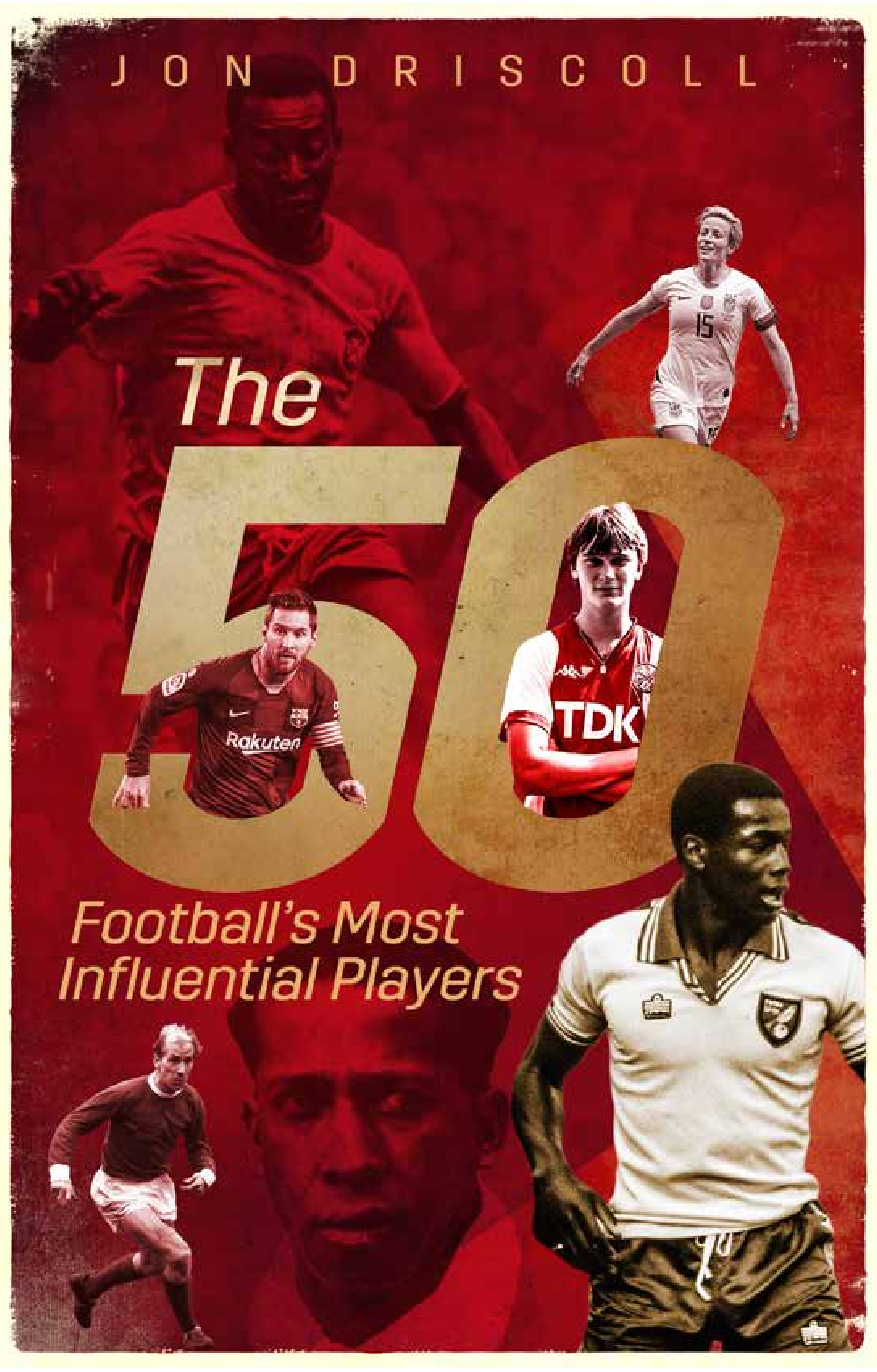
JON DRISCOLL

The 50

Football's Most Influential Players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Preface

I MUST begin by thanking Neil MacGregor of the British Museum for his inspirational *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. It is a monumental work, but he makes one schoolboy error. Obviously, the best object invented by humans is the football, at least since the 'Olduvai stone chopping tool' allowed us to crack open bones and suck out the protein-rich marrow, but somehow it doesn't make it into MacGregor's 658-page masterpiece. The nearest thing is the 'ceremonial ballgame belt' – believed to be from Mexico, from between AD 100 and 500. The one in the British Museum was probably used for the pre-match build-up – like the tracksuits players wear for the Champions League music. Later pictures show the players wearing something similar to reinforced pink Y-fronts, as they try to land a rubber ball in their opponents' court, using only their buttocks, forearms and hips. Occasionally, the losers would be killed. Today, we have social media.

Despite his mistake, MacGregor does understand the importance of sport to humans: 'One of the striking characteristics of organised games throughout history is their capacity to transcend cultural differences, social divisions and even political unrest. Straddling the boundary between the sacred and the profane, they can be great social unifiers and dividers. There are few other things we care about so much in our society today.' So why did he prefer the Statue of Ramesses II to Dixie Dean's leather-panelled casey?

The history of football has been told through results, events, coaches and tactics, but it is a game made by players, and I wanted the players to tell the story. Some of *The Fifty* changed the world: without Charles Alcock football would be a different game, and Jean-Marc Bosman should be toasted by every super-rich modern star. Some left a stamp greater than their contribution on the pitch: Johan Cruyff was the first name on my team sheet. The three times European Player of the Year became a great coach and advocate for a style of football that dominates the top level of the sport still, after his death. I almost made the mistake of regarding Pelé as simply a great footballer until I re-read his autobiography and realised the importance of a black man being the greatest game's greatest star before Nelson Mandela was sent to prison or Martin Luther King made his 'I Have a Dream Speech'.

Lily Parr was only one of Dick, Kerr's Ladies, who filled football grounds until the women's game was deliberately crushed by the FA, but I chose her not only because she was paid in Woodbine cigarettes but because she was an openly gay footballer decades before any male player dared to come out. Walter Tull was a war hero who was racially abused by football fans; over a century later, Raheem Sterling is fighting the same fight.

Some of the players were so good they wrote their own page in history: Matthews, Maradona and Messi set new standards. You will have to read Jimmy Hill's chapter to decide whether I put him in just for laughs.

The list isn't perfect; it was like completing a moving puzzle. The Brits dominate early on, before I spread my gaze wider. It was painful to leave out some of the best-ever footballers, and I'm sorry if I missed your favourite player.

1

Charles Alcock

HUMANS HAVE kicked balls at or through targets for thousands of years, but it took the enthusiasm of the Victorian Brits for rules-based sport to turn football into a game ready to conquer the world. As America and Australia demonstrate, it was by no means inevitable that the beautiful round-ball game known now as football (or soccer, if you prefer) would come to bestride the globe. That is where Charles Alcock comes in.

There is a reference to a game in which participants invade their opponents' territory with a ball, played in Derby in AD 217. It was locals versus occupying Romans, although we don't know the score, or the rules. We do know that versions of football survived, always under threat of being banned by disgruntled authority.

The trouble was that it was a deadly business. Henry de Ellington was perhaps the first documented football fatality in 1280. This is what we know: 'Henry, son of William de Ellington, while playing at ball at Ulkham on Trinity Sunday with David le Keu and many others, ran against David and received an accident wound from David's knife of which he died on the following Friday. They were both running to the ball, and ran against each other, and the knife hanging from

David's belt stuck out so that the point sheath struck in Henry's belly, and the handle against David's belly. Henry was wounded right through the sheaf and died by misadventure.'

In 1321 William de Spalding successfully persuaded the Pope to give him indemnity for killing his friend, also called William, in a football match. There were frequent attempts to ban the games, especially during times of war. In 1531 Henry VIII, no less, got in on the act:

'Foot balle is nothing but beastly fury and extreme violence whereof proceedth hurte and consequently rancour and malice do remayne with thym that be wounded, wherefore it is to be put to perpetual silence.'

Despite such threats, folk football outlived the Tudors, and in 1660 Francis Willughby chronicled it in his *Book of Games*: 'They blow a strong bladder and tie the neck of it as fast as they can, and then put it into the skin of a buls cod and sow it fast in. They play in a long street, or a close that has a gate at either end. The gates are called gaols. The ball is thrown up in the middle between the gaols, the players being equally divided according to their strength and nimbleness.

'Plaiers must kick the ball towards the gaols, and they that can strike the ball thorough their enemies gaol first win. They usually leave some of their best plaiers to gard the gaol while the rest follow the ball. They often breake one another's shins when two meete and strike both together against the ball, and therefore there is a law that they must not strike higher than the ball.'

Shrove Tuesday, an apprentices' holiday, became a traditional football day, but the drowning of a player in the River Derwent in 1796 highlighted a problem: it was too dangerous. As the industrial revolution gathered pace and people started to work in factories, their bosses objected to broken bones, and as glass became affordable, householders objected to broken windows. The new middle classes drove football to the margins of society.

One surviving hotbed was the English public school system. ‘Flannelled fools at the wicket and muddied oafs at the goal,’ was how the great poet and novelist Rudyard Kipling described his sporting contemporaries. Did the common folk have the public schools to thank for codifying and civilising the game? In his excellent history of the formation of British football, *Beastly Fury,* Richard Sanders rejects that: ‘Public schools were a prison from which football would have to escape before it could be reborn.’

The educational institutions of the British Empire were strange places, and Sanders argues the stubborn adherence to each school’s unique version of the game, coupled with toxic snobbery, hampered the coordination and consolidation of rules. For football to have a future in Victorian Britain and beyond, it needed laws that encouraged players who *did* mind if they broke a bone.

At Cambridge University in 1848, old boys of various public schools tried to write a compromise rulebook. Dedicated football clubs were springing up around the country, most notably Sheffield FC, which also produced a set of rules in 1858. It was a painful process and would ultimately lead to a split: one code became modern football; the other remained a more violent game, in which the ball could be carried, and attackers caught in front of it would be offside. Rugby school became the rallying point for this code.

The argument was unresolved when the Football Association was formed in 1863, in a series of meetings at the Freemasons Tavern in London. Francis Campbell of Blackheath said if they banned the practice of hacking an opponent’s legs, he would be ‘bound to bring over a lot of Frenchmen who would beat you with a week’s practice’.

At first the FA struggled to assert itself on the country’s football clubs and schools. Its rules were an unloved hybrid that resembled modern rugby as much as football. Then, thankfully, Charles Alcock enters the story.

Charles and his brother John were born in Sunderland but brought up in Chingford, Essex, and went to Harrow School, where they were keen footballers. They set up Forest FC, which later became the famous Wanderers FC. John was the administrator – he was at the founding meetings of the FA in 1863 – and Charles the acclaimed player. Charles's friend W.G. Grace, the best cricketer and most famous sportsman of the day, wrote, 'The way Alcock used to knock over a fellow when he was trying to pass him I shall never forget. Alcock made Catherine-wheels of those fellows.' Alcock was around 6ft tall and a burly 13 and a half stone, large for his day but dwarfed by Grace.

Charles brought his playing reputation and diplomatic skills to the thorny issue of blending existing laws from the FA, Sheffield FC and the public schools to create a version of the game that could thrive. The rugby men split and loyalty to the Football Association is why the game was also referred to as 'soccer'; the word is not the Americanism often assumed.

Alcock's influence didn't end there. He became FA Secretary while still Wanderers' star player and he was a prolific journalist with his *Football Annual*, *Football* and *Cricket* publications. It was at a meeting in his office at the *Sportsman* that he persuaded the FA to hold a challenge cup competition, for which all clubs in the country would be invited to compete. As an ex-Harrow man, he had been inspired by his school's Cock House competition, although some speculation suggests his friend Grace might have shared some part in the germination of the idea.

The first games kicked off in November 1871 and Jarvis Kenrick of Clapham Rovers scored the first goal against Upton Park FC. Barnes beat a Civil Service team that had only eight players. Wanderers didn't enter until the second round, when they beat Clapham 1-0. Their next two games finished 0-0 and they progressed each time because of the other club's withdrawal.

So Alcock led out Wanderers in the first FA Cup Final at The Oval, home of Surrey County Cricket Club, of which he was secretary from that year until 1907. Their opponents were Chatham-based military side Royal Engineers, who had the considerable advantage of regular training sessions, and were prepared to offer positions to servicemen based on their sporting ability – essentially, the first semi-professional club!

The wholly amateur Wanderers won, helped by a broken collarbone suffered by Royal Engineers' Edmund Creswell, who stayed on the pitch but contributed little. Morton Betts scored after 15 minutes and, despite Wanderers having eight forwards and the engineers seven, that was the only goal.

Wanderers won five of the first seven FA Cup finals, although Alcock only played in the first. In 1873 they were joined by Arthur Kinnaird, who won three cup finals with Wanderers and two with Old Etonians. Kinnaird was a founding director of Barclays Bank and FA president for 33 years. In Wanderers' 1877 victory over Oxford University, Kinnaird was the goalkeeper and carried the ball over the line for Oxford's goal. He later persuaded his fellow FA committee men to scrub it from the records, and it stayed that way for over a century.

Alcock, meanwhile, invented international football, of a sort. He set up five fixtures between England and Scotland and advertised for players in the *Glasgow Herald*. The Scotland team that took the pitch was controversial because it contained many London-based players such as Kinnaird, with others reluctant to travel south, possibly because of the different laws. Alcock persisted and Queen's Park – Glasgow's premier club – took up his challenge to play by Association rules. The match was played in Partick, Glasgow, in November 1872 and is now recognised by FIFA as the first international.

Alcock was injured but he picked the team. The English were bigger and stronger but the club-mates who made up the Scotland side were better coordinated and passed more effectively. The match finished goalless, but it was rapturously received by spectators and press alike. The teams met again at The Oval the following March. Queen's Park brought only seven players and recruited London-based Scots, including Kinnaird. England won 4-2. Alcock was injured again and was listed as one of the two umpires. He missed out again as Scotland won in Glasgow in 1874 but finally won his only official cap at The Oval in 1875 and scored in a 2-2 draw, at the age of 32.

This giant of Victorian sport was more than just a footballer. His energy and diplomacy were vital in arranging cricket's first Test match to be staged in England. It was played at The Oval and his friend Grace dominated with a century, as England beat Australia. We will hear more from Alcock, the administrator, shortly but it is worth one more note – he also captained the France cricket team against Germany in Hamburg.