



THE

UNHAPPY

A Revealing Insight into the Turbulent
Life of Lars Elstrup, Danish Darling
and Luton Town Striker

HERO

Carsten Fog Hansen and Jens Rasmussen

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Goodbye Football

‘EVER SINCE I signed my first contract, I’ve been considering how I could get out of it.’

It’s a mild summer day in 1993, and the man behind these words is leaving his large apartment at the intersection of Kongensgade and Dronningensgade in downtown Odense. Determined, he walks towards Odense Boldklub’s office, located further up Kongensgade, just a few minutes’ walk from his apartment. Not much time to change his mind. But that doesn’t matter. The man has made his decision. And it’s final. Now he just needs to announce it to the public. One fax to the country’s leading sports editorial offices, and it will be done. Over.

In the fax, the man will announce his immediate and sensational retirement as a professional football player. Sensational because it involves a mere 30-year-old national team player, European champion, Superliga star, former foreign professional, and star striker for the newly crowned Danish silver medal and cup winners.

He has formulated the wording of the fax in less than 20 minutes, but the considerations behind it have been brewing for years. Several years, in fact. In reality, he decided on retirement two years earlier. A lucrative contract in English top-level football

was within reach, but instead, he chose to return to his hometown club, OB. A club he knew. In an environment where he felt at home. A fitting place to end his career. The two-year contract with OB would be his last in his professional career. He knows it. He has made his decision. In the summer of 1993, it's over.

No more professional football for Lars Elstrup.

Preparation

In the summer of 1991, Lars returned to Denmark after two seasons with the then English First Division club Luton Town. And now, at least mentally, he can sense that he is nearing the end as a professional football player. Sporting-wise, the past year in the small town 30 miles north-west of London has been sufficiently successful, and he has scored plenty of goals. But over the two seasons in the top professional game, the daily competition has taken its toll on Lars's worn psyche. Increased performance anxiety has planted poisonous doubts in his fragile mind. Doubts that nag at him and increasingly challenge his fundamental joy of the game. And it's not just his goalscoring ability and experience from English football that he brings back across the North Sea to the pride of Funen, Odense Boldklub. Deep melancholy also permeates his otherwise celebrated existence at the club. But only Lars himself knows what stirs beneath the surface. Inside him. And it's not anything particularly positive. He feels mentally trapped. Lacking joy. In football. In daily life. In life itself.

Everyone knows Lars Elstrup. At least, they know the football player Elstrup. His retirement will undoubtedly attract attention and ignite speculation in the sports press. The retirement will seem sudden, surprising, and peculiar to all football enthusiasts in the country. Just a few months after his 30th birthday and a week and a half after the season ended as a star for the Danish league

runners-up. A little over a year after his goal sent Denmark to the European Championship semi-finals. And where his intuition and successful penalty kick contributed to Denmark's sensational appearance in the final.

But Lars is preparing for his farewell. He feels it inside. That's what he wants. What he desires. Because behind the predominantly successful facade, Lars has been struggling with his many anxiety attacks and severe depressions, even in the midst of the most celebrated match in Danish football history.

However, it is not that experience or other mentally burdensome incidents that he wants to justify his retirement with. And he doesn't need to because he can give another, less suspicious reason for his retirement: his chronic knee problems. Nothing mysterious about it. He is far from the first top player who has had to retire before the expected date due to physical injuries. And after 12 senior seasons with gruelling physical demands, bone-threatening tackles, and ligament-testing obstacles, Lars knows that. And the people around him can understand it too. Or so he hopes. But for Lars, the knee problems are just the excuse he has been waiting for, for years.

The smile that disappeared

The truth is, for about as many years as a football player usually dreams of victories and success, he has mostly wished to be free from it all. Wished to be freed from the burdensome yoke that being a professional has often been for him.

But he has still held on to his professional career. Hoping to get better over time. With himself, the professional football environment, performance anxiety. But he has also held on to the career to not disappoint or let anyone down. Team-mates, club management, his father, the fans, friends, and himself.

But now he can't take it any more. His body and mind are worn out.

In particular, the latter has left its mark on him. Over a longer period, he has been feeling worse and worse. His warm smile has long receded into the background. Erased by anxiety, worry, and melancholy.

'At that time, I was 30 years old and couldn't smile. When I walked down the street and saw other people smiling. I thought, "I would also like to smile again!"' reflects Lars.

It's not like people have noticed the absence of his smile. Lars has played his role as the cheerful football player to the fullest. He has put on the right face, complied, and done what was expected of him. And he has played the role so well that he has even fooled those closest to him.

'When people see pictures of me from back then, they say, "But you were such a happy guy and always so nice to be around. You were smiling and at the top of your career!" But my smile wasn't genuine,' he says. Lars also didn't let his then partner Charlotte get close enough to share in his inner thoughts and concerns.

'I am just like that or I grew up thinking that you can't talk to others about anything or any problems. So everything was kept inside me. I couldn't express myself, and I felt that when I said something, it was completely wrong,' Lars continues, beginning his reasoning about the lack of dialogue about his problems, in relationships and life in general.

'I remember one time when Charlotte wanted to talk to me at the dining table. She could sense that something was wrong with me, but all I could think about was when I could get away from that table and out the door because I didn't want to talk to anyone about anything.

‘And it would have been a defeat in advance if, for example, I had sought out a psychologist. It would have shown signs of weakness if I had needed help, right? That was completely out of the question for me to talk to a psychologist or, for that matter, any other person because then others could use it against me. So even that was completely out of the question in the world I lived in.’

Not even among his team-mates at Odense has anyone noticed anything. The contrast between Lars’s status in the side as a national team player and top scorer and his own self-perception is enormous.

‘I was the star of the team, but I was afraid to go to training, afraid to play a match, afraid to drive a car, afraid to be out in society. I trembled at the thought of having to perform,’ he recalls.

But now it has to end. Lars has made his decision. The season is over, and his contract with OB has expired. He has been plagued by injuries in the past season and feels justified in quitting football. But deep down, he also has no desire to stand up and formally bid farewell. He just wants to get away from it all. To disappear, and find himself and his own space. He doesn’t want to have to answer a lot of questions.

On the other hand, he feels that he owes the world an explanation. After all, he is a popular figure among OB’s fans. Not least for his friendly nature but also because he has made a significant contribution to the team with 24 goals in 44 matches, helping them secure the national cup and a place in Europe.

The broader public also vividly remembers how Elstrup secured Denmark a place in the European Championship semi-finals in June 1992 with his winning goal against France. That goal has for ever cemented his name in Danish football history and made him popular among the football-loving Danes, who

have also enjoyed 12 other Elstrup goals in the national team jersey. He is aware of all this. The expectations of the world are not new to him. That's why he chooses to announce his retirement via fax instead of simply disappearing.

'I was a public figure and a well-known name. That's why I felt that I had to announce my retirement instead of just disappearing without resurfacing,' says Lars.

The decision has been made and cannot be changed. Lars just needs to send the fax. And although he has had the decision in his thoughts for a long time, he hasn't shared it with anyone except Charlotte.

'Because it was a decision I was happy to have made and could stand by. And you like to share good things with your girlfriend,' Lars admits.

Space ahead

In essence, he has kept the decision a secret because he didn't want people to try to talk him out of it. At OB, he is still a valuable asset. Perhaps one of the best players the club has ever had. He will be very difficult to replace, and director Jørgen Bækkelund has been pressuring Elstrup for a contract extension. After all, he is only 30 years old and has several good seasons left in him as a player, Bækkelund reminds him. Despite the increasing injuries, Elstrup's main strength, his goalscoring ability, remains intact, and he has been among the Superliga's top performers in the past season. There would even be room for Elstrup to lower his level a bit or play fewer minutes and still make a significant contribution to OB's first team. But he has rejected any extension.

He puts the concise A4 page in the fax machine and presses the send button. The paper with the announcement slowly

makes its way through the machine and spreads out to the country's sports editorial offices. Now it's done. Now the message is out there, and they can all think what they want. The press, team-mates, the club, family, fans. He lets out a sigh of relief, takes a moment to gather his thoughts, and prepares to leave the office at OB, his last football club. He wants to get away quickly. He has already planned a summer vacation with his girlfriend and has no desire to be confronted about his decision. He doesn't want to deal with the reactions that will inevitably come once his decision is known. Perhaps the journalists will inquire about the content of the fax? Maybe even dig into whether the chronic injuries are the sole reason for his retirement? He's not ready for that. And he doesn't want to answer any more questions.

As he is leaving, the office phone rings. It's the first journalist calling. The experienced Torben Larsen from daily newspaper *BT*, whom Lars has a good relationship with. Larsen wants to meet Elstrup for an interview but is turned down. He can read what's in the press release. But yes, the decision is final, and nothing can change it, Lars asserts in his brief comment.

Lars still doesn't know what he will do next. He has been playing football since he was six years old. For the past seven years, he has made a living from it. He could return to working in a bank, but changing jobs is not something he is considering at all. He doesn't need it either. His football career has earned him enough money, and he doesn't have to work for many years. But those thoughts haven't dominated him or motivated his decision.

'At that time, I had no plans for the future, and I wasn't thinking about spiritual seeking either,' says Lars.

‘What I thought about was that something was wrong, and now it had to be enough. I needed to distance myself from something that wasn’t good for me, something that prevented me from smiling.

‘Along the way in the decision-making process, I also thought about Lasse Skov, my former team-mate, who had taken a sabbatical period where he sailed around in his own boat in the Mediterranean. It had triggered a lot of thoughts in me because that was precisely the kind of space I was looking for. A place where you could breathe a little easier, regain your composure, or feel better in some way.

‘But the most important thing was the feeling of finding a sanctuary. The feeling of being free, not bound by anything or any contract. Not having to do anything. Not having to go to training or show up at work. But being able to be myself and do the things I truly wanted to do.’

Initially, the space is set in his in-laws’ summer house in Hasmark on the island of Funen. Lars spends a long and pleasant summer vacation there with Charlotte, filled with romance, beach trips, and enjoying ice-cream. Plenty of free time, the numbing feeling of freedom, no football matches. Space for Lars Elstrup.