

THE SMELL OF FOOTBALL

2

**The Next Eleven Years
(and Ten Teams)**

Mick 'Baz' Rathbone



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Chapter I

THE END OF AN ERA – 14 MAY 2010

Sacked!

I just got sacked by my best friend (that sounds like a tag line from a Jeremy Kyle show).

I stumbled down the stairs, shaking my head in disbelief.

I closed the external door of Everton's Finch Farm training complex and climbed into my E-Class Mercedes. My head was spinning. Wow, what a totally unforeseen, unpredictable, shocker that truly was. That was not supposed to happen. In fact, what the hell did just happen?

My hands are visibly shaking. Calm down, breathe, regain control. That's better. Count to ten. Fucking hell, count to a million, more like.

I am in a state of shock.

When I left my home this morning, for what was destined to be my last working day at the club, I had a completely different scenario in mind.

This was absolutely not supposed to happen.

Sit down, relax, deep breathing, regain control. That's better. Pull yourself together, and slowly start to piece together the sequence of events from probably the most traumatic 45 minutes of my entire football career (and I have had a few of them).

My mobile phone started to ring. It was Marouane Fellaini. Well, he can fuck off now, I suppose. I won't have to worry about him randomly going back to Belgium without permission and getting me in bother with the boss.

The boss? But he's not the boss now, is he? Well, not my boss anyway. He's just David Moyes, or even Dave, or Big Davey, even 'Moyesy', now.

And I suppose that if he is just David Moyes now, then I must just be Mick Rathbone – unemployed Mick Rathbone LOL. That's what they say now, isn't it? LOL – laugh out loud. I don't know whether I should be lolling or not. I never got sacked before, well, except at Halifax. Calm down, get a bloody grip. Sit back and recline the seat.

Switch the radio on, find some soothing music. How ironic: 'Go Your Own Way' by Fleetwood Mac!

And breathe. That's better. Smell the leather and relax. I love this car. Shit! I suppose the car will be going as well.

Pull yourself together. Stop rambling.

How could a plan go so spectacularly wrong? I had gradually come to the realisation, over the last 12 months, that I needed a break. I really wasn't enjoying the job anymore, and that just isn't like me. I knew that I was experiencing good old-fashioned burnout.

After working nearly every day for the last 17 years, I suppose that is understandable and forgivable. I just needed a break or a change. That's all – no big deal.

It doesn't make me a bad person, does it? It had been a fucking tough, tough, season. Worst ever.

If I deeply analyse the origin of these negative feelings towards the job, then I could probably trace them back to my 50th birthday, just over a year ago.

It had hit me quite hard – that milestone – magnified by being in an industry fixated on youth.

I felt bloody old. I certainly looked bloody older.

I was finding it increasingly difficult to drive through the barrier into Finch Farm these days.

I had discussed it with my wife, and she agreed. She had seen my enthusiasm, and energy levels, gradually ebbing away over the past couple of years. It's only human nature. I am not a machine.

It was quite difficult to write that last sentence – I am not a machine – because everybody had always said that I WAS a machine. I could run all day long, laugh, work, and lift spirits, all day long.

I USED to be a machine. Now I am no longer a machine. I am a burned-out machine, yes, that's it, a burned-out machine – like those rows of bombed-out Iraqi tanks we used to see, strewn all across the landscape, during the Gulf War. I am a 51-year-old man who can hardly keep his eyes open during the day.

Louis Saha used to joke that only kryptonite could stop me. I loved that and I played up to that. That defined me, that was my USP.

Well, somebody must have brought some kryptonite into Finch Farm.

Those difficult, high-pressure situations, that I would have previously tackled head-on, in my stride, were now starting to drain me and make me doubt myself – become indecisive.

I desperately needed to do something about it. It wasn't just normal, end-of-season fatigue that a week in Spain would put right. No, this was deeper, and much more entrenched. I knew, in my heart of hearts, that I just couldn't come back for pre-season training. Time to make a brave decision.

England physiotherapist Gary Lewin used to come up to Finch Farm, a couple of times a year, to see how our international players were getting on. I liked Gary very

much. He had just left Arsenal, to go with the England national team, full-time.

I had confided in him about how jaded I was feeling, and that I knew, deep down, that something had to change. He empathised and told me that if I did leave Everton, he would give me some part-time work with one of the junior England football teams. That was great to hear and sounded much less stressful, if I am being honest.

I assume that David and my medical staff had sensed that I was struggling. David had called me into his office several times during the last couple of months and asked what was the matter with me. Where was the old Baz? In a funny kind of way, he answered his own question; the old Baz had become the OLD Baz. To his eternal credit, he tried to encourage me, praise me, reassure me and reinvigorate me. I am very grateful to him for caring about me so much. It was too late for that, sadly. Sorry.

I knew I wasn't performing well, but I just couldn't raise my game.

We were having a tsunami of injuries and every new calf strain, sprained ankle and dead leg just added to my personal burden and threatened to overwhelm me.

To what extent my staff saw it, I don't really know. They were all top-class men and always supported me anyway. One thing I am hopeful about is that the players never saw it. I am too professional (proud) for that. My head is clearing now and the exact sequence of events are coming into sharper focus; we had played Portsmouth, at Goodison Park, five days earlier, in the final game of the season. We won one-nil and the winning goal came with almost the last kick of the game.

A win bonus for us, in time for the summer break, while it was more despair and disappointment for them. It would be the last time Pompey would feature in the Premier League for some time, with their shocking descent

into the lowest tier of English professional football just starting.

We were all told to be in, at the training ground, on the following Thursday, because David and the senior coaching staff had been to London, for an awards dinner, earlier in the week.

I remember that I had done some running sessions with a couple of the injured lads, had a shower, and was sat in my office, having made the momentous decision to hand my notice in.

I was very calm as I walked the short distance to David's office. This was absolutely the right thing to do. My mental health was at stake. He was sat in his chair.

As I raised my hand to knock on his door, all those doubts, that I thought I had overcome, resurfaced.

'What the fuck are you doing? Giving up a six-figure salary, when you have got three kids who still need financial support? You have a mortgage, you fool!'

There were other financial commitments coming up as well, like university fees, driving lessons, weddings, birthday parties and designer clothes – all the things I never had as a kid.

What are you doing, you absolute idiot? Who gives up this kind of job? What will the kids think when we are going away in a caravan instead of a five-star hotel? Are you fucking mad? Have you lost your fucking marbles?'

I went back to my office and sat down. I was badly spooked.

Calm down.

On my desk was the schedule for the next pre-season. Bloody hell, it looked tough, with the usual four-day conditioning camp in Austria, followed by nearly two weeks travelling around Australia, with lots of double training sessions and pre-season games. A real tough five weeks.

My mind was made up (again). I just can't do that schedule. Off I went, to his office. David was still sitting in his chair. I raised my hand to knock but, again, I couldn't do it. What if my kids hated me for it, felt I had let them down and failed to provide for them?

Surely, they would rather have a relaxed, happy dad than material things. Wouldn't they? What would I want in their position?

Back to my office. Confused and anxious. This is becoming farcical. I sat down again. Thinking, thinking, trying to think more clearly – overthinking. Then, a knock on my door, and David came in, looking somewhat forlorn. Looking back now, I recall his pained expression.

He said: 'Baz, can you come down to my office, please?' I followed him down the corridor.

Here we go again, another meeting about the strategy for the flight to Australia. They had been pestering me for weeks about this. What strategies do we need to put in place during the flight? When should we eat, when should we stretch, when should we walk up and down the aisle, how much water should we drink, and on and on and fucking well endlessly on.

Typical sports science stuff. Making a huge complicated issue out of a simple flight. I was fed up with it all. There was even talk of some expert on jet lag coming in to do a presentation. Apparently, he developed the flight strategy for our Olympic team for the recent Sydney Olympics and I had to pencil in a meeting with him.

Expert on jet lag, for fuck's sake! Developed a strategy for a fucking simple business class flight. What next?

If I am being totally honest, another drain on my energy was being caused by the way the game was changing, with all the new sports science and fitness trends. Maybe I felt threatened by it all.

An old man, with even older ideas. Becoming obsolete? My ageing legs were starting to get increasingly tired in the running drills and, more worryingly, my left knee was starting to ache just a little bit. I really didn't think that any of this new stuff was relevant, or necessary.

Why make everything so complicated? Let's just get on the bloody plane at one end, and get off it at the other end, like everybody else will be doing. We are going business-class, after all. Why all the fuss about a simple flight? I went to Sydney twice myself and lived to tell the tale for God's sake. I really wasn't in the mood for all this nonsense.

While you lot were sat with a cup of coffee and a biscuit, on the laptops, looking up articles on Melatonin (a chemical used to induce natural sleep, often used during long-distance flights to mitigate against jet lag), I was out in the rain, running with the injured players (martyr). All this stuff makes me feel 91, not 51. But I could tell from David's demeanour that this was not routine stuff. He had an agonised look on his face. He didn't ask me to sit down.

'Baz,' he said, 'I am making a change at the head of the medical department.'

'What? Excuse me? What did you just say?'

Wow! What a shocker, what a complete, out-of-the-blue, all-time shocker. And that was that. Twelve words that severed 15 years of history.

I was out. I never got the chance to jump. I was absolutely devastated, shattered. I just got SACKED. Sacked, sacked, sacked! Keep saying that word. Hurting yourself with it. Enjoy the pain. SACKED, SACKED.

FUCKING WELL SACKED.

Everton Football Club, that I loved, and David Moyes, who I also loved, did not want me. They thought they could do BETTER without me. They felt that this club would BENEFIT from my not being here. They felt that somebody else could do the job BETTER. SACKED!

I don't know if the club would see it in such harsh terms. Is 'making a change' and getting sacked the same thing? Making a change is like giving me a break, isn't it? Maybe they thought they were doing me a favour. I suppose they were, really.

I can't remember what I said. I did mumble some incoherent nonsense, I think. It was difficult, so I just turned round and left. I think that, in a way, it had been MORE difficult for David.

They were going to give me a full and generous settlement on my contract, which presumably I wouldn't have got if I had knocked on his door two minutes earlier. To be fair, they were doing me a massive favour. Or were they?

What David Moyes showed me that day was that he truly was a brilliant manager and man. He went up even more in my estimation that day.

In truth, would I have ever found the courage and determination to knock on his door? I will never know the answer to that question.

It didn't matter now, anyway. What an extraordinary 45 minutes.

So now, sitting back in my driving seat, having had a chance to digest the brutal realities, and having deleted Fellaini twice more, how do I really feel? It would be disingenuous to pretend that I wasn't starting to feel – dare I say it – euphoric.

I was out, and felt embarrassed about it, but now I had the financial breathing space to just sit back for a few months and recharge my batteries, and decide, at leisure, what I wanted to do next.

I felt how Charles Atlas must have felt when he took the weight of the world off his shoulders. All the stress and pressure of the job gone, in a split second. Just like turning off a light.

On the way home, I was going to pull into Charnock Richard service station for a coffee, and a kip, in my car. I had gotten into the worryingly bad habit of doing that, over the last few months. It was just a little bit of me time; to switch off the mobile phone, and close my eyes, and chill out. De-stress.

Today, I didn't pull in, I didn't need to. I wasn't tired, all of a sudden. I felt fresh and energetic and unburdened. The thing about pressure is that you don't really notice it, until it's not there anymore. It goes on, bit by bit, day by day, gradually, and almost unnoticed – until the day that it's suddenly not there any longer. It's like those heavy sledges that you pull behind you in sprint drills; you only realise the effect they had when you take the weights off, and sprint effortlessly without them. Free as a bird.

When I arrived home and told my wife that I had been sacked (I have come to terms with the word now), she had mixed emotions. She was angry at the manager for doing what he did after all the work that I had put in at Everton over the last eight years.

She felt upset for me, because she knew, deep down, despite all my shit jokes about being careful not to put 'best wishes, Mick Rathbone' when I sign on the dole, my pride had taken one hell of a battering. However, her overriding emotion was relief that I would now have the chance to recharge my batteries.

My 13-year-old son burst into tears, until I informed him that he could still have that new PlayStation that we had promised him (only joking, Ollie – couldn't resist that one!).

Of course, the irony now is that due to my poor performance last season, I can now afford to buy him as many PlayStations as he wants.

Life's not fair. I can't complain, though.

The news of my demise had started to spread now, and I had numerous calls and texts from people at the club.

It was quite moving that so many people had bothered to contact me. I even got a text from Fellaini (from Belgium, I assume). Mikel Arteta phoned me. We had a great personal relationship but had disagreed professionally over the management of a couple of his injuries. He was worried that these fallings-out could have contributed to my sacking. I assured him it had nothing to do with any of that. He is a really nice guy and one of the best professionals that I had ever worked with.

The fact that everybody appeared to be so shocked by my departure made me feel a lot better about myself. Even though I had stopped enjoying the job, I had felt and hoped that none of the players saw it, and the expressions of disbelief from them reassured me that I had hidden my problems well.

One player phoned and said that he was going to refuse to play if I didn't get reinstated. I quickly talked him out of that nonsense. I was starting to enjoy my new, pressure-free life.

I would have been mortified if the players had felt that I was cutting corners or not paying my full attention to their injuries. Even so, to this day, I wonder if I did let my staff down, just a little bit, in that final season. Did I lead from the front and manage them well enough? I think they would all say yes, but that's the type of people they are, and I was so fortunate to have had them with me.

I know that, deep down, I didn't perform to my maximum that season. I am sorry about that.

I slept like a log that night. We had had a lot of injuries that season and even though I can assure you that I never injured any of them myself, it does get you down after a while.

It seems that everybody is looking at you (blaming you) and expecting you to perform miracles. I have spoken to many club physios over the years, and I know they all feel that same pressure.

When I first went to Everton back in 2002, things went fantastically well and we finished a magnificent seventh, despite being pre-season favourites for relegation. There was a feeling around the place that, just as much as David had transformed the whole ethos of the club, I had equally played a big part in turning around what was considered to have been an 'injured club'.

I remember being interviewed at the end of that season and that same point was made to me. I modestly – and truthfully – explained that it was mainly luck and that we had been fortunate with injuries that season.

The interviewer then made a remark, suggesting that not only had I transformed the medical department, but I was incredibly modest as well. I recall thanking him, but asking him to remember this interview, when we had had a lot of bad luck and the medical room was full, with the pressure mounting.

That injury-ravaged season, I had warned about, had just happened and it had certainly taken its toll on me.

Trudging up those stairs every morning to give the injury news, with a list as long as your arm, seeing the disappointment in the faces of the manager and coaching staff, really grinds you down after a while.

I had to go back into Finch Farm the next day to clear my desk. I am a bit ashamed to say, that, when I drove in, I felt fantastic. Stress-free. Maybe I shouldn't have. Maybe I should have felt like a failure – guilty and embarrassed – I am sorry, but I didn't.

There existed, at Finch Farm that day, a state of disbelief that I had been moved on (no more 'S-word'. I

have convinced myself it was just a parting of the ways, nothing more). I saw the brilliant ground staff guys. They were clearly shocked, as were the other non-football staff. Wow, what a nice feeling.

The icing on the cake, however, was that one of the ladies in the kitchen was actually crying because I was leaving. It was like the bloody last supper. It was close to being the happiest day of my life. How bizarre?

I emptied my desk of several family photos and my 'keep calm and carry on' place mat that my daughter Lucy had bought me recently. Pity I didn't take more notice of that particular piece of advice.

I had a final cup of coffee with my friends, Chris Woods, Jimmy Lumsden and Steve Round. All sympathetic, not really knowing what to say. Awkward.

Ironically, in less than four years' time, I would be sat drinking a final cup of coffee, with those same people, at one of the biggest clubs in the world, after THEY had all been sacked. David himself would suffer three highly public and premature parting of the ways before the ink dries on this book. That is football, my friends.

If you want me to give you a neat story that will explain how I now felt, this is it; on the way out of the building, for the last time, a senior player chased after me. He had been away for a couple of days, so didn't know that I had been substituted (ha ha, yes, that's a better word – substituted). He had just had an operation on his knee and was worried that the arthroscopy holes were becoming infected.

He rolled up his trouser leg and asked me what I thought. What did I think? Well, I didn't think, didn't care – didn't give a fuck! Not my problem now, mate. Somebody else's. If that same incident had happened only a couple of days earlier, the sweat would have already been pouring down my back as he rolled up his trouser leg.

For the record, his knee was fine and if it hadn't been, I would have taken the appropriate measures to sort it out – but you get the point ...

The pressure had gone, and I was glad. I felt like a completely different person.

By the time that I had got home that day, the social media jungle drums were out in full force. The consensus was that I had been relieved of my role due to the mismanagement of Phil Neville's knee injury. He had ended up having to have surgery six weeks after the initial injury.

I am sorry to let the truth get in the way of a good story, but it's simply not true. It was a complex injury that was managed correctly. The simple fact of the matter was that I had lost my mojo and David Moyes had done the correct thing for both myself and the club. I will never be able to thank him enough.

Head of the medical department at a Premier League club is a bloody tough, high-pressure job that requires dedication and commitment. If you lose your focus, you become a passenger. I had lost my edge and deserved to be sacked. Brutal, but fair.

I am my harshest critic. Always have been and always will be.

My wife went to bed and then my kids went to bed (isn't that the wrong order?) but I stayed up watching TV, waiting for the final indignity to be over and done with, so that the whole incident could officially become tomorrow's chip paper.

And there it was, early the next morning, as expected, on the yellow Sky Sports News breaking news banner ... 'Everton have parted company with physio Mick Rathbone ... Everton have parted company with physio Mick Rathbone..Everton have parted company with physio Mick Rathbone ... Everton have parted ...'

Turn it off, go to bed. We get the message. 'Parted company' – yes, I like that. I can live with that.

Lie-in tomorrow, LOL.