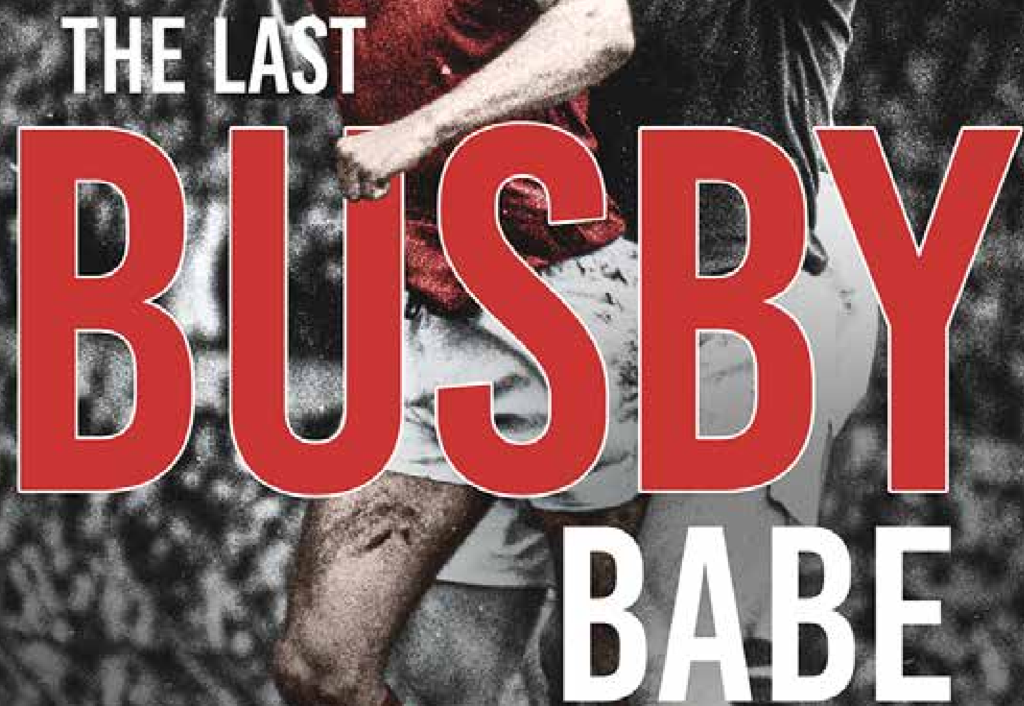
# THE LAST BUSBY BABE



THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

## SAMMY McILROY MBE

WITH WAYNE BARTON

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# 1

I WAS eight or nine when football really began to get a grip of me. I was a schoolboy at Mersey Street Primary School, right across the road from my house on Severn Street in east Belfast. I think an obsession with football was the case for every lad my age, especially where we lived, just down the road from the Cregagh estate. That was where the Best family lived. We knew all about George, the boy of the family, who had gone over to England to play for Manchester United. He'd quickly become one of their best players and he was still a teenager. If you had any interest in football and you lived in my area, George Best was the name on everyone's lips. In these days, before every house was fortunate enough to have a television – and I grew up in one which wasn't – then you'd get your information from the radio, newspaper, and word of mouth. And hearing what one of the boys from our neighbourhood was doing across the water for one of the biggest clubs in football was the kind of thing that made every boy want to get a football and go out on to the field. Maybe we could be next.

When you are so young, you dream, without being conscious of the reality. The dreams happen away from the pitch. When you're on it you're learning to play and you're just loving the fun of it. I was in the school team and I was captain of it at nine. We won everything.

Any competition we entered we won, and usually convincingly so. We felt the part in our Newcastle United strip of black and white stripes, black shorts and hooped socks. When you're savouring the success you start to dream that one day your school trophy might be the FA Cup. Maybe your mates will be in the team with you? Sammy Scott was a mate in the school team who lived around the corner from me. He was born on the same day as me. He always wanted to be a footballer too. Eddie Martin was our goalkeeper. He eventually went to Notts County for a trial.

If you came from where we came from it didn't feel as though you had much of a chance of anything in life other than what everybody else did. George changed that. He put a spotlight on Belfast. There was an expectation that the area might develop footballers. The most well-known face to impress in the region was Bob Bishop. He was the man who sent George to United. So if you had the slightest indication that Bob might be at a game – and he wasn't hard to spot – then you'd be trying even harder to impress. The fact was, if you were any good then the chances were Bob knew all about you anyway. He was such a good judge that it wouldn't have mattered if you'd starred or underperformed on the big occasion.

I didn't know until later that he'd been watching me since I was nine. I didn't know who he was when I met him. But I quickly became aware of this man stood on the sideline every time I played a game on a Saturday morning at North Road. Cap, overcoat, boots and a cigarette hanging out the corner of his mouth. There he was, every game I played. You might think that I'm going to explain how he watched me for years. But after maybe four or five games he came over to me, tapped me on the shoulder and introduced himself to me, before asking, 'Can I speak to your mum and dad?'

So I went home after the game and told my dad a gentleman by the name of Bob Bishop had watched me play and would like to speak to him.

'Oh,' Dad replied. 'He's the man who sent George Best to Manchester United. That's great, son.'

Dad said he'd be happy to talk to Bob. Only I hadn't thought to get any contact information. I told Dad that I saw him every week so chances were he'd be back again. He was. I told Bob where he could find my parents, 115 Severn Street. So after the next school game, Bob went to see them. He told them he thought I had a little bit of promise. He said he was keeping an eye out for me and would that be okay? Dad replied that it was.

From then on, I was convinced I was going to become a footballer. Football, football, football. I didn't want to think about anything else. Dad tried to keep my feet on the ground about it all but there was just never any thought in my mind that I was going to do anything else. It had an impact on my academic life, but the sight of Bob on the side of every game just gave me that extra belief that I could make it and everything was going to plan. And he was there pretty much every single week from when I first noticed him, at the age of nine, until I was 14, when he told me he'd arranged for me to have a trial with Manchester United.

I was an only child but the family was pretty big and pretty close. Literally – my father's parents lived five or six houses down the road from us. Dad had four brothers and a sister. Mum had two brothers and a sister. Her family lived on the Cregagh estate. Mum and Dad liked a drink, but they were no different to any family. It was a close neighbourhood and there would always be a lot of socialising. If they'd been down the club and I'd been left with a babysitter, almost every occasion would end with them bringing back loads of their friends.

Dad was a decent amateur footballer. Decent enough that he played international football at amateur level, as an inside-forward. That's where I got my love of the game from. At these parties, or house gatherings, his friends would always tell me he could have been a decent player. Dad, on the other hand, talked about George Best, like most other people did. I had heard a lot about George but the first time I got to see him play in the flesh was at Windsor Park on 21 October 1967. Bob told me he was going to take me to see

Northern Ireland play Scotland. I was mesmerised. I was in awe. Everything my father had said about George was true. It was one of the most remarkable performances I've ever seen in my life. That much remained true forever – so you can imagine what an impression it left on me as a 13-year-old.

The noise from the crowd whenever he got the ball was unlike anything I'd ever heard. The Scotland players were doubling up on him and still couldn't get near him. Great Scotland players, by the way. George destroyed them. He was floating around on the pitch as if the tackles were nowhere near him. You might say it spoiled my idea of what normal brilliance was supposed to be. Attackers weren't supposed to be everywhere on the pitch, but George was, and he set up the winning goal. I had never seen Pelé play, and everyone would say he was the best player in the world, but after watching George do what he did at Windsor Park that day, I thought there could be no way any man could do anything better. No way.

At the final whistle I was as breathless as Tommy Gemmell, who'd been given the thankless task of marking George. 'That's what I brought you here to see,' Bob said to me, 'and don't forget, when I first saw this kid, they said he wasn't going to make it. He was too small. He didn't have the strength. Look at him now.'

I was astonished, and I mean that with all sincerity. I couldn't wait to get home and get my ball to play. Bob took me home on the bus. I talked his head off about what we'd just watched. Bob was a very funny man. He had a hearing aid and would always make sure that you were on his good side so he could hear what you were saying. On the bus he moved me to his other side – in the moment, I presumed it was to make it easier for me to get off. I only realised when I was getting off and said goodbye that he wasn't paying attention – he'd got that bored of me rabbiting on! He did catch on with enough time to wave goodbye when he noticed I'd moved.

'I've just seen George play,' I said to my dad as I arrived home. I hardly had to say any more.

'Son,' he said, 'you might have the opportunity to follow him to Manchester United. You just keep doing what you're doing.'

I couldn't get that performance out of my head. I watched it on television later that night and relived the entire thing. On Monday at school I was telling all my friends. When I played football, imitating that style of play was all I could think of. We'd have our coats and jumpers down as goalposts. We all wanted to be George Best. *'I'm George Best.'* We all were. I wanted to copy everything I'd seen. I was doing the running commentary in my head. I later read that George himself had a similar experience when he watched Alfredo Di Stéfano play for the first time against United in a friendly. I can't imagine that even the great Di Stéfano played the way George did on that day.

It wasn't certain that I could make it as a footballer but it was obvious that football was my best chance. As I left Mersey Street I was made a prefect because of being captain of the football team and not because of any school work I'd done. The teacher, Mrs Hall, made me stand up in front of the class and asked me what I thought I was doing in the front row. She knew I wasn't there for my work. She was a maths teacher and I was the worst in the world at that subject. The intention was to embarrass me, or humiliate me. It did more the former than the latter, as my school friends knew why I'd been made a prefect. But I told my mum the story and she marched up to school to have it out with Mrs Hall. 'Why have you done this to my son? It's nothing to do with you, it was Mrs Stanley, the headmistress, who gave him the prefect badge. You had no right to humiliate him in front of the class.' I look back and laugh – at the time, very embarrassing.

Dad was employed at the Sirocco Works, working on parts for ships. He played for the Sirocco Works amateur football team. Their biggest game came on a Christmas Day in 1938 in a Steel & Sons Cup Final, a competition the professional clubs entered their second-string sides into to compete against the amateur sides. The final was always played at Christmas and the ground would always be packed

out. In this final, Sirocco Works played against Crusaders Seconds and beat them. It was one of the biggest upsets in the competition's history and it still gets talked about today. Dad was proud of his part in the win and rightly so.

He was invested in my development as a kid. 'A shilling a goal,' he always promised me. One week we won 11-0 and I scored nine. It was a lot of money for a kid in those days! No matter how well I'd played, he'd always say, 'I'll tell you something, son, you'll never be as good as your dad.' I'd never answer back. But I would always make an internal vow to myself that I would prove him wrong. I'd have that extra incentive to score, or win, or do something I thought was brilliant. And every time I did, I got the same comment from him. It quickly turned from incentive to pressure. It went from wanting to prove him wrong to not wanting to let him down. It was like I had to try my best in order to get the affirmation that I would never surpass what he'd accomplished, all the while complicated in the childhood emotions of wanting nothing more than to make my father proud.

Because he worked hard, and worked long hours, it's probably fair to say that I didn't spend nearly as much time with him as I did with my mother. Once he finished at the shipyards, he worked helping out bookies and he'd be gone all hours. And although I never talked back to him, through that mixture of respect and fear most kids had of their father in that generation, I look back and think I used to give my mum hell – that was until Dad came through the door and I knew I'd better watch my mouth. I don't know how Mum put up with me, but we were very close. Between them they always made sure I never went without. She worked at Irish Bonding, only 100 yards from the house, putting tops on the bottles of beer. She worked shifts of 6am to 2pm and 2pm to 10pm for years.

I've made it sound like it was mostly a normal childhood, and it was, really. But normal in Belfast in the 1960s was not normal compared to everywhere else. There were elements of it that nobody would be too surprised by. My parents liked a drink. When Dad couldn't get to my game to watch me, Mum would always be there,

and after the game she'd go out with her mum and sister and have a few drinks. I would always worry about that. I wouldn't want her to drink too much because it would inevitably lead to rows when Dad got home. So many times I can remember Dad asking me if Mum had been drinking, and I would lie and say she hadn't been. 'She's been with her mother, they've been here,' I'd insist.

It could be volatile. They'd have their arguments when they came home from the social. I'd be cringing thinking the neighbours would be talking about the bloody McIlroys again. But the next day it would be someone else on the street. Just one of those things. Many a time I saw some wife throw some husband's dinner out on to the street. Friday nights would come around and you knew there would be some action. I'd just be praying it wouldn't be at ours. I would get frustrated with Mum because I knew what a drink would lead to. And outside of a drink they were both the most loving parents I could have wished to have. There was no wealth in that area whatsoever but they did everything for me.

You then had the elements that were specific to Belfast. The door would knock on an evening. Vigilantes. *'Get the man out of the house, we're walking the streets.'* I can remember those words. They were chilling and left you with this strange, inconsolable emptiness in your stomach. Dad was in his 50s. By then he was ill with arthritis and gout. He was in no condition to fight anyone. The Troubles had always been there but in the mid-60s, as a city, we became abnormally conditioned to the most horrendous scenes. I wouldn't say you became indifferent to it – it's something that you carry with you forever – but you become used to it. I grew up in a Protestant area. Ten minutes' walk away was a predominantly Catholic area and we knew we weren't to go there. Schools were segregated. Even in school football matches there would be trouble if we went into an area we weren't supposed to be in – stones would be thrown at us.

Through the years it got worse. When I was 14, a schoolfriend of mine, Andy Petterbridge, was hit by a bullet which ricocheted off a wall into his heart. He died. Everything in life was affected by

the constant confrontations. As far as I was concerned, and this was just the way I was brought up, I just didn't want the conflict. I didn't want my father to go out and support a cause which may cost him his life. I just wanted my father to be safe and well. I was concerned about what they might ask him to do.

Not that Dad shied away from rivalry. We were used to it even in our hobbies. I grew up a stone's throw from Glentoran but Dad was a Linfield fan – their biggest rivals – and raised me to be one (as well as a Glasgow Rangers supporter; Dad was mad about Jim Baxter). He'd played for Linfield Swifts. It was a much smaller version of the Celtic and Rangers situation, with conflict all the time, tied into your religion. You would have to be brought into the stadium from different sides of the ground. Police escorts. It was the biggest game in Irish football and I was used to ducking and diving for fear of getting my head kicked in on a matchday.

The great Jackie Milburn had come over to become player-manager of Linfield and that was a little before my memory kicks in, but I do strongly recall the legacy he left and the first great team after he returned to England. In 1962, the club were celebrating 40 years since they'd won seven trophies in a single season. They only went and did it again. I remember watching Hugh Barr up front with the man we called the 'Duke of Windsor', Tommy Dickson. I remember them all. Isaac Andrews, Bobby Ervine and Sammy Hatton as the support act. Billy Ferguson on the wing. Then in later years, as the team declined, there was Sammy Pavis up front. We would call him Sammy 'Save Us' because we depended heavily on his goals. Glentoran had a good team and the rivalry was always between them for the big trophies.

It was, ironically enough, Glentoran who made the first proper move to sign me. It's a story that starts and ends with my receiving a gift of football boots.

The first pair I owned were given to me by Bob, a pair of brown toe cap boots. I'd worn plimsolls before. I'm not saying my parents couldn't afford to get me a pair – but for gym work in primary school

we'd just wear plimsolls, and honestly I think it was just a case of Bob getting there first with his generous gesture.

'Now you're playing schoolboy football, you'll need proper boots,' Bob said.

For someone who knew so much about the game – and gave me so much – he seldom, if ever, gave any actual advice. The most I can remember after a game would be a 'well done, son' and I'd have to score a hat-trick to get that praise.

I was one of those lads who were taken to Bob's place in Helen's Bay. That's where you went if you'd been earmarked to be sent to United. I was invited with a couple of other lads, Drew Harris and Derek Whaley, and we were allowed to bring a couple of mates if we wanted to. Bob had rules – you must bring your own food. If you went for the weekend, you'd go Friday night and come back on Sunday. You'd get the train to Helen's Bay and walk from the station to the farm. Once you got there, it was a case of 'food on the table'. There'd be ten to 12 of us in three bunk beds. Bob had three dogs – one was a Great Dane, one was a Boxer. They stayed on Bob's bunk. The rest of us would have to toss a coin for who would have to share the bed with Bob and the dogs.

The first time, I took a couple of local mates who came from families who weren't too well off. Neither was I, but some were worse off than others. They didn't have two pence to rub together. They couldn't afford to bring food. I'm telling you, if those boys so much as touched a biscuit, Bob would be tutting and sighing. It was half-joking but the message was clear – if they wanted to come back, they better bring their own food. I wouldn't say it was discipline in the strongest sense of the word and yet it was a message about taking on personal responsibility. If we stayed on the farm we'd have to pitch in. Mr McCormack, who owned the farm, would give us jobs to do. Hard work like lifting hay bales into tractors. The football part of the weekend would start with a run through the forest on Bob's orders before having games on the beach.

When we were playing, he wouldn't come and watch us. No, he wasn't interested in that. He wasn't even interested in perhaps unearthing a talent he hadn't seen from one of the lads who we'd brought along. They were there to keep the numbers up in the games we played.

At the time, you're thinking this is a rite of passage. This is what George went through. This is what anyone goes through if Bob is sending them to United. It's when you get older that you realise it was, in all honesty, little to do with football, and mostly to do with attitude and aptitude. Less to do with the reputation of the boys, more to do with Bob's own. How could these boys, who Bob was staking his credibility on, adapt to sterner rules and impositions on their childhood? How could they adapt to being in a different household? To doing non-football things when they thought they'd gone to play football? How they'd get on with other kids who were competitive? How they'd be away from their parents? In the summer holidays I'd sometimes go for two weeks. I'd have to take a lot of food. I remember those trips consisting of a strong and healthy diet of beans, peas and eggs. My baths were in the sea and the lakes. It was tough going, but it was so enjoyable.

Bob had been doing that for years before I came along. This was work he was doing, mostly on behalf of Manchester United. Before day one. You haven't even arrived at the club and he is putting in years of careful groundwork to ensure you have the right mentality, that you're prepared, that the club are getting a kid who not only has the talent but the maturity to handle being away from home.

It was a system of its time. You couldn't imagine it being allowed today. There would be so much suspicion, and considering some of the stories that have come out about child abuse in recent generations that make your stomach turn and heart break, you can understand why. I can only speak about what I went through and feel grateful that Bob was as pure as the driven snow. He lived with his sister. He was football daft. He was proud of what he was doing to contribute

to the game. Proud, but never conceited. Never once would you associate him with being egotistical.

Even if his only discovery had been George Best, he would have been a famous name in the fabric of Manchester United. But it wasn't. There were so many. When you think about it, United were as lucky as we were to have his loyalty. He could have given that loyalty to any club, but he was attached to United. I don't want this to sound as though I'm saying Sir Matt Busby was lucky to have Bob Bishop, or Bill Behan who did the scouting in the south of Ireland. But it does work both ways and, when retreading the path of my own story, I feel it is only fair to pay tribute to a man whose status in football is as legendary as his reputation in Belfast at the time. The only time I think I saw him on transport was the bus trip to and from Windsor Park for that game in 1967. He was renowned for walking everywhere – and he even had a distinctive walk. A march. Everyone knew him. And if he was at a game people would be speculating why and who he was watching. Bob was at the Oval. Bob was at North Road.

For some players, getting as far as Bob's trips to Helen's Bay was a pretty entertaining 'I almost made it' story. If he thought you had genuine promise, it was fair to say that a trial at a professional club would soon follow one of those trips to the beach. I'd done pretty well in the boots he had given me.

I was playing quite well at school when one day a letter came to the school notifying them that I'd been selected for schoolboy trials for Northern Ireland alongside a lad called Billy Hamilton – not the Billy Hamilton who would go on to play for the senior side some years later. We went to the trials and they were pretty daunting. We only had a couple of trial games under the management of a gentleman called Jake Gallagher. He was a PE teacher and a fantastic football man. He insisted we should express ourselves and enjoy ourselves, which I guess is the best thing you can tell a 14-year-old playing alongside a bunch of kids he's never met. It was music to my ears. Jake announced the squad for the games against

Wales, Scotland and England in the Victory Shield and we also played the Republic of Ireland in a friendly. Our first game was against Wales at the Oval, just down the road. There was a decent crowd, and my parents were there as it was in walking distance. We managed to get a 2-1 win – but it was a different kettle of fish against Scotland at Dundee's ground. As we arrived at Dens Park, we had to pass Tannadice just a couple of hundred yards up the road – I found it incredible that two stadiums could be so close together. Scotland beat us – they had a good team and I think they stuck five past us.

We then played England at Newtonards. Jake brought me to meet the Northern Ireland squad who were training there ahead of one of the senior games – I met Martin Harvey and Terry Neill, and it was a tremendous thrill as I was photographed with them due to the fact that Bob had arranged for me to go and have my first trial with Manchester United. I think we drew – not a bad result for us, as we were usually wooden-spooners. It was the first test where I played against players who were all genuinely pushing to become professionals. I noticed – I couldn't not – how big the rest of the lads were. And how good some of them were. Scotland's best player had been a lad called Derek Johnstone, and he would go on to play for Rangers. These were the best schoolboys around but Jake did his best to instil confidence in us. He was enthusiastic about our chances of doing well.

After the final game against England, he actually gave me a lift home and went into detail about how good he thought my chances were if I kept trying hard and kept listening to people who were trying to help. He said that among the lads who were mostly a year older than me, I'd managed to stand out, so I had a great chance. You can imagine what it was like in the dressing room on an occasion like that, with different lads boasting about going for a trial with Tottenham or a similarly big club. I was too shy to mention that I was being sent to United. I listened to the conversation but was too shy to join in.

In those days, you didn't get a schoolboy cap. We received certificates with our names and the game we played in – I ended up with four. Now, those certificates mean something different to me than they did then. I can think of how proud I am that I played for my country as a schoolboy, and my father said he was proud, but in the moment you're just wanting to play well and beat the team in front of you, because your quest is more about impressing watching eyes in your ambition to become a professional than it is a matter of national pride. It was a game of football.

I was at Ashfield Secondary School, playing in the school team and preparing for a cup final, at Cliftonville's Solitude ground, against St. Augustines. I was playing a year up at school level too as a 14-year-old. My reputation was getting around Belfast and Peter McParland, the legendary Aston Villa forward who had scored the goals that won them the FA Cup in 1957, was the new manager of Glentoran. Everyone in the local game knew I was under Bob's wing, and they knew what that probably meant, so Peter attempted an intervention and invited me to see him at the Oval.

'Listen,' he says, 'why don't you just stay here, train with us and sign for Glentoran? Then, when you're good enough, which I'm sure you will be, we'll send you across the water.' I didn't know what to say. 'By the way, what size boots are you?' He brought me out a brand-new pair of boots to play in the cup final. He said to have a word with my father and then to speak to him after the game.

We lost in the final, 2-1. My parents were both there. My dad's dad, who was in a wheelchair at that point, was on the sidelines cheering me on. He loved me to death. He was devastated when we lost. Dad talked to me, 'You can't stay here, son.' I think he was referring more to the conflict than he was my footballing potential. Maybe it was a bit of both. 'Irish league football is rubbish, you have to go to United and give yourself a chance there.'

On Monday, I went to see Peter. I said I'd spoken to my father and that United was too big an opportunity for me to allow it to pass me by.

'Are you sure, son?' he asked. 'I think you could do yourself some good staying here. You'll get a lot more experience, you'll get to know what the game's all about, and it will help get us a little bit of money.'

I thanked him but said my mind was made up.

'Okay,' he says. 'Can I have the boots back, please?'

He asked for them back! Because I lived so close to the ground, I just went home and brought the boots back to him. Many years later we were at a function together and I reminded him of the story. 'Sammy, I remember being disappointed,' he said. 'But did I really take the boots off you?' I think he was as embarrassed as I had been.

I talked to Dad about what Peter had said and he reframed it. 'If it doesn't work out in Manchester, you can always come back here,' he said. 'But you don't want to be thinking about that, you don't want to think like that. Go and give it your best shot.'

Dad was pragmatic about it. I didn't know at the time but I later found out my mum was heartbroken at the prospect of me going. She was upset at the airport and I'll be brutally honest, I couldn't wait to get away from her because I couldn't bear to see her like that. It was unsettling.

There was something about Manchester United. There was an allure, an intoxication. I was too young to remember what had happened with the Munich air disaster but the following years are imprinted in my memory. People would talk about how Matt Busby was rebuilding the club and there would be constant references to the team who had died in the tragedy. I couldn't say that everyone wanted them to do well, but most were interested in the recovery of the club, and in 1963 when they won the FA Cup I think it's fair to say nobody begrudged them that success. It was one of the first finals I could remember watching, on a black and white television. Everyone had the television on all day to watch the final in those days. 'I'd love to play in a Wembley cup final,' I thought, though if thoughts could echo I'm certain every kid in the country was feeling the same way. What a great United team they were, with Law and Herd getting the goals and Crerand running the play. Most of us were already

dreaming of what it would be like to be in that team so you can just visualise what it did to our imagination when we learned that a young Belfast lad came into that side and became the star name.

I was 14 when I went for my first trial with Manchester United at Easter. I was blown away and intimidated by the size of everything. The city. The club. The other trialists. It was like a different world to what I was used to. It frightened me a little bit and I have to confess that the fact they'd just won the European Cup added to it. There was an aura. I was in competition with lads who I knew had to be the best from all over the United Kingdom. The English lads in particular looked so much bigger, so much fitter and stronger. I can vividly remember thinking to myself, 'Oh dear, oh dear. I don't think I'm going to last very long here.' That was my first impression.

Their first impression of us? Well, you could hear some of the boys talking, 'They're from Belfast.' You could hear them talking aloud, among themselves and not to us. Did they think I had suffered terribly? Did they think I was part of the conflict? And then I watched the news and saw the newspapers as they saw it. It really was being broadcast to the world, and what I had become accustomed to as everyday life was given its true perspective by the international press. 'Did you see what happened in Belfast last night? Did you see that explosion? Did you see they threw a petrol bomb at the police?' That would be the morning conversation. Not with me, but I'd hear it. What passed for morning chat with others, just the same as with anyone about current global affairs, was the source of extra anxiety for me. I suppose I could say, as a young teenager, I felt a bit embarrassed about it happening in my home town. Ian Paisley and Bernadette Devlin were constantly in the news. Every day. I don't know if it was youth, or the way I was brought up, but even though I was a Protestant, I just never looked at another person and wondered what their religion was. I didn't think about if they might be Catholic. They were just the lads I was playing football with.

I went back in the summer holidays for two weeks. Bob sent me over with three other lads, Derek Whaley, Drew Harris and Jeff

Gorman. Derek and Drew, of course, I'd already known from our trips to Helen's Bay. The club put us into digs. I went with Drew and the other two lads went together. On our first morning Jeff reassured me. 'Listen, Sammy,' he said. 'We're only here for two weeks. Let's make the most of it.'

Possibly the only thing I didn't know about George Best was the fact that he had been through the same emotion I couldn't seem to shake off. Homesickness. But you don't, when you're young. You think everything is personal to you and that every negative emotion is the end of the world. It killed me being away from my mother. I was so close to her and comfortable with her way of living. I'm talking about ways which you just wouldn't even think. Maybe I was just sensitive to it. But the layout of the houses. The way people would eat. The way your parents do everything to govern your life, and then when you are somewhere by yourself you have to show the initiative to do it yourself. I just wanted to play football and it had never entered my mind that I would have to think about what time to get up, or go to bed, or that I would have to be forthright with things that I ate.

Those early days in Manchester made me realise just how much Mum did for me that I took for granted. She would be there when I got home from school and she'd have my dinner waiting for me. She'd send me out to play football and have a bath waiting for me when I got back in. Those baths would take hours to fill in those days. She must have been running it from the second she sent me out to play. We went everywhere together. She'd be the one getting anything I needed; balls, clothing, she was the one who got it all. She did so much that I took for granted and to make sure I was looked after that the moment I needed to genuinely look after myself, everything was so unfamiliar that even Bob's testing ground couldn't have prepared me.

To be fair, as far as the trials went, it couldn't have been much more basic. It was a case of play football, go back to the digs, and then wait at the digs to be picked up to go to the Cliff again. We

weren't expected to do any of the jobs that the younger players who were attached to the club did, such as cleaning boots or sweeping the terraces. It was the longest two weeks of my life. There was a lady across the street from us in Belfast, Mrs Matthews, who was the only woman in our area I can remember having a telephone at that time. I would phone her to speak to my mother. It would just be a relief to hear her voice at all. You would quickly become accustomed to the horror and intensity of how Belfast was reflected in the news and I would just need some reassurance that my parents were okay before I could even think to tell them about what I'd been doing. I watched an A team game and then played in A and B team matches. I used a telephone box to ring the social club in Glentoran where my dad spent a lot of time, to tell him how I got on. I was trying to sound enthusiastic but the truth of the matter was that I just couldn't settle. It went deeper than that. I didn't think I could *ever* settle. The lad who'd dreamed of playing football now had just one ambition – to get that ticket in his hand so he could go home to where things were familiar. As traumatic as it was, in the strangest way it felt less traumatic being close to it but closer to my parents.

This is no reflection on the club, who had things laid out in the best way possible. We were picked up at 9am. We went to the Cliff, got our kit. We joined in the football. John Aston snr, a legend of the club and former England international, was looking after us. He would mix the trialists with other apprentices and the young professionals. You don't know it at the time but that's the second test – the first is if you make it over at all. Can you deal with players who have benefitted from professional training? You're thrown in – *can you handle that*? You can tell from the standard that there's no chance you can take it easy for a day and decide to turn up tomorrow. You have to impress a man like John Aston and you have to do it from day one.

John was one of the pillars of the club. He was a Busby stalwart, one of his first generation. Then he retired and went on to the coaching staff. The club was saturated in this sort of continuity.

You are familiar with that going in, but only when you arrive is the scale of that continuity impressed upon you. Joe Armstrong, as legendary a talent spotter as Bob Bishop. Everyone knew he was the man who'd found Bobby Charlton. You couldn't wish to meet a nicer fella. He was a football encyclopaedia. He loved the game, this small cheerful man with a massive presence. Joe and Johnny were the ones who looked after the trialists, they were the ones introducing us to the standard that was expected of us.

The other lads who had come over with me seemed to be handling things better than I was. Even that intimidated me. I talked about it to my father. He told me not to worry about it. He reminded me they were two years older than I was. They were used to playing with older lads, they'd played at a higher level than me back at home. They were more prepared. I would listen and then the second I was back on the pitch the following morning I'd forget it all and become inhibited again. Towards the end of the trial I started to think about how I was letting myself down. I tried to remind myself that I was there because Bob saw something in me. But I was worrying about being sent home or not being invited back. What if they would say I wasn't good enough or I wasn't strong enough? It would have broken my father's heart. I knew it would have done. I thought that I couldn't let it happen – but when it came to do anything about it, I just seemed to freeze. Don't get me wrong – I threw myself fully into anything that was asked. I tried to play football the way I knew how. But it was such a short time in the day to play, and the rest of the day was spent consumed and beset by this type of adolescent anxiety.

It's an unreasonable weight, but an unavoidable one at the same time. It's part of what happens signing for the biggest club in the world even though it means the scope for failure should be much higher. They had just won the European Cup. They had three European Players of the Year in their team. Of course, most youngsters would not be able to play for them. The chances of making it were slim. My first trial coincided with United's European Cup game with AC Milan. I was stood with the other trialists right at the back of the

South Stand. I was lucky enough that the first game I'd seen George Best play in the flesh was one of the most memorable in history. This was the second – and just as memorable for different reasons.

I suppose I was lucky that my first taste of a game at Old Trafford was a big European night but even taking that into account, this was a special atmosphere. I was lucky enough to experience one or two nights like this but it was up there with the greatest atmospheres ever at the ground. Hairs were standing on end, goosebumps all over the body, the sort of physical reaction that few arenas can inspire. I could only imagine how the players were feeling. United were two goals down from the first leg. Bobby Charlton scored late on. Then it looked as though Denis had scored – it looked a yard over the line from my angle, and from the angle of everyone else in the ground apart from the referee. The goal wasn't given. United, the holders, were out of the European Cup – but it was such a tremendous occasion that it just intensified the sense of how good you would need to be to get through the ranks. You're simultaneously overawed and desperate to get on to the pitch.

Jack Pauline was the manager of the A team and Alan Jones looked after the B team. Alan was the first one to put me in a game. 'This is the team. This is where you're playing. Now go out and enjoy yourself.' I wonder where he got that from?

We'd have these matches and then the inter-squad practice games which were mixed brilliantly with the players already there. They were serious games. Nets, referee, linesmen. The 90 minutes were the only ones I spent not consumed by the weight of everything dragging me down. Towards the end of the second trial, the two-week stay, I started thinking more about what Bob must have seen in me. Why I was here instead of any of the lads from my Mersey Street team, and how any of them would have given their right arm for this chance. Don't blow it. Go for it.

Our group was luckier than most. Drew, at 17, was offered a year's professional terms. I was offered a two-year apprenticeship by John Aston – he told me that I'd have to come back on my 15th

birthday to sign it and that's when it would start. Derek and Jeff were sent home. I can remember our bigger group of trialists being about 15 in number. Paul Jones, Peter Fletcher, Frank McGivern, Clive Wakefield, Drew, myself and maybe one more lad were all told we'd be brought back. That wasn't a bad number to take on, but for the eight or nine lads who were told they wouldn't be coming back, well, they were heartbroken. Distraught. It was clear to see.

I can remember the local talk that summer. Signed to United, who'd won the European Cup the previous year? *You must have made your parents a few bob from that.* My mum and dad did not get a single shilling from United for me to sign for them. People thought we'd got a brown envelope. Joe Armstrong came over to see my parents with the apprentice forms. They got flights and accommodation when I signed, so they could see where I was living and being put up. The first time Mum ever got on a plane was to come to Manchester when I signed. They were made up with it.

The first time I went to Manchester I'd gone in my Northern Ireland schoolboy blazer and took my kit with me. I had a grey tie, red jumper, a pair of trousers and a pair of football boots. Another aspect of being unfamiliar. All the lads had a few changes of clothes and here I was stuck with my blazer. They wore nice jeans and new shirts every day. I felt very conscious of it. I talked to Mum about it when I got home and she made sure that when I went back I would have a new wardrobe. She went to Burtons and kitted me out. It was only years later when I realised she'd done that on tick, as we said in Belfast. I suppose it's difficult to understand in these days where so much is bought on credit but it wasn't really a done thing in those days and there was a tough pride in the Belfast people which would normally prohibit them from doing something like that. Mum, who would have been happier than anyone if I didn't go back at all, was doing all she could to make me feel comfortable in order to give it the best shot. It came up in conversation a few years later, Dad mentioned it in passing. I was so touched by it.

# CHAPTER 1

Back in Manchester to give it a full-time crack, I was back in digs with Drew Harris at Cavendish Road in Stretford. I was still always phoning home. Goodbyes with my mum never got easier. Dad was proud as punch. I knew he'd been telling anyone who would listen about his son going on trial to United, so when I was offered the apprenticeship he could boast about that too. The phrase 'you'll never be as good as your old man' never really came up anymore, but if I phoned him on a Saturday after an A or B team game, where I might have played well or scored a goal, I might have had to call the social club to have a word. With a few drinks in him, he'd say, 'Well done, son, but you know what I'm gonna say,' and it would always be me completing the sentence. 'I'll never be as good as you, Dad.'

I settled in Cavendish Road but I should mention the incident that happened beforehand. In the second trial, I'd stayed with Jeff at Mrs Beresford's house on Kings Road in Stretford, near the bowling alley. She showed us to our bedroom. She told us the times for breakfast and dinner – she would ring a bell when it was ready, and other than that, when we were in we were expected to stay in our room. She read out rules and regulations for living there. I was already feeling uncomfortable but that was nothing compared to breakfast the following morning. The bell went and me and Jeff went downstairs. I was struck by a foul odour. Mrs Beresford had made us kippers for breakfast. I had never eaten a kipper in my life. Jeff was looking at me as if to say he hadn't either.

There was a little bit of toast and tea on the side so I timidly took a slice while Jeff gave the kippers a good go. Mrs Beresford noticed I hadn't touched the plate.

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'I don't like …'

'What do you mean you don't like kippers? Do you know how much these cost?'

'I'm sorry, I don't eat fish.'

'Well I have been told by Mr Armstrong and the gentlemen at Old Trafford that this is what I am to make you.'

'I'm sorry,' I repeated, 'I'll have an egg.'

'You'll have an egg?!'

Clearly, I was suggesting a compromise in a situation where the word wasn't understood. I was there for three days. You won't believe this. *She* complained about *me* for complaining about the food! Joe and Johnny Aston talked to me about it.

'It was only the kipper,' I insisted, but I admitted I hadn't felt comfortable and that it would probably be for the best if I was placed with another landlady.

'Oh, you're going to be a problem,' Joe joked. 'Three days?'

I wasn't taking it as a joke so I went to pains to explain how it was only the kipper that had thrown me off and that I wasn't really a tremendously fussy eater. They put me at ease and agreed to move me. Mr and Mrs Thomas took me into their home and they were unbelievable. They'd been made aware of what had happened and I think Joe had probably sensed my homesickness. They couldn't have been nicer – asking me what food I liked, arranging with one of their friends who had a phone to allow me to use it. I was desperate not to feel that way. The problem is, especially when you're too young to understand it, homesickness is one of those human emotions that you just can't switch on and off. It was to dominate every aspect of my life as I tried to settle in Manchester.