



THE LION

WHO NEVER ROARED

JACK LESLIE

The Star Robbed of England Glory

Matt Tiller

Foreword by
Viv Anderson MBE

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Chapter Two

Go! Guts! Goals!

THE ‘THREE Gs’ of this chapter title was Jack Leslie’s motto. For someone who was considered one of the most intelligent footballers in the country, it sounds rather direct, simplistic almost. But his genius on the pitch was instinctive. And it’s a fitting title in looking at what kind of man Jack was because they’re his words. It’s a real insight into his positive, determined attitude on the pitch and in many ways reflected his life off it. To make a living as a professional player gave Jack a huge sense of pride because achieving that goal is no easy task. It isn’t now, and it wasn’t in the 1920s. You need resilience and courage. Jack Leslie had those qualities, for sure. And if you’re an attacker, gutsy or not, you have to get goals. If you don’t, you’re dropped.

Jack Leslie’s quality is summed up in Plymouth Argyle’s Diamond Jubilee book, *All About Argyle 1903–1963*. In his history of the club up to that year, W.S. Tonkin asked, ‘What about the best-ever individual player? From a galaxy of Home Park stars over the years, the choice is not easy; but few would dispute the claims of David Jack, Neil Dougall, or Jack Leslie for this distinction.’ Of those three, only one was never awarded an international cap.

Peter Hall, who worked at the club for decades, watched Jack in 1933 when Argyle beat Manchester United 4-0 on the opening day of the season. Peter passed away in 2021 but spoke to the BBC in 2004: ‘I always remember that Jack Leslie played a huge part in that win – it was a real treat to see him play. He was everywhere, his passing was first class, and his shooting power was enormous.’ And 97-year-old Charlie Trevethan, who must be Plymouth’s oldest living fan, was

at that match too: 'Jack was the ultimate football player and, as the papers say, the best inside-left in England and with Sammy Black, the best side players on the left flank. They could show the players today how to play football and how to score goals.'

However, it's also important to know that Jack Leslie was not perfect. He was a humble, fair, charismatic man, without doubt, but he was also a man of his time and there are aspects of his life that are surprising. Here's a man who suffered a great injustice due to the colour of his skin, yet Jack's granddaughter, Lesley, remembers one of his favourite television programmes was '*The Black and White Minstrel Show*, believe it or not! I think it was the music more than anything else.' And, while Jack was no George Best and had a long, happy marriage, it's fair to say his head was turned just a little as a young, successful and popular professional footballer. There were no champagne fountains, he was more of a brown ale kind of guy. But Jack was earning more than double the wage of a boilermaker, the work he would otherwise be doing at the docks, up to his elbows in grease. Let's not be too hard on him.

I'm looking directly into Jack's eyes. It's a moving photograph given to me by his granddaughters on the day the statue was unveiled and it came with a personal poetic message on the reverse of the frame. A treasured gift that I'm taking time to consider more deeply as I nervously attempt to write a portrait of this man whose life was nothing short of remarkable. He's 77 years old and sitting in his final place of work. It's a small, dark room at the old Boleyn Ground, and behind him hang the West Ham United players' boots that he looked after with precision, care and love. Many of the footballers whose footwear he cleaned and repaired will never need their names rekindled in the public's imagination. After all, Martin Peters, Geoff Hurst and Bobby Moore were World Cup winners. Alongside them, legends such as Sir Trevor Brooking, Harry Redknapp, Clyde Best and many other players and staff remember Jack well and with love. And within those eyes looking back at me there's pride, determination, warmth and the sparkle that kept Jack firmly in the minds of friends, family and colleagues. He was someone who stuck in your memory. But there's also a sincere and almost painful sense of the burden of

unjust disappointment that Jack carried through his life. Taking just a few moments to engage with this portrait, it's hard not to choke.

This photograph was taken in 1978, the year Viv Anderson became the first black player to win a full England cap. This was huge news. Black players were becoming more commonplace in the Football League in the 1960s and 70s, but they faced a barrage of abuse and there was a section of England fans who couldn't bear the thought of any in the national side. West Ham United was pioneering in its diverse recruitment policy. The club fielded three black players – Clyde Best, Ade Coker and Clive Charles – six years before West Bromwich Albion. Despite this, emerging from the Boleyn Ground tunnel for an opposition player of colour was as intimidating as any other stadium. Jack saw what was happening before him and, I'm sure, reflected on his own treatment.

Jack never seemed openly bitter about what happened to him at any stage of his life and applauded Anderson sincerely on the accolade. Yet the circus that surrounded the Nottingham Forest full-back's achievement surely reignited, and even heightened, the feeling of rejection, of a deserved opportunity denied, that Jack must have felt.

Listen, that was different times. I won't lie and say it don't matter. It does. That Viv Anderson got a cap, and I'm glad. Not because he's coloured, but because he's good enough so he's entitled to it. I think I was entitled to it. Honestly, I'm not a boasting man. But I was good enough.

Those final words say so much, and that's exactly what I'm seeing when I look up from my screen to the black-and-white photograph hanging above it. From the age of 24 when the England call came, Jack Leslie knew he had what it took to play for his country. He was a skilled, physical sportsman, a leader on the pitch who was humble and gentle off it. There's more to Jack than this thumbnail sketch but it's certainly true that he wasn't a boasting man. In fact, many of the West Ham United players who chatted to Jack almost every week of their lives didn't know he had a professional career, let alone that he had been picked for England.

Sir Trevor Brooking, who became part of that club's set-up in 1966, talks about his old colleague with a beaming smile and has been only too happy to help the campaign. He even turned up as a surprise guest at one of our online events during the pandemic, which Jack's granddaughters absolutely loved. They remember their granddad telling them he liked Brooking, and the feeling was definitely mutual:

Jack joined in 1967 and was fantastic for the next 15 years. He was our boot man so if we needed anything doing, he would sort it out. He was very affable, very chatty, and never ever mentioned anything about his own career which is a credit to his modesty. He was a lovely fella and it's great that there is now a statue in his memory.

* * *

So, what was Jack Leslie like as a player? He began as an outside-left, what we would call a left-winger, but found his home in the playmaker role at inside-left. Physical, aggressive, tireless and brave ... absolutely. But skilful, versatile and creative too, a reader of the game who always looked to push his team forward. Match reports of hard-won battles – tough draws and heavy defeats as well as great victories – create a portrait of a footballer who was always trying to make things happen, no matter the situation. It's no surprise, then, that he became club captain, excepting perhaps for the fact that it was very rare for people of colour to be given positions of authority. Jack had worked hard over many seasons and had not only proved himself, but also shown that he was a team player. He was popular with his fellow professionals, the club bigwigs and, of course, the fans. Bob Jack said this of Jack after Argyle's promotion success in 1930: 'On his best form he can be ranked as the best inside-left in the country.' The gaffer may have been a little biased but the same was said in local and national papers throughout Jack Leslie's career. Writers often wondered why he was being overlooked for England, forgetting all about the rejection of 1925 and how it had been swept under the carpet.

There are countless reports of Jack's skill. His footwork was often 'dazzling' and 'a pleasure to watch', while precision passes threading team-mates through on goal are frequently mentioned. He was the kind of player every team needs, someone who can break up play, work an opening and unlock the opponents' defence. And he could score both beautiful and straightforward goals. Jack often broke through to go one on one with the keeper or shot from distance, striking or skimming crossbars and often, thankfully, hitting the target. Jack Leslie was a player you wanted to see pull the trigger. His hefty tally and the heart of a lion gave Plymouth Argyle one hell of a player.

Tactics and formations were very different in the 1920s and 30s, although the sport was evolving, and it seems that Jack was one of those footballers who broke the mould. The players set up in a 2-3-5 formation with the emphasis on getting the ball forward as quickly as possible. Teams always lined up in that formation on paper in the English Football League throughout the inter-war years.¹ The reality could be a bit more flexible, of course, but attempting to do things differently did, at times, lead to criticism where Jack was concerned. One column by the key local writer on all things Argyle for the *Football Herald*, 'Pilgrim', suggested in February 1930 that Jack should stop tracking back, saying, 'Five forwards are better than four, especially when the fifth might be one of Jack Leslie's build and aggression.' He does mitigate his statement: 'I do not and never have minimised the value of Leslie's work as a forager and picker up of short clearances.'

It was commonplace for writers to have pen names at a time when sports journalism was blossoming. 'Pilgrim' was a massive Jack Leslie fan and, having read a great deal of his work now, I've got a soft spot for him too. He's the scribe banned from telling the truth behind the England decision but who clearly wanted to reveal it. His name was Henry Patrick Twyford, known as Pat, and he served in the First World War before joining the *Western Morning News* and then writing for the *Football Herald* too. When writing for *The Snooze* (our affectionate name for the genteel *Morning News*), Twyford used the moniker 'Tamar'. So, whenever I mention 'Pilgrim' or 'Tamar', it's our Pat. He usually backed Jack, and the player's energetic, ground-

covering work won over our local wordsmith. In December 1930, commenting on a tight 3-2 home victory against Wolverhampton Wanderers, which Jack missed through injury, 'Pilgrim' bemoans:

How Leslie was missed ... I see some comment has been made of the fact that there appears to be a big gap between the forwards and the halves. Is not the whole solution of this to be found in the absence of Leslie? Leslie is the one man who forms the distinct alliance between the two departments.

Jack Leslie was clearly part of the movement away from the rigid 2-3-5 into more of a 2-3-2-3 (the W formation becoming the W-M), with inside-forwards the most important players on the pitch. This meant that wingers, along with the centre-forward, were positioned further upfield. Jack and his partner on the left wing, Sammy Black, were famed for their combination play and goalscoring and this development in tactics perhaps explains why Sammy tops Argyle's all-time scoring charts while Jack is fourth, although injury curtailing Jack's career also meant he played fewer matches. Jack said he and Sammy never talked tactics, but they clearly knew instinctively how to carve open their opponents' defences, and the inside-left obviously saw the benefit of playing deeper to spot and exploit those gaps. I suspect Jack Leslie frequently found 'pockets of space' nearly a century before that phrase entered the pundits' handbook.

Talking of clichés, 'he's got an engine on him' is the type of thing Wright, Shearer and co. would surely use of Jack today. They might also suggest that engine would run more efficiently if he gave up the Player's cigarettes. A fug of smoke in the dressing room wasn't uncommon back then as half-time tabs accompanied a steaming cup of tea before the restart. Jack Leslie was a heavy smoker throughout his life but his fitness as a footballer, physical work as a boilermaker and working into his retirement at West Ham must have helped him live to the ripe old age of 87.

The commentary of 'Pilgrim' on Jack's positioning may have been contradictory but he does constantly praise how he covered the

ground and often saved his team from disaster. This was picked up in the nationals too. Reporting a 3-1 win at Charlton in April 1931, the *Daily Mail*'s headline was 'TEN PLYMOUTH MEN WIN. LESLIE THE HERO' and described the impact Jack had when they went a man down: 'Leslie went to centre-half, and it was the play of this man that saved the day. He was everywhere, covering both backs, shutting the middle path, and keeping McKay the Charlton danger man, under strict control. Few men have played so well as Leslie in this game.' Even if his approach occasionally failed, it's clear that Jack Leslie was the kind of player a crowd love. They knew he would give his all and most of the time it worked. Sometimes it didn't. That's football.

As for his bravery, the astonishing diving header that was Jack Leslie's final goal for Argyle says it all. This gargantuan effort against Fulham in December 1935 came after a terrible eye injury had kept him out for 15 months. 'His goal was a splendid example of determination. He actually threw himself at the ball when it came across low from Vidler.' In the end, that injury finished his career. There's also a fantastic report in *The People* from 1931 with the headline 'PLYMOUTH CAPTAIN SCORES BY A FACE!' It details Jack's unusual technique with glee:

There was a good deal of speculation as to how Jack Leslie, the Plymouth captain, managed to deflect the very fine corner from Black for an equalising goal against Preston last week-end. The truth was that he turned it past Hughes with the side of his face. It was a bit of a sting, but the result was worth it, for it inspired Argyle to get the winning goal three minutes later.

Foot, shin, thigh, forehead, face ... if you're a goalscorer then you get it over the line any way you can. They all count.

Not only would Jack lift the crowd when going forward with clever, determined and courageous play, but also, when the chips were down, he put his body on the line at the back. Incredibly, given how dangerous the game was, substitutes weren't allowed until 1965. So,

for nearly 80 years of competition in the English Football League, if a player was injured, they had to hobble on until the final whistle or hobble off and the team would continue with ten men. In Jack Leslie's time, it would usually fall on him to drop back to midfield as centre-half. And when he did, Jack won plaudits. In December 1930, Argyle welcomed Tottenham Hotspur, already famous for twice winning the FA Cup.

In the first half the Pilgrims' keeper Harry Cann had to retire after a brave stop was followed by a boot gashing his head open. Fred Titmuss – a good friend of Jack's – drew the short straw and went in goal, while Jack withdrew to centre-half and was, 'a tower of strength with his splendid kicking'. Argyle won 2-0, and when Cann trotted back on to the pitch with his head wound fully bandaged, the crowd went wild.

Playing Spurs must have had that effect on Argyle, or maybe the North Londoners were to the 30s what Wimbledon's crazy gang were to the 80s and 90s. It was a Good Friday match at White Hart Lane in 1933 and Plymouth's centre-half Harry Bland was off with concussion within a minute. Back steps Jack to fill that void in the middle of the park once again. According to 'Pilgrim': 'When they retired undefeated at the end and the 45,000 spectators rose to give them an ovation I have never before witnessed on any away ground – well, it just told its own tale.'

The match clearly stayed with Jack, as he shared his memory of it with Leslie Yates, writing for the *Sunday Independent*, a Plymouth paper, in 1972:

I must have had a good match that day in what was a hard fought draw for our disorganised team. Anyway, a Tottenham player – I can't remember who – said to me 'Here, listen' as we walked off. Everybody in the stands seemed to be clapping and it grew louder as we approached the players' tunnel. I wondered what it was all about until the Spurs player said, 'They're giving YOU an ovation.' I can tell you it was a wonderful feeling to hear applause like that on an away ground.

A goalless draw can sometimes feel like a glorious win.

Incredibly, the return home fixture at Home Park was on the Easter Monday and again Argyle were effectively reduced to ten men when their right-winger was injured, although he stayed on the pitch. Again, Jack dropped deep and Argyle fought valiantly for a draw. In Jack Leslie's time as a player, Plymouth Argyle never lost against Tottenham Hotspur.

There are so many standout features of Jack's play but more than anything it's his intelligence that comes to the fore. Superlatives abound and, in this compared to other descriptions, his skin colour is more frequently mentioned. He's 'a coloured genius' said the *Daily Mail* in its report of the massive FA Cup tie against Arsenal in 1932. Later the same year the *Manchester Guardian* said of Plymouth's 3-1 win against United, 'The Argyle owed much to Leslie, a coloured player, who is the captain of the side and the "brains" of the attack.' *The People* said in 1931, 'The dark-skinned Leslie is still the life and soul of the attack,' and the next year it described his 'generalship' and called him 'that coloured opportunist'. It wasn't unusual for sports writers to pick up on athletes of colour, but I do wonder whether the prevalent racial stereotypes were at play here. They're positive about his play and it's somehow worthy of comment that a black player can command the game in such a way. It's not dissimilar to the way in which footballer and First World War hero Walter Tull was described. Their talent was surprising to white commentators who had a fixed view of the attributes and, in their minds, limitations of other races.

These are the challenges that Jack and black footballers throughout the ages have faced. Bernard Joy was a 'gentleman' amateur who played for the Casuals and Corinthians. He also signed as an amateur with several league clubs, including Fulham and Arsenal. Joy went on to become a famous football reporter from the 50s to the 70s. In 1975 he wrote how he couldn't see a black English footballer 'overcoming the temperamental and physical obstacles' that he believed stood in the way of them winning an international cap.² He lists these as temperament, English conditions, physical contact and barracking. Joy may not have been aware of Jack's selection in 1925 and he may not have seen him play, but he would have been

aware of Jack Leslie. Joy was playing from 1931 when Jack was at his peak, attracting rave reviews nationwide.

It's clear that these preconceptions are utter nonsense, but it's exactly these attitudes that Jack came up against. He was strong and talented enough to let his football do the talking but that wasn't enough for his country. Bernard Joy played for England once in 1936, the last amateur to do so. What an irony that 50 years after Jack's selection for a match Joy probably read about as a teenager, this player turned pundit wrote off black English players' international hopes.

The final thing to say about Jack as a player is that he was, by all accounts, incredibly popular within the dressing room as well as with the fans. Long-time servant, Argyle captain and regular international for Wales, Moses Russell, treated the *Sports Budget* periodical to a club tour in 1928, introducing his team-mates: 'Ah! You all know who that merry fellow is. Yes, you're right, it's Jack Leslie, the happiest chap in the whole camp. Born where? Africa? Not on your life. "Darkie's" a real Londoner.' Moses clearly hadn't been on a diversity and inclusion course. Jack was often described in such terms. Sometimes he says it *was* shouted in an abusive way at him, but it was also often how he was described in the press and by his peers. It's impossible to know exactly how he felt about such descriptions.

Was this language of the time that had no impact, or even used endearingly among friends? Or perhaps it hurt, but Jack had to show that it didn't affect him for fear that he couldn't take the 'banter'. Jack was genuinely well liked, but it's also clear that he was seen as different and had to cope with that on the pitch and in the dressing room.

We've seen how aggressive and powerful Jack was on the pitch and one story his granddaughters tell is in some ways surprising, but if you think about it, it fits his character entirely. Sammy Black, the mercurial goalscoring left-winger, with whom Jack shared a special relationship on the pitch, was often targeted with the kind of crunching tackles that would get a straight red these days. 'Pilgrim' wrote, no doubt with a sigh, in September 1925 of 'Black's Usual Fate ... being fouled when opponents found him too clever for them.' Now, Sammy would have often been the shortest player on the pitch at 5ft 6 (and a half!) and had a reputation. A defender would want

to intimidate him in a bid to cancel him out, but if an opposition player started getting in his friend's face, Jack would react. Lesley says, 'He wouldn't have it, he wouldn't have them pick on Sammy Black. He told me that he would go and say, "Watch it or you'll have me to contend with!"'

Jack's granddaughters admired him for his sense of right and wrong. He hated injustice. So, his looking out for Sammy Black makes sense and shows why he was a great choice as captain. And the memories of those who saw him play confirm this. In 2020 I spoke to nonagenarian Argyle fan, Bill Stephens, who saw Jack play when he was just a boy in the early 1930s. Bill sadly passed away later that year, but it was a privilege to have the chance to hear him talk about Jack:

I remember my father saying he was at a game and Jack wasn't playing, but he was just standing there watching. He thought it was a good chance to go and speak to him, so he went up to him to tell him what a great player he was. He was a real gent, he played the game the right way, he didn't cheat, and he didn't foul.

I promised this book wouldn't be a hagiography, yet through this entire chapter I've been praising Jack to the hilt. Naturally, there's the odd match where Jack didn't play at his best and he joined Argyle as a very young, promising player, having performed well at amateur club Barking Town for two seasons. He wasn't the finished article by any means, and it took time for Jack to establish himself in the first team at Plymouth. But from the very start he showed leadership qualities and formed strong bonds with team-mates. There's one photograph of Jack, still a teenager, as part of the Essex County team and there's a real sense of affection between the players. In one, Baden Herod – who alongside Jack was presented a cap by a French official for playing six or more times for their county – is sitting behind Jack with his arms round his shoulders. In another, Jack has his arms around his team-mate at Barking, Essex and Argyle, Alf Rowe. You get a real feeling of a man who cared for those around him, wanting to get the best out of them for the team and themselves.

THE LION WHO NEVER ROARED

Jack was a player who took responsibility throughout his career. In the fourth round of the Essex Senior Cup in 1920, he won a penalty after being fouled in the box. He was just 18, yet, with many more senior players in the team, was given the responsibility in a crucial cup tie and took the opportunity with 'a deadly shot', according to the *Chelmsford Chronicle*. Jack never took penalties for Argyle. Maybe that's because he missed two in a match later that season. Jack Leslie was a great player but there isn't a footballer out there who hasn't missed a chance, not even Pelé.

* * *

His attitude and approach to football say a lot about Jack Leslie's personality. He had charisma on and off the pitch. This was a charming and funny man with a twinkle in his eye that family and friends often mention. Jack had a mischievous side, liked to have a pint with mates and made friends easily throughout his life. Two incredible letters show this clearly. The first was written in the mid-1980s by a long-lost school friend, E.J. Griffiths, who had moved to Australia. He spotted his old mate in an article by sportswriter David Jack (grandson of Argyle manager, Bob). E.J. had lost touch with Jack, but still had clear and fond memories of him, their close friendship and how they played football and cards together at the weekends. And in the second, wonderful recent letter, Hazel Cadmore, now 98, wrote to Jack's granddaughters after seeing news of the statue on TV. She realised this was the man who used to share pints after work with her father in the 1940s and 50s. Hazel says he stood out among other men: 'I don't remember the names of my father's other friends, but I remembered Jack Leslie with the sparkling, kind eyes.' His wedding photos show how strong his relationships were with his team-mates too. Among Jack and Win's guests were not only current players at Argyle but also old comrades from his first amateur team, Barking. What an impact Jack had on the lives of so many people.

And, while he was serious on the pitch, the players also enjoyed themselves and Jack clearly liked to have a good time. There's certainly a sense that he felt at home in the dressing room, as evidenced by some of the memories from West Ham players and staff, even though

he wasn't a boisterous young footballer but an elderly man caring for boots in the background. Rob Jenkins, the club physio at the time, remembers how they would have a cup of tea and 'sometimes we'd drink something a little bit stronger!' He goes on to recall young players looking for advice:

They asked Jack if it was okay to have a drink the night before a game and he replied that a couple of beers was fine to settle the nerves and to get some sleep. Inevitably, they asked him if it was alright to have a 'bit of the other' the night before a game. Jack didn't think that was acceptable at all. 'Anyway, you can always make up for it afterwards,' he said, which made us all laugh!³

Jack was philosophical too. In 1933 he penned an article that pops up in the *Halifax Daily Courier and Guardian*, but that I suspect was syndicated and appeared in more than one local paper as Halifax is a fair distance from Plymouth.

The fact he was given this platform is an indication of Jack's reputation nationwide.

In *Football and Fickle Fortune* Jack reflects on how luck plays a part in success and failure. With Plymouth Argyle missing out on promotion by a whisker as runners-up in Third Division South six times in a row in the 1920s, he knew it. 'Then our fortune changed,' reflected Jack on finally going up in 1930. 'I think you'll agree with me that we deserved it.' What's particularly remarkable about his piece is that he talks about Manchester City player Fred Tilson, who 'must be regarded as one of the unluckiest players in the game. I understand he missed a schoolboy international cap, a full international cap, and the chance of a Cup medal – all through injury.' Incredible to think of Jack empathising with a fellow player's misfortune in missing out on the honour he was so cruelly denied. He ends thus: 'It's great to be a footballer when your luck's in, but ...' Jack would know that more than any other player.

There's so much to love and admire about what Jack Leslie achieved and silently confronted. And we haven't even touched on

the abuse he received from the terraces and how his wife, Win, was treated because she had married a man of colour. It's also fascinating to think about what Jack was like as a young husband and father and how tough it must have been for his wife when he was travelling around the country, and occasionally the world, plying his trade. I can tell you with certainty that it wasn't easy. And, although he was a working-class, left-wing, union man, his talent meant he mingled with upper-class sportsmen, dignitaries and officials. In Plymouth he even became a Freemason, a discovery that came as a surprise. Maybe that's how he got away with the occasional minor traffic offence as he was, according to his granddaughters, 'an absolutely terrible driver'. Jack Leslie, a man not to be trusted behind the wheel of a vehicle, was someone you could trust with your life on the football pitch.

As a grandfather he was playful and engaging with Lesley, Lyn and Gill. He would make up his own characters to put smiles on their faces and, no doubt, give his only child, Eve, a break from childcare. They speak with great affection of Jack, their granddad:

He obviously had a charisma, and he had this lovely voice, he was a tenor singer, and it held you, you were just mesmerised by him. All our friends wanted to come round and would ask him to tell them stories. He made up characters and always left his funny tales on a cliff-hanger.

The three of them grew up with Jack and Win in the same house as their parents and remained tight-knit. Jack cherished his family and this shines through brightly whenever I speak to Lesley, Lyn and Gill.

I hope this gives you a sense of the man who's looking down on me before we embark upon his journey. What I can see is a life well lived and a person of substance. He embodied so much more than his motto. His goalscoring days were decades in the past, but he still had go and he still had guts. Jack Leslie surely deserved a fourth G ... Glory.