



“Every Port Vale supporter should get down on their knees and thank the Lord for John Rudge.”

Sir Alex Ferguson

To Cap
It All

The Autobiography of

JOHN RUDGE

With Simon Lowe

Forewords by
Sir Alex Ferguson, Carol Shanahan
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Chapter 1

Stepping into Denis Law's Shoes (and Bed)

'I lay there, in Denis Law's bed, wondering if I would ever be sold for £55,000. I don't think I even totalled that amount of transfer fees in my entire career!'

John Rudge

I WAS born in Wolverhampton on 21 October 1944 as the Second World War drew to its bitter close. I lived with my sister Pat, who is six years older than me and so clever I always say she was born with my brains, in a typical three-up, three-down terraced house on the Dudley Road just outside the town centre with our parents, Marie and Jack (although his christened name was Frank Harold Rudge, everyone called him Jack). In keeping with those kinds of properties, the house didn't have an inside toilet at the time. We had to brave the cold to visit the privy in the backyard, which was not only open to the stars, but had no light, which made visits after dusk problematic. My main memory of this contraption isn't during that time, but stems from the first occasion I took my then girlfriend, and now wife, Del, to meet my parents. I had to guide her out into the open air to find the toilet and then stand guard so no one else tried to enter. It wasn't what she was used to, and she came from Huddersfield!

Ours was a warm family environment, although my father was a Jekyll and Hyde character. He was an accomplished capstan operator, setting and operating a capstan lathe at a factory works in Wolverhampton; that is when he fancied going to work, which wasn't that often. His split personality emerged when he'd had a drink, which was most nights. Dad was a complex man, but I know he would have loved to see me succeed in football management. He died in 1972, when I was playing for Bristol Rovers. He did come to watch me play occasionally throughout my career, though.

My mother was a proud, hard-working woman who ran a fruit and veg market stall at Wolverhampton market for over 60 years. I can still remember her shouting in a loud, Black Country voice, 'I weigh bananas; anyone want a nice pound of pears ...?' Mum had that stall until she was 80 years old. Remarkable.

We had other relations who worked on the market, so it really did feel like a family down there. My Uncle Jack had an indoor stall that specialised in Asian food. He had served in the Royal Air Force in India and was familiar with its dishes and spices, so found a niche in the market, particularly with the growing Asian population in the area. I helped him for the princely sum of two shillings and sixpence a day, the equivalent of about 12 pence now, but worth considerably more to me. As a result, I can still count in Punjabi to this day. We used to have dozens of old biscuit tins lined up containing goods like black-eyed peas, chilli powder and curry powder. I remember we used to go up to Birmingham to buy rice, which was weighed out in measures and put in brown sugar bags. It was a thriving business. I still remember the occasion when I was twirling a bag of turmeric powder and it burst, showering the customer in a sea of yellow. It took forever to get that out of my hair. Yes, I did have hair back then.

I started on the market very young (it saved mum paying for childcare which she simply couldn't afford, I suppose), helping my mother out, first pushing the little truck full of stock to and from

the wholesalers' van to the stall, before graduating to selling to customers. Then on a Saturday afternoon I would go and watch my boyhood team Wolves when they were at home, taking one of the fruit and veg boxes with me to stand on so I could see over the wall of the paddock, which sank down some way beneath pitch level, to admire my heroes. I wasn't particularly tall then, so really needed the box. Some say I haven't grown since!

Mum strove to enable my sister and I to enjoy a loving, close, Catholic upbringing on scant resources and tried to get both of us everything we required. She bought me a leather-cased football that was the talk of the street. Older boys used to knock on our door to see if I was coming out to play and, if I couldn't, could they borrow my ball? I would be out like a flash as often as I could. Playing with older and stronger boys probably helped me being selected for St Mary's and St John's Primary School Under-11 football team when I was just seven years old.

'Can you play with your left foot, Rudge?' asked the teacher who picked the team. 'Of course I can,' I responded. So, I played, despite being three or four years younger. I don't know why, but the older boys called me 'Oscar'.

So now my Saturdays consisted of helping out down the market, playing football for the school, then going to watch the Wolves in the afternoon. Blissful times.

I moved on to St Joseph's secondary modern school, but I was only interested in football, not academic subjects, and was selected to represent Wolverhampton Schoolboys, training with the squad a couple of evenings a week, having been recommended by one of my teachers.

At that time Wolverhampton Wanderers were one of the best clubs in the world, with a team packed full of England internationals, including wizard winger Johnny Hancocks, who was my role model as a small, lithe, quick attacker, Ron Flowers, a teak-tough midfielder, and legendary captain Billy Wright. Under manager Stan Cullis, Wanderers won the league title in 1953/54 and took

part in prestigious floodlit, televised friendlies against European clubs such as the Hungarians Honvéd and touring Soviet sides Dynamo and Spartak Moscow, plus Real Madrid. These games were the precursor for the European Cup, which began in 1955, and has now developed into the Champions League. I remember that famous game against Honvéd on 13 December 1954 so well. Wolves won 3-2 and Cullis claimed our heroes to be world champions afterwards, as they had beaten the side which boasted most of the Hungarian team which had thrashed England 6-3 at Wembley just a year before. The thing I particularly recall is the Hungarians going two goals ahead early on, but then Wolves overpowering them in the second half. The equaliser and winning goals were scored in a quick two-minute salvo by Roy Swinbourne, a wonderful centre-forward, both from passes by amateur striker Dennis Wilshaw, who, despite being an England international, was also a schoolteacher.

My fruit and veg box allowed me to see the likes of Puskás, Yashin and Di Stéfano, all of whom were fabulous players, and I also remember an FA Cup tie in January 1957 against Bournemouth in which one of the Cherries' players, Reg Cutler, hit the headlines for breaking a goal post as the third-tier club beat mighty Wolves 0-1, causing a huge shock.

Another hero of mine was the England goalkeeper Bert Williams. Bert used to happily sign autographs as he walked from Molineux out and about into Wolverhampton and would look like the Pied Piper with a stream of youngsters in his wake. There were so many lads keen to get his signature that, by the time it was your turn, you could be a quarter of a mile away from the ground!

I was lucky because I had a wonderful mentor in the shape of my sister's boyfriend and then, later, my brother-in-law, Peter Clark. Peter was playing for the reserves and was understudy to Eddie Clamp, the former Arsenal and England international, who anchored Wolves' midfield. Peter used to take me down to Molineux to watch games, and also into the park to work on my technique, but unlike him, I never realised my ambition to wear the famous gold

and black shirt as Wolves declined to sign me on as an apprentice, despite my star turns for the schoolboys team, when I reached the age of 15 in 1959. I always felt that was because they thought I was too small, but even by the age of 15, I was 5ft 7in and would go on to grow to 5ft 10in. I know what you're thinking, he's never that tall!

I was inconsolable, but help was at hand swiftly in the form of Lawrie Kelly, a former player who was scouting for Huddersfield Town, who were in Division Two at the time. Myself and a lad called Graham French, who was a left-winger and went on to have a decent career at Shrewsbury and Luton, had been playing together in the Wolverhampton schoolboys team and, at the end of one game, Lawrie approached us and said, 'How would you fancy going to Huddersfield as apprentices?'

We jumped at the chance.

Luckily, even though I was only 15, my parents said I could go. I looked at my grandson when he was 15 and couldn't believe at that age I was allowed to disappear off to the north to live in a completely unknown Yorkshire town. I can only think my parents knew I had to pursue my dream, having seen my utter devastation at having been told Wolves weren't going to sign me. So, I joined the Huddersfield Town 'ground staff' – the term used in those days for being an apprentice.

To start with I didn't live up in Yorkshire all the time, but caught the train from Wolverhampton on a Monday morning and returned after the Saturday morning youth team game. Quickly, though, I moved into digs full-time.

As it happened, days before I arrived at Leeds Road in March 1960, Huddersfield had sold Denis Law to Manchester City for a British record fee of £55,000. The digs I initially moved into was a big, shared property in Milnsbridge, owned by a Mrs Sobey, which housed a mix of apprentices and established players. In fact, my bed was in a row of three in this room and had recently been vacated by none other than Law himself. Denis was four and a half years older than me, so that gave me something of a target to aim for!

So, here I was sleeping in the Lawman's bed (as he was known) and, as I lay there, finding myself wondering if I would ever be sold for £55,000. The answer turned out to be a resounding 'no'. I don't think I even totalled that amount of transfer fees in my entire career!

On top of that, one of the first things I found in my section of the wardrobe was a pair of Denis's smart, black shoes which he had somehow left behind. It must have been the enormous signing-on fee of around £50 he'd received that caused him to forget them, I'd imagine ...

The other two lads in the room confirmed that I could have these smart size sevens, which was my size, but I thought I'd make a present of them to my father. So, I took them home and gave them to dad, who was over the moon. No sooner had I told him whose shoes they were, than he togged himself up smart and wore them down the pub, telling everyone who'd listen that he was wearing Denis Law's shoes! Dad did this regularly for years.

It was so cold in Mrs Sobey's house that we kept our woollen football socks on in bed and it was so damp that when we put our pyjamas in front of the little gas fire to get them warm, steam rose off them in a cloud. There were frequent fights amongst the lads over playing cards and I learned of one incident when Denis was reported to have punched one lad straight through the window. As for food, everything came with chips and fag ash – so much for a footballer's healthy diet in those days.

There was nothing glamorous about being a ground staff boy at a Second Division club. We did all the menial chores like getting on our hands and knees to scrub the corridor with a brush and soap on Fridays, ready for the match on Saturday. We were spurred on by the hope of finding a bob or two, but we suspected the groundsman had already conducted his search.

The first-teamers would train on the pitch on Mondays and we'd be ready to leap over the perimeter wall to make up the numbers to show the pros how promising we were if their numbers were depleted through injury or illness. Our organised football

was restricted to the Northern Intermediate League on Saturday mornings and after the game I would hurry to the station to catch the train home, via Stoke, never realising the Potteries would play such a large part in my life.

I must admit it was tearful at times when, as a young lad, I left my parents' house at 6.30am on a Monday to head back to Huddersfield, taking with me my clean washing that had been aired in front of the living room fire, whilst hoping the train would get me to the ground for a 9am start or I'd be punished with even more chores.

I often wondered while on that train whether I really wanted the heartache of being away from my family, but I desperately wanted to become a professional footballer and was driven on by my determination. My brother-in-law, Peter, was a massive influence in urging me on, himself a professional until a serious knee injury ended his aspiration to be a First Division player. He eventually moved on to Doncaster, Mansfield, Stockport and Crewe in the lower leagues. Sadly, Peter eventually had to retire, a lesson for me in the fragility of footballers' careers.

* * *

I started at Huddersfield at £7 a week as an apprentice. From that, I would have to fund my regular visits home to see my folks. During those trips, I also continued to help out at the market to earn some extra pennies. Even when I turned pro, I carried on working at the market in the summer break to top up my earnings. Buying and selling was part of my upbringing and it stood me in good stead later in my career at Bournemouth when injuries prevented me from playing and also, I believe, in the horse trading that is buying and selling footballers when I became a manager. Can you imagine a modern footballer doing that now?

That work ethic stood me in good stead for life, as did the one proviso my parents gave me when I started as a 15-year-old with Huddersfield Town; I had to get myself a back-up trade.

I hadn't been the Brain of Britain at school, being obsessed with football, as I say, but I started going to college, learning initially to be a radio and television engineer, one day a week on top of my apprentice duties at Huddersfield. I remember the chap taking the course simply putting a television in front of me at the college and just saying, 'right, there's a fault on there, find it'. No other assistance or advice given! I had no chance. All the other students on the course were already working in TV shops and that kind of thing, so they had that background and regular working practice. I was kicking footballs around. So, that didn't last long.

I was still gently nudged regularly by my mother, who was desperate to know I had something to fall back on, so I dabbled in a range of other courses, sometimes on days off, sometimes in the evenings and gained GCE 'O' levels in English, management and accountancy. All that studying meant that I always had something outside football on the go throughout my career. Also, when it came to management, I was ready for the long and lonely evenings driving to watch players, studying form and tactics.

The club didn't push any kind of education agenda. That sort of thing came in much later, with football academies now ensuring their youngsters take and pass exams, as well as learn football skills. My major concern, although not as great as my mother's, was what would I do if I didn't get signed on professionally? In the 1950s and 60s, football clubs didn't give two hoots about that.

More is the pity, perhaps, that I did not study physiotherapy at night school as, even then as a young player, I was struggling with injuries, picking up knocks, strains and stresses all the time. My hamstrings were a big problem and these issues blighted my career. My physique also wasn't the strongest; my legs were like sticks, but that liteness allowed me to flit round defenders, so it worked both ways. At that time, we didn't do weights or anything like that to bulk up. On Fridays, as light preparation for the following day's game, we used to don our spikes and go sprinting, which was my strength as I was quick, but there was very little that made us

stronger built into our training. In common with many sprinters, my hamstrings often tweaked. I'd liken myself in that sense to former England striker Michael Owen, who I would later sign for Stoke City, in that sense, but it is the only comparison I can draw between him and me!

As it turned out, though, I never used that education directly to get myself a job outside football, but I firmly believe that having it, and indeed the drive, nous and dedication to achieve all that instead of just sitting back on my laurels and assuming I would continue to have a career in the game, stood me in great stead when it came to being offered coaching and then managerial positions.

* * *

Despite those injury issues, I was taken on when many weren't and turned professional in November 1961 just after my 17th birthday. By then I was 5ft 10in tall, decent with my head and fast as a whippet. At least that's how I tell it.

Not everyone was as lucky. Graham French, the lad I had been spotted alongside, blotted his copybook one day when he was walking from the ground up the road to a nearby cafe in a small group, including me. As we walked, we saw this girl walking towards us and for some reason Graham decided to shout at her, 'Are you dropping 'em tonight?'

Not surprisingly the girl took great offence and, realising that we were young footballers, she went into the mill where she worked next to the ground and told the manager, who then told the owner, who happened to be a director of Huddersfield Town, what had occurred. Graham was sent home after that.

I made my debut the following season, in which we ended up sixth in the Second Division under manager Eddie Boot. But I couldn't make the breakthrough into the first team, appearing mostly for the reserves when I wasn't injured. I also had a slight problem in that, try as I might, I could never get my left foot to be as good as my right. If I'm honest, as good as my right was, and it

was very good, my left was as weak. I could never improve it, despite working so hard on it.

At that time, Huddersfield were a good Second Division club that included Raymond Wilson, who would go on to play left-back in England's 1966 World Cup-winning side, Mike O'Grady, an exceptional left-winger, and former England goalkeeper Ray Wood, who had survived the Munich air crash in February 1958. He had played only one more game for Manchester United following the disaster, joining Huddersfield that summer. The manager, Eddie Boot, ran a tyre business on the side and never swore, but had the knack of winding players up, so they often did.

We often used to play in the big car park just outside the ground so we didn't wreck the pitch. Beforehand, Eddie would come into the apprentices' dressing room and tell us not to be overawed by the 'fupping' (his version of the F word) pros or let them kick us about. He would then go and tell the first team not to let the youngsters get the better of them. By the time we got out there we were all spitting blood. There were often fights in that car park, plus a lot of bad grazes from some of the tackles that flew in on the totally inappropriate surface. It was a unique managerial style, I suppose.

My problem as a youngster was displacing the two strikers who were in possession of the first-team shirts as they were both hugely experienced pros who scored fairly regularly. One was Scottish striker Les Massie, who netted over 100 goals for Town in a ten-year career at Leeds Road. He was in his heyday while I was trying to break through, which made my job very difficult.

Alongside Les was senior pro Len White, a stocky, powerful striker who was coming to the end of a wonderful career in which he had become Newcastle United's second-highest scorer, with 153 goals, behind Jackie Milburn, his team-mate in the heady days of the Magpies winning FA Cups in the 1950s. Both were, of course, overtaken by Alan Shearer in the early 2000s. With that pair ahead of me there were few opportunities to make the breakthrough.

Successfully making the first team, however, was Chris Balderstone, who was a little older than me and had risen through the ranks after signing as a 17-year-old from Shrewsbury Town, where he had been a youth player. 'Baldy' was one of those admirable, but annoying, individuals who was good at every sport, eventually making a dual career in both football and as a cricketer, even playing for England, then going on to become an umpire. As a footballer he was a lovely, skilful midfielder who could see a great pass and deliver it, like radar. To be either is fantastic. To be both is exceptional.

I got on very well with Chris and we ended up as big pals. I was amazed at his ability to play both sports to such a high standard and his dedication to mastering the skills of each. Later in his career he would famously play both football and cricket professionally on the same day; turning out for Leicestershire during the day in a County Championship match against Derby at Chesterfield, ending the day 51 not out, and then haring 30-odd miles up the M1 to play for Doncaster Rovers that evening in a 1-1 draw against Brentford. He then returned to complete his century the next morning. Remarkable.

One of my big pals at Huddersfield was a lad called Allan Gilliver, a strapping centre-forward who was the same age as me. We came through the ranks and made our first-team debuts together aged 17. We actually only found out we were going to play against Swansea Town (as they were called then) in the local evening newspaper, the night before the game. The manager never told us. We defeated the Swans 4-1 on Monday, 6 May 1963 and Allan netted two of our goals. We got on so well, that, eventually, I was Allan's best man. We decided to move digs across town so we could live together and lodged with a lady called Mrs Clarke.

As a young man of some standing in Huddersfield, I was also on the lookout for a young lady to sweep off her feet. I didn't really go out drinking as I wanted to give myself the best chance at making it in the Huddersfield first team, but my sprightliness in jinking

through defences since the age of seven stood me in good stead on the dance floor and I won the Butlin's dance competition during one holiday when I was 16!

That wasn't how I eventually met my wonderful wife Del, though. Nor was our meeting your typical football romance story. I actually just needed to make a phone call home. The problem was my new digs had no phone line connected, as was fairly common at that time, so I went outside and cast my eye up and down the Bradford Road, spotting a hairdresser's salon almost directly opposite. I knocked on and asked the girl who opened the door if I could use their phone. She said yes, so I rang home and chatted with my parents for a few minutes, giving them updates. Then, after putting the phone down, I said thank you to the girl and left.

That really was my lucky day as, little did I realise it then, but I would end up spending the rest of my life with that young lady, whose name it transpired was Dellice, a name I've never heard of before or since. She really is unique, my Del!

Following that call, every time I left the digs, I could see Del looking out of the salon, hiding a bit behind the curtain, seeing if it was me coming out of the front door. So, I knew she fancied me from the way she looked at me. I reciprocated, watching her while she opened the salon. It was like a little courtship dance at distance across the Bradford Road; the 60s weren't yet swinging in Yorkshire. Del was beautiful. So, I kept phoning home more and more regularly so I could meet her and have a chat with her. My parents weren't used to all this contact from me! Finally, I plucked up the courage and we began stepping out together and have now been married nearly 60 years.

Very simply, for me, meeting Del was the best thing I ever did. We have spent our lives together, through thick and thin, and she has been a huge support and key influence behind the scenes for me, especially during the years I was manager at Port Vale. She was bringing up the children, while I flitted around the country

watching players in far-flung glamorous places such as Grimsby, Darlington, Gillingham and Hull.

Actually, at the end of that season we met in, we broke up because I was going home for the summer to work on the market to earn extra cash. After I returned for the start of the following season, there was this Miss Huddersfield Town competition at the Town Hall. Del's friends had realised I'd be there and dared her to enter. Once I saw her on stage, I realised what I'd been missing. Not that she won, but she won me. I asked her out again and that was it.

* * *

Actually, how Del had come to run that salon is something of a tale in itself.

Del's mother died when she was nine. She had grown up in Hull, but her parents had split up and, as her father moved to Huddersfield, she was brought over to live with him. He had no idea how to look after a child and, as he was just living in a room in digs, he didn't have anywhere for her to sleep. Remarkably, when he went to visit a local landlady to ask if she had a spare house he could rent, instead of giving him accommodation, the landlady took Del under her wing as she wouldn't see this young lass living in such conditions. This lovely lady was called Edith Longbottom; who Del, and eventually I, called 'Auntie'. She never formally adopted Del, but she treated her as if she was her own.

Auntie had recently lost her husband, who had made quite a bit of money and invested it in property, mainly terraced houses with no bathrooms which were all rented out, so she was quite wealthy. Del stayed with Auntie and was brought up effectively as the daughter she had never had, while Del's father faded into the background, seemingly relieved to have palmed his daughter off, although to be fair to him, he was slightly disabled as he had a gammy leg having suffered with polio as a youngster.

Del had a much better childhood in that house than she would have done otherwise. There was an old sheepdog called Shep, which

looked after Del as much as she looked after him. Auntie also had a hen run and geese. Del had to collect the eggs and the geese often chased her as she tried to take theirs. But best of all Auntie was the owner of a sweet shop, which she leased out, and took part of the rent in sweets, so Del could have them.

When she was 19, Auntie leased the hairdressing shop for Del, who'd trained to be a hairdresser since the age of 15, buying the incumbent business for her for £150 as the lady who ran it was retiring. The salon just so happened to be situated right opposite our digs. How lucky for me.

Influenced by Del, and fed up with TV repairs and the like, I had a go at hairdressing as one of my back-up options. Insert your own joke here ... The irony of the terrace chant, 'He's got no hair, but we don't care' which rang out from the Bycars End at Vale Park on a regular basis is not lost on me, especially as even by then I was thinning on top. Del took me to a place in Halifax where I could learn to cut gentlemen's hair. But it was in a unisex salon and I soon got fed up with, what I call 'women's talk' all the time. It used to drive me daft, so I packed that up. Instead, I continued going back to night school and got those five 'O' levels, although that took me until I was 22, passing an exam here and another there.

* * *

In 1964, after failing to win any of the first nine games of the season, Eddie Boot got the boot and Tom Johnston was installed as Huddersfield manager. He arrived after being in charge of Rotherham and Grimsby, but my injuries meant I didn't really feature very much under him. I played two games at the start of the 1966/67 season, but then dropped out of the first-team picture entirely and, as I had been at Huddersfield for six years, but only played five senior matches, I suppose he thought he wasn't going to get many games out of me. The Terriers were a very good side at that point, often challenging for promotion from the Second Division, so, as I wasn't in his plans, the manager allowed me a

move to Second Division rivals Carlisle United in December 1966 for the princely fee of £4,000. Not quite Denis Law proportions! I had just turned 22. My replacement in the Huddersfield squad was a young whippersnapper called Frank Worthington, promoted from the youth ranks. I wonder what became of him?

The start of my three-year stay at Carlisle was memorable for the fact that Del and I got married on Sunday, 2 April 1967, back in Huddersfield, with my cousin Gordon Potts as my best man. Sadly, Auntie, who had made the bridesmaids' dresses, wasn't well enough to attend as she was in hospital. Our honeymoon was just one night in a hotel at Scotch Corner, before I returned to training in Carlisle on the Tuesday morning. That's the lot of a footballer during the season.

The day before our wedding, we won 2-1 at Hull City and I was on such a high towards the end of the game that I knocked the ball out of the goalkeeper's hands and smashed it into the Boothferry Park net. It didn't stand and, for my sins, I had my name taken by referee Mr Staveley for the first time in my career for 'ungentlemanly conduct'. My lips remain sealed as to my conduct, gentlemanly or otherwise, on my wedding night.