

THE SMELL OF FOOTBALL 3

**One Hundred Days
in the Dugout**

A black and white photograph of football boots and kit on a concrete floor. In the foreground, a pair of worn football boots sits on the floor. Behind them, a football jersey and shorts are crumpled. To the right, a bucket of water is visible. The scene is dimly lit, emphasizing the textures of the boots and the fabric of the kit.

Mick 'Baz' Rathbone



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About This Book

Life within a professional football club, seen through the eyes of the club physiotherapist, giving a real and honest insight into the day-to-day workings of a famous football club, playing in League 2.

Written in the form of a daily diary, it accurately portrays all the emotions of professional sport: the sheer unbridled joy and relief of a win, and the awful despair of defeat. The matchday drama is juxtaposed with the mundane, yet fascinating, day-to-day goings-on at a typical League 2 club. This 100-day diary encapsulates those almost carefree, pressure-free days of pre-season, where results don't matter – the lull before the storm – before the gloves eventually come off and the serious stuff starts, with that vital first league game of the 2024/25 football season.

A rollercoaster ride, with a gentle start, a fascinating middle and a truly shocking finale.

The *Smell of Football 3* gives you an authentic, warts and all insight into the world of professional football.

Day 1

Monday, 1 July 2024

Was a perfect day; it could hardly have gone any better. And I should know, because I am the expert on first days. Nobody has done more first days than me. I know how to perform on the first day. I know how it works. If I went on *Mastermind*, my specialist subject would be first days at football clubs. It certainly helped that everyone seemed so very, very pleased to see me. The Director of Football (DB) was really friendly and welcoming. The manager and his staff were friendly, and welcoming. The players were friendly and welcoming. There were numerous unexpected, pleasant surprises: the training kit is beautiful, the training pitches and associated facilities are brilliant, and, last but not least, there is even a coffee machine in the medical room!

Fanny tingles is the phrase that springs to mind. I have got a great feeling about this. I already know a lot of the staff and players. That's what happens when you spend nearly 50 years in football, and work with 20 teams. The only problem, though, is that at 65 years of age you can't remember any of their bloody names. Just faces.

On the first day of pre-season training there's always a special buzz around a club. Nervous excitement. New signings. Young players promoted

up to the senior squad. Daring to dream of promotion, play-offs, glory, goals and fame. For many of these players there will be none of the above; 92 teams dreaming of that glory. For most it will end in tears of disappointment.

Football is a bloody cruel game. Especially in a League 2 team on a very tight budget. Any success will be hard-fought. Just outside my new (and fantastically appointed) medical room is a glimpse of how tough this business can be. There are half a dozen training kits with no numbers on, in rolled-up towels. These are for the trialists – the players drinking in the last-chance football saloon. Released from their previous clubs. There are no takers, so they find themselves in the dog-eat-dog world of going on pre-season trial at a League 2 club. It will be very, very difficult for any of these guys to do enough to earn a contract over the next month or so and stay in the professional game. Good players all of them. Good CVs in most cases. Played at a higher level in some cases, but now with a common denominator of being on the slippery slope into part-time football and the financial implications that brings, for them and their families. Injuries, not being rated by the manager, face not fitting, loss of form at the wrong time. All or any of these have left them in this extremely vulnerable position.

My heart goes out to them. This is as far from the world of the Premier League, Sky TV, Rolex watches and Mercedes G-Wagons that you can possibly get. There's usually a significant amount of bad luck that has gone against many of these lads, and now they're in the shit.

I introduce myself to these lads, one by one, and get them to sign a form saying that if they get injured

they won't hold us liable for that injury or expect any medical care from us. Standard practice at all clubs. Harsh but practical, and necessary. Kick them when they are down.

Any one of them could be my son. I realised many years ago that I'm too soft. Too late to toughen up now.

We change at the small but beautifully appointed stadium and drive the kilometre to the training ground. The facilities are outstanding for this level, and I'm really enjoying the whole experience. There's a brand-new gym at the training ground, overlooking the pitches. You get a feel for a place, and this already feels great.

When I told my son that I had agreed to work full-time for Accrington Stanley this season, including running on the pitch on matchdays, he shook his head and told me I was off my rocker to make this commitment at 65 years of age. He may be right, but today he is wrong!

We have the usual nice, easy first day today. A few gym tests, to get some individual physical data, body-fat calibrations and flexibility scores. Brilliant. Don't make it too complicated. Too many clubs now do far too many tests and acquire far too much information that they never use, just to make themselves look forward-thinking. Finally, testing complete, boots on and out on to the grass pitches. Take it easy, plenty of time. No injuries, please. Especially to me.

Two lads get injured, and one lad has returned for pre-season training with an injury that he picked up training with his mates during the off-season. Three injuries and only day one. But there is good news, though. You have bloody well got Baz here, so everything will be fine. Never lost a player yet!

I join in with the warm-up. Feel great. Laughing, joking. *Chariots of Fire* opening sequence with the athletes emerging from the mist on St Andrews beach springing to mind. Some of the lads saying that it was their ninth or tenth or 12th pre-season – try 50!

My mind wanders back to my first-ever pre-season in 1975. So different. Nowadays, players invariably come back in great shape, having done all their off-season fitness plan and monitored their body weight. Back then it was completely different. Players had a much longer break, with no exercise programme in place. The only exercise some of those lads had was going to and from the bar for their next pint!

Some of the lads came back so overweight that they actually looked different. There was only one solution back then – cross-country! Every day for a fortnight (Saturday and Sunday included). We would walk from the Blues' training ground, through a farmer's field (now home of Solihull Moors) and descend en masse into Elmdon Park for the torture. On that walk, a few of the porkers would warn the younger, fitter apprentices, in no uncertain terms, to run in a group with them and not show them up, or there would be trouble! Legend has it that the great Kenny Burns on one occasion got his girlfriend to pick him up in the car halfway round the course. That all seemed a lifetime ago, a different era, a different me, as we set off, nice and easy, all wearing GPS discs and sporting fancy watches, with all the electrolyte drinks nearby. This is the modern game.

Ged (assistant manager) makes a great joke. Just before the gentle 12-minute run, he announces to the squad that Baz is going to join in, and anybody finishing behind him will have to do the run again. Brilliant, love

that Ged. Everyone laughs. I laugh. Little do any of them know that if I join in, half the buggers will have had to do it again. Brilliant stuff.

I am still very fit at 65. I used to be super-fit about 20 years ago. During a pre-season at Everton we did the infamous bleep test. After all the players had finished and gone for showers, I asked our fitness coach, Dave Billows, if he would let me have a go. I got the highest score in the test, by a whole level. I asked Dave to keep that as our secret. He let it slip, and Moyesy found out. He assembled all the lads in a group the next day and had a right go at them for being beaten by a man in his mid-40s! To be fair, it was all done tongue in cheek, because Moyesy knew how fit I was. The lads weren't happy, though, and said that I was a very bad person for telling the boss and getting them all a bollocking!

Great times. I will never forget them.

Ironically, it was Moyesy who was indirectly responsible for me cutting back on my training. Back then, in the early noughties, every day at Bellefield (our old training ground), after everybody had left for the day, I would run 10km on the running machine at 16km/h, while listening to The Beautiful South's greatest hits. I had already done shit loads of running in the morning with the injured players. I suppose I was addicted. Anyway, on this particular day I had got to about 8km when Moyesy came in and started watching me. He told me that he had a theory that you are born with a certain amount of heartbeats, and when you reach that number your heart will stop and obviously you will die.

Fucking hell. That really spooked me, and I pressed STOP. I never did any extra training ever again. Now, obviously, Moyesy is not an expert on the human heart,

but he has an incredible knack of being right about nearly everything.

Back to Accrington Stanley, and Day 1; got back to stadium after suitably light first-day session. Lots of laughter, banter and cappuccinos. This all feels so good.

Con, the other physio (I don't like the word assistant, because we are a team who work as equals), offers to make me a coffee, but I say, 'No, I will make the coffees, you sit down, mate.' I also insist on personally ordering all six different colours of sock tape for the season; three for first-team kits and three for goalkeepers' kits. Easy-peasy. What could possibly go wrong. Let's go home.

As I said – a perfect day.