

# The Glovesmen of Goodison

Paul Owens



A History of  
Everton's  
Goalkeepers

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Foreword by Alan Kelly



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## Jordan Pickford – England's Number One

Bold. Brash. Brave. Bonkers. Brilliant. Manic. Magnificent. Malevolent. Terrific. Terrible. T-rex arms. It is difficult to think of a goalkeeper in the history of British football performing at the top of his game who has spawned a greater lexicon of antonyms or been as heavily criticised by the national media as Everton and England's mercurial stopper **Jordan Pickford**.

Consistently brilliant for club and country for well over half a decade, Pickford appeared in two World Cups and two European Championship finals before turning 31 years old – the age, in many experts' eyes, when goalkeepers begin to reach the peak of their powers. In all four of those competitions, the ex-Sunderland man's performances were of the very highest standard, and in three of them, including in the Euro 2020 Final against Italy at Wembley, he made stupendous saves from the penalty spot as Gareth Southgate's team came tantalisingly close to winning the country's first piece of senior silverware in the men's game since 1966.

However, despite Pickford's heroics, ahead of the 2024 Euros in Germany, the narrative somehow still prevailed that he was the weakest link in the England team, that his perceived arrogance and tendency to get emotionally involved with the crowd would be the difference between winning and losing matches at the business end of a major tournament – that there were better options out there available to Southgate, including goalkeepers who were not playing first-team football for their club sides. All of it was nonsense.

In an attempt to prove that the Everton man was a loose cannon incapable of handling the pressure, his critics – many

of whom were ex-Liverpool players working for various newspapers and the major TV outlets – would choose to ignore the world-class saves he made week in, week out for his club and the ridiculously brilliant performances he put in to preserve Everton's top-flight status almost single-handedly for three seasons in a row between 2022 and 2024. Instead, they preferred to constantly point to a freak goal he conceded in the dying moments of a Merseyside derby in 2018 and a reckless yet unintended collision with Liverpool skipper Virgil van Dijk at Goodison Park two years later. At times, the stinging abuse coming Pickford's way, especially after the incident with Van Dijk, would become not only extremely personal but unacceptably toxic, and it is testament to his incredible strength of character and mental toughness that he has managed not to let it affect his performances or halt his progress in becoming the finest British keeper of his generation.

Pickford ended the 2024 European Championship finals with the second-highest save percentage of any goalkeeper to have played in a Euros finals tournament and made several excellent reflex saves in the final against Spain before being beaten by Mikel Oyarzabal's close-range strike with only minutes remaining. Of course, there were still those in the media who found the time to criticise him, firstly for celebrating a save late on in the last-16 tie against Slovakia that prevented the game from going to penalties and then for sliding on his knees after Ollie Watkins's last-minute winner against the Netherlands in the semi-final.

In 1996, the great Neville Southall gave an interview to *Goal* magazine, in which the Welshman addressed both the issue of him being dubbed eccentric by the press and his perceived frostiness to many of those working in the media. Southall stated, 'If you want to do something different from how they think things should be done, then you're eccentric, aren't you? If you go along with everyone else, you become a robot. You can't win so you may as well do what you want to do. I'm my own man. If you don't like it, then too bad. It's the only way you can live your life. I just do what I want and if they don't like it, tough.' Almost 30 years later, the same lines may just as well have been uttered by arguably Everton's second-greatest goalkeeper of the postwar era.

One man who has had Pickford's back covered throughout his career to date is goalkeeping coach and mentor Alan Kelly, who knew his protégé was destined for great things after seeing him play as a raw 20-year-old on loan at Carlisle United from Sunderland in 2014, in a game which saw Pickford concede six goals against Kelly's Preston North End. When I spoke to Kelly, he explained what he saw in the young goalkeeper that day, 'After the game, I walked over to my manager Simon Grayson and said, "That's the one for me. That's who we need going forward." Simon looked at me as though I was daft as Jordan had just let six in but I told him, "That's definitely the one we want."

'After a year on loan at Bradford City, Jordan came to us on loan about a week before the start of the 2015/16 season. Straight away, he was fantastic. You talk to any Preston North End fan from that era and they will tell you that they would struggle to think of a better goalkeeper. At one point he kept seven clean sheets on the bounce. We went to Burnley, who were flying at the time, and won 2-0 and he made two outstanding saves in that game. He was an unbelievable shot stopper; he was coming for crosses, he was totally dominating his area and his distribution was at a level that nobody had ever seen before. Karl Robinson, who was managing MK Dons, couldn't believe it when Jordan kept coming for crosses against his team. Their plan had been to isolate our young keeper and put him under pressure, but Jordan caught 12 and punched three of the total crosses in that game and I remember Karl turning round and saying to me, "Who gave me that dud information about your keeper?!"

'Jordan also made his England under-21s debut that season against the USA at Deepdale. Undoubtedly, he saw his time at Preston as his audition for the Premier League and not long after returning to Sunderland forced his way into the first team. He hasn't looked back since. I knew even back then that he would end up playing for England.

'He has always had a real mental toughness about him and never been afraid to put himself out in front of new team-mates and new supporters. He has always backed himself. That was evident in all the loan moves he undertook as a teenager and in his early 20s – Darlington, Alfreton Town, Burton Albion, Carlisle,

Bradford City and Preston. To walk into a dressing room full of people you don't know shows that you have to have a belief in your talent, a resilience in your character and an ability to show your new team-mates that these new surroundings will hold no barrier to your performances. People look at the goalkeeper and think you are alone but Jordan prides himself on being a team player, which was evident when Frank Lampard gave him the captain's armband at Everton. That was a statement of what Jordan is like behind the scenes – a great lad, a good team-mate and a leader. And that is the behind-the-scenes person that people don't always see.

'For me, that person hasn't changed. From being at Preston in 2015 to seeing him at Everton in 2024, he has remained grounded because that is his character. Yes, people see the frustration at times but that is only because he wants better. Surely that is something that you want from all your players on the pitch – you want them to strive to be better, to improve performances and to climb the league ladder. The day you don't want to do that for yourself and the team is the day that your standards will start to slip and the time to pack it all in.'

Having been shortlisted for the PFA Young Player of the Year award in 2017 (at the time of writing, a trophy that no goalkeeper has ever won) after his maiden campaign as a Premier League goalkeeper, Pickford, voted England under-21s' player of the year after some outstanding performances in the UEFA European Under-21 Championship finals that summer, moved to Goodison Park in June 2017 for an initial payment of £25m (plus an extra £5m in add-ons), which made him the third most expensive goalkeeper in world football at the time, after Gianluigi Buffon and Ederson. On signing for the club, Pickford told the BBC Sport website, 'Last season was my first in the Premier League so to get this opportunity with Everton now, to be able to go forward with my career and show everyone what I can do, is unbelievable. This is an exciting time for the club and for me, too, with the ambition being shown. I just want to be the best I can be to help.'

Over the last near-decade, he has done far more than merely help out. In a troubled and turbulent period in Everton's history, which saw Pickford play under eight different 'permanent' managers (and two caretaker bosses) in his first eight years on

Merseyside, the club docked ten points for breaching financial fair play rules and the team embroiled in relegation battle after relegation battle, he has done more than anyone to keep Everton in the top flight of English football. Pulling off big saves at big moments in big games would become the norm for the Washington-born stopper.

According to Kelly, reunited with Pickford just five months into his Everton career, following the sacking of Ronald Koeman and his backroom staff after an awful start to the 2017/18 campaign, 'I have never seen a goalkeeper receive as much stick as Jordan has over the years. Because of his character – and the fact that he likes to interact with the fans as his way of "staying in the game and focused" when dealing with pressurised situations – and because he has performed at such a consistently high level for such a long time, he has often got it in the neck for his actions on the pitch, not only when things have gone wrong and he has conceded goals, but also for celebrating saves, which is absolutely bonkers. His Premier League save of the season against Chelsea at Goodison in 2022 is a prime example: he makes a miraculous save, celebrates with the Everton fans and then quickly refocuses to make another brilliant point-blank save from the resulting corner from Antonio Rüdiger.

'I think when you break down what many of those who have criticised him have had to say, then it is pretty obvious that they haven't really seen him play. He has been brilliant for a long, long time now and it has been the greatest of privileges for me to work with him – both at Preston when he was just 21 years old and then at Everton between 2017 and 2024 after David Unsworth brought me to the club. The negative noise surrounding Jordan has been ridiculous because, in my opinion, he is a modern-day Everton legend.'

It is an opinion shared by many Evertonians, including the media trio David Prentice, Alan Myers and Phil McNulty. According to Prentice, a lifelong Evertonian, the former sports editor at the *Liverpool Echo* and the Toffees' communications manager since 2022, 'We would have gone down at least twice in recent seasons without him. His performance against Chelsea towards the end of the 2021/22 campaign was one of the great



Everton goalkeeping performances and it really frustrates me when I hear people who obviously never watch Everton play say, "He is OK for England but not for his club." He has been so good and so consistent for so long, and is very much a modern goalkeeper in terms of how good he is with his feet to spark attacks. I absolutely love the guy and think we are very lucky to have him.'

Sky Sports News' Alan Myers, Everton's head of media between 1996 and 2001, believes that there are similarities to be made between Pickford and Neville Southall, 'People may shudder a little at the comparison but over the years both Neville and Jordan have made big saves that have won us games. That's what makes them great. Along with Nigel Martyn, Jordan is the closest we have seen at Everton to Neville in terms of consistency but away from the club he doesn't get anywhere near the credit that he deserves.'

Phil McNulty, BBC Sport's chief football writer, is another who believes that Pickford deserves to be talked about in the same breath as Southall, 'All Everton fans will know how good he is and the debt that the club owes to him for keeping them in the Premier League. He is a model professional who consistently makes match-winning and match-saving stops. He is still out there, still wired, but not to the extent that he was and, anyway, wouldn't it be dull if everyone was the same? In my opinion, only Neville Southall sits above him in the Goodison Park goalkeeping pecking order. He makes a compelling case to sit alongside Gordon West, who won two titles and an FA Cup in his Everton career. Jordan Pickford may not have the medals to show for his efforts but his honours list is keeping Everton in the Premier League on at least two occasions with consistently brilliant performances.'

In Chapter 13, Jordan Pickford's excellent Everton career and brilliant performances at club and international level are chronicled and analysed in great detail. However, before we get there, let's go back to the very start, to a time before Goodison Park even existed, and commence a journey that pays tribute to every player to have stood between the posts for the club, starting with banker George Bargery, who first lined up in the Everton goal almost 150 years ago.

To aid with the navigation, the name of every 'regular' goalkeeper who made at least one appearance for Everton has been emboldened here, whereas the names of utility players who played the odd game in goal, outfielders who acted as emergency keepers (after an in-game injury or a sending-off) and goalkeepers who failed to make a first-team appearance have not.