

T I M H A R T L E Y

THE WORLD AT YOUR FEET

ONE MAN'S SEARCH FOR THE SOUL
OF THE BEAUTIFUL GAME



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**THE
WORLD
AT YOUR FEET**

IN SEARCH OF
THE SOUL OF FOOTBALL



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How It All Started

THE CHANTS grew louder, the crowd swayed as one and I lost my footing, tumbling down under a heap of young men in flares and tank tops. I avoided a Doc Marten boot and struggled back to my feet with as much self-respect as I could muster. ‘Yeah. Nothin’ mate,’ I mumbled, not that anyone was listening. For this was 1976. It was a week after my 16th birthday and I was a lone ‘lad’ on Cardiff City’s Grange End terrace but this time supporting my national team. No dad beside me, certainly no mum in those days. Just me. And boy was I petrified.

This was no normal game. It was Wales v Yugoslavia and at stake was a place in the semi-final of the European Championships. We had lost the first leg 2-0 in Zagreb but our hopes were high. In terms of tangible success over the years, let’s just say that the footballing gods had not been kind to Wales. Getting this far, reaching the last eight of the Euros, seems to have been almost airbrushed from our nation’s sporting history. Before me that day, though, were some of the best Welsh players of their generation: John

Toshack, Terry Yorath and Leighton James. I don't think we realised how good this class of '76 was until well after the event.

The atmosphere inside Cardiff's Ninian Park was intense that afternoon; 30,000 fans packed the ancient, battered but oh so real football ground. It was also, sadly, the golden age of football hooliganism where passion, alcohol and teen spirit could lead almost anywhere. Up until then I had been more of a rugby boy and, compared with the respectful atmosphere watching the Black and Blues at the Cardiff Arms Park, this was to be a jolting culture shock. Sure, I had been 'down the City' on a couple of occasions, but that was with Brett from Barry and his dad who had chaperoned us well before kick-off to the posh seats in the Grandstand. This, though, this was something else.

I will never forgive the powers that be for denying generations of supporters the visceral experience of watching a football game standing on a terrace in a traditional ground. I was mesmerised by the sights, sounds and smells of Ninian Park. The enormous floodlights stretched high into the late spring sky like *War of the Worlds* giants peering over the cavernous stands below.

Four or five times a year Ninian Park hosted Wales's international matches. Bob Marley played a gig there just two months after the Yugoslavia match and Pope John Paul II also graced the pitch in 1982. It was a stadium venue before they became a big deal. In normal times it was the home of Cardiff City FC. The dark and imposing Grange End was Cardiff's 'end', where their noisy and partisan fans stood. Over the years the boys had rubbed shoulders with the best of Britain. Liverpool had the Kop, Manchester

United the Stretford End. We had the Grange End, like a mighty cave behind the goal. Who knew what beasts lay within?

There was a special Boys' Enclosure at the very front of the terrace, which was separated by a small wall from the main enclosure behind. If you leant on the wall you were just inches from the pitch itself. You could hear the players shout at each other and smell the wintergreen. We stood on ascending rows of blackened railway sleepers. TV cameras sat on a precarious platform dangling above our heads. Years later, I was told by a cameraman how they would shin up the gantry well before kick-off dragging the ladder behind them, 'Because you never know.'

There was a strange open-fronted shed with a sign saying 'Radio Ninian' at the far corner of the ground to our left. I think this basic tannoy system under a corrugated roof fancied itself as a pirate station washed up on the shores of Lake Ninian. It announced the teams, the half-time scores, the results of the Golden Goal competition and played us in and out of the stadium with ska classics. Every time I hear 'Liquidator' by Harry J All Stars, with its tinny drums and organ melody, I am taken back to that terrace and my mind conjures up the smell of Brut aftershave and chips fried in old oil.

A horde of faceless souls occupied this vast end. Our end. The Grange End. Pensioners in weather-beaten flat caps shielded children at the front, shaven-headed monsters with giant boots and braces behind. My hair was long in those days but I wore the obligatory check shirt and tank top. In the darkness of the stands a thousand cigarettes flickered. No smoke-free zones then.

It may have been Wales not Cardiff today but the routine was much the same. I found a space halfway up but close enough to the front so that I could seek refuge in the Boys' Enclosure if needs be. Sixteen is a slightly awkward age isn't it? I could play the hard man with the Ely and Llanrumney boys if I liked. But I was still fresh-faced enough that I could appeal to a steward's or a copper's paternal nature if the going got tough. And the going was about to get tough. 'One, two, three, four, five. If you wanna stay alive. Keep off the Grange End!' The chant sounds rather puerile now. It was then too but it was also great fun.

Captain Terry Yorath and his team though were the real men that day. It may be the quality of the television pictures from that time but looking back it seems the players then lacked the finesse of today's stars, such as Gareth Bale and Aaron Ramsey. But they had something else. They got stuck in. Forget the modern game's fitness regimes, dieticians and statistical analysis, in 1976 it seemed all we needed was passion and the will to win.

Either way it went horribly wrong for Wales from the word go. Yugoslavia were awarded a controversial penalty. Bang; 3-0 down on aggregate. Wales fought back and scored a goal to give us a glimmer of hope. We won a penalty which Yorath agonisingly fluffed, and we saw two further goals by Toshack contentiously ruled out by the referee Rudi Glöckner. One was for offside, the other because the East German official deemed that a John Mahoney bicycle kick assist was dangerous play.

There was something fishy going on. Glöckner had refused to start the match until the East German flag was flown above Ninian Park. Was he now deliberately

favouring a fellow ‘communist’ team? I am not sure geopolitics entered into it on the Grange End that day, but the Welsh crowd went berserk anyway. Beer bottles and cans rained down on the pitch and some fans tried to climb the perimeter fence to get at Herr Glöckner. The stewards and police struggled to contain the crowd. Glöckner stopped the game and threatened to abandon it altogether. If that had happened it would have been awarded to Yugoslavia anyway.

At the final whistle a linesman was speared by a corner post – all because Wales had drawn an international football match. Yes, the refereeing had been questionable, but throwing a corner flag at a linesman. Really? The fans’ performance that day earned Wales a UEFA ban from playing in Cardiff. For me though it had been a baptism of fire. I loved every enthralling, foul-mouthed and scary minute of it.

But there is a sporting history lesson here too. Ask most football fans and they will say the only finals Wales ever qualified for were the World Cup in 1958 and the Euros in 2016. Not so. Under their new manager Mike Smith that class of ’76 were also a great team. They had beaten Hungary, Austria and Luxembourg, and to top their qualifying group, only to lose over two legs to this lot, ‘the Brazil of the Balkans’. This match was their European finals.

Smith is perhaps one of Wales’s more underrated managers. He deserves a lot of credit not just for this tournament but for his overall record with the national team. In his two spells in charge he oversaw 40 games, winning 15, drawing 11 and losing 14. He also had some interesting motivational techniques. Apparently the night before a match he would stick life-sized photos of the opposition on

the walls of the Welsh players' rooms so they could get to know them. 'Rather footballers than the Bay City Rollers,' as he allegedly put it.

Ah, the 1970s, the decade that gave us Chopper bikes, 10cc on the jukebox, *Seaside Special* on TV and scarves tied around your wrist. It was also the decade of the 'dirty' Leeds team, the rise of Liverpool FC, the Home Internationals and the start of the club v country argument. Then there was Wales's superb Admiral kit, red with vertical tramlines either side in yellow and green and the crest bang in the centre. They didn't make replica kits for us fans in those days. I now wear a latter-day cotton copy of this shirt to every Wales match.

Perhaps it was the format of the European tournament in those days (only the semis and the final were played in one country) but this Wales team have become the forgotten men of international football. We rightly laud the groups of 1958 and 2016, but not the heroes of '76. For many of the men who gave their all at Ninian Park that May afternoon, the lack of recognition still hurts. As the captain Terry Yorath says, 'To this day it annoys me ... we actually reached the quarter-finals of the European Championship with no help from anyone.' I agree, but for me this match will never be forgotten and I am privileged to be able to say that 'I was there'.

In the 40-plus years since that Yugoslavia game I have wondered whether this was the moment I fell in love with football. I moved away from Cardiff and only watched the occasional match from the terraces (Arsenal, if you must know). However, I never forgot the shared elation of the crowd at Ninian Park as that Ian Evans goal went in, the

anger when the penalty was not awarded, the sheer wildness of it all. Yes, I was only 16, but it sticks with you doesn't it?

Since then I have watched football at all levels and all over the world, lower leagues, cup finals and play-offs. Nothing though can compare with that Saturday in May 1976. Maybe I am chasing my lost youth and that first, never-to-be-repeated, football fix. What a journey it has been. Long may it continue.