light of these 'punch-drunks' in professional football. 'Couldn't club doctors get together and find out just what there is in it?' It is a column which would not look out of place in newspapers today, asking pertinent questions and wishing for answers. Harry doesn't mention dementia but it is clear he is making a connection between football and traumatic brain injury and

calling for consideration. It is crying out for research, much like an article which appeared in the *Sunday Times* on 3 November 1974 under the headline 'Head Damage'. It was about a group of footballers whose deaths had been linked to the game. 'The figures represent an extreme minority of the millions who play football,' *Times* readers were told. 'But death from heading happens. Why? Medical research into heading is as thin as bone china.'

Perhaps the most extraordinary article I've encountered is from 1984 and entitled 'How Dangerous Is Heading?' It is remarkable because it is proof that world governing body FIFA have known about a potential problem for decades. We know this because the article was published in *FIFA Magazine*, their own publication. It raises the possibility of CTE. It insists the only immediate protection would be to decrease heading. It warns footballers are becoming concussed in training without realising it. It highlights players whose deaths were potentially provoked by football. It details a 1925 incident in which a 20-year-old developed a headache and dizziness during a game before losing consciousness and dying from 'subdural hematoma' – a bleed on the brain. 'The sports medicine community has not devoted enough attention to this important problem of possible brain damage,' concludes the article, authored by Vojin Smodlaka. 'When an athlete is knocked down and is unconscious for several seconds during a competition, in many cases he or she will be allowed to immediately continue the game – but if an athlete sustains a sprain or strain, he or she will stop. The sports community must take brain concussions more seriously.'

Chris Sutton started his professional career with Norwich City in 1991, seven years after this piece was published. 'It's astonishing,' he says. 'A major problem was flagged in their own magazine and yet what was done to protect players like me? I headed the ball day in, day out. We all did. And yet here, in black

and white and in 1984, the dangers were being highlighted. It makes me wonder how many people from my generation will end up suffering, and how many of those were preventable, had action been taken. I've got a lump in my throat thinking about that.'

In response to the discovery of this article, the governing body defended their track record. 'FIFA takes its responsibility in relation to the topic of brain injuries very seriously as protecting the health of players is – and will remain – a top priority in developing the game,' said a spokesperson.

Nice words, but then this write-up was presented to FIFA's medical committee at a meeting in Zurich on 26 October 1984. Maybe they're dedicating more time to this problem today, now that it's been confirmed footballers carry a heightened risk of dementia compared to the general population. As the authorities in charge of the global game, though, it was the warning which appeared in their own publication in 1984 which players like Chris wishes FIFA had acted upon.

It was not only in newspapers and magazines that red flags were raised about the rising risk of brain damage. They also appeared in medical journals and the like, both home and abroad. In 1933, the *National Collegiate Athletic Association medical handbook for schools and colleges* warned that 'concussion of the brain' and 'fracture of the skull' are not only terms reserved for car accidents. They warrant special attention in sport, too. 'The seriousness of these injuries is often overlooked,' it warned, while insisting concussion should be defined as 'bruising of brain tissues' to underline its severity. This handbook was to be used by the doctors, coaches and trainers of athletic squads to provide the best care possible or, as the NCAA put it, prove 'helpful in the administration of their responsibility'. Decades later this document would crop up as American football was gripped by accusations that those in charge shirked this responsibility.

'There is definitely a condition described as "punch-drunk",' the handbook added.

In 1962, an article appeared in the German medical journal *Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift* with the title 'Über Verletzungen des Nervensystems beim Fußballspiel', translated as 'Injuries to the Nervous System when playing Soccer'. That study was highlighted at a 1968 conference in the United States with attendees hearing there was an 'increasing number of neurologic injuries from soccer due to propelling the ball with the head'. In 1972, an article appeared in the *British Medical Journal* called 'Footballer's Migraine', a term which players plagued by headaches would use among themselves in changing rooms. In 1980, another *BMJ* article called 'Serious Head Injury in Sport' was published, discussing cumulative damage in football and emphasising that it isn't only boxers who should be concerned about their careers.

In 1995, an article appeared in the *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* called 'Are Professional Footballers at Risk of Developing Dementia?' It was prompted by the death of Tottenham Hotspur legend Danny Blanchflower at the age of 67. 'Preventative action could be taken by football's governing bodies to reduce the risk of brain damage as a result of head injury and subsequent development of dementia,' it summarised.

Norman Giller is the former Fleet Street sportswriter and author of more than 100 books. His 97th was *Danny Blanchflower: This WAS His Life*. For each copy sold, £5 went to the Tottenham Tribute Trust, the charity supporting former footballers in need, such as those struggling with the same condition which clouded Danny's mind. Norman recalls the time he went to interview the man who did the double with Tottenham in 1961, hoping for a nice, nostalgic, 30-year anniversary piece for the *Daily Express*. 'Danny and I had known each other well for years, but when I sat him down he did not know me from Adam, or Eve,

for that matter,' he says. 'Worse still, he could not remember a thing about the First Division and FA Cup triumph or any of his team-mates. The most talkative and intelligent footballer I had ever known just looked at me blankly, his memory wiped clean. It was heartbreaking to see the game's great visionary with no knowledge of what he had achieved. Two years later he passed on at 67, unaware that he had been a football icon.'

This century of cautionary tales shows that dementia in football is by no means a new phenomenon, though it is now a much more recognised problem. It's in the mainstream. It crops up in conversation at the pub. It's circulated by campaigners on social media. It features on the back pages of newspapers who fight for justice. On 22 September 2013, led by Sam Peters, the *Mail on Sunday* launched a campaign after a series of high-profile concussion cases in rugby union. On 31 May 2016, led by Jeremy Wilson, the *Daily Telegraph* launched a campaign calling for sport to address its 'scandalous' neglect of research into dementia. On 17 November 2020, led by Mike Keegan, the *Daily Mail* launched its 'Enough is Enough' campaign, a powerful back page in black and white showing 28 former footballers diagnosed with dementia.

Clubs now treat this topic with the sensitivity it deserves. On 12 August 1995, at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association in New York, attendees heard how a scientific survey had found footballers who frequently headed the ball scored significantly lower in IQ tests. The findings were widely reported and made their way to England. *The Times* contacted the authorities for comment, with the FA blaming it on 'years gone by, when the ball was made of leather, absorbed rain and became twice as heavy' in a statement. The newspaper also approached clubs. 'I don't think heading the ball has got anything to do with it,' quipped a spokesperson from an unnamed Premier League side. 'Footballers are stupid enough, anyway.'

Sometimes the families of former footballers can grow frustrated. Sometimes they feel the discussion can disappear and coverage wane. Then a familiar pattern will play out. A former player will have his condition made public and with that, dementia in football is a feature on the six o'clock news all over again. Denis Law, the former Manchester United man and only Scottish footballer to have won the Ballon d'Or, announced his diagnosis on 19 August 2021. Known previously as 'The King', 'The Lawman' and 'Denis the Menace' in his playing days, he became a broadcaster after hanging up his boots, renowned for his humour. That came across in his announcement. 'The time has come to tackle this head on, excuse the pun,' said the Scot too talented for only one nickname. Two days later, former Liverpool favourite Terry McDermott announced he had dementia, too. 'I'm not frightened of taking it on,' Terry said in his statement, 'and also, as we've seen, there are a lot of former players in a worse state than me.' Their reveals started up the conversation all over again – the one about how safe it is to play the world's most popular sport and what should be done. They were the latest warnings in a long history of them.