

# TOP MAN



GEOFF  
**TWENTYMAN**

MY STORY

WITH NEIL PALMER

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## Chapter 1

# Values

AS A youngster growing up on Merseyside, the neighbours thought I only had two forms of clothing: football kits or my school uniform. They rarely saw me in ‘normal’ clothes. By the age of 12 I had the best part of 20 shirts. The iconic red shirt of Liverpool was my pride and joy, but I also had the red and black stripes of Manchester City’s away kit, the red shirt with white sleeves of Arsenal, and the wonderful Crystal Palace shirt, with its red and blue diagonal stripes. I always hoped to wear a ‘real’ shirt and follow in my dad’s illustrious footsteps – he played for Liverpool after starting his career at Carlisle United in the 1950s.

As a kid I used to play Subbuteo in the lounge. As I flicked the players around the pitch, I used to commentate aloud: ‘Smith to Lawler, inside to Strong, on to Hunt, who races through and smashes it past the keeper at the Kop end. It’s Liverpool 4 Manchester United 0 ...’

I was blessed to follow in the great man’s footsteps and then enjoy a 30-year career behind a microphone with the BBC in Bristol.

The circuitous journey started at Broad Green Hospital in Liverpool on 10 March 1959. We lived in Huyton with Roby. I was

the third Twentyman sibling. I was always known as 'Geoffrey' or 'Geoff Jnr', as Dad was Geoff. My sister Susan is six years my senior and Margaret is three years older than me. My brother Billy is seven years my junior.

And, of course, there was Mum, Pat. She and Dad were two incredible people and wonderful parents. They instilled values such as kindness, compassion, understanding, honesty and integrity into all of us Twentymans. Mum was the driver; she was the glue that kept everything together. She always seemed to have a part-time job. She oversaw the pic'n'mix counter at Woolworths in Maghull. She did it with such pride. Even on her days off she'd drop in to make sure everything was well! That was a lesson in itself. Whatever you do, do it to the best of your ability.

Although I hate to use the term disciplinarian, she made sure we always stayed on the right track. I learned so much from her, not only in terms of how to be a decent human being but how to treat other people. Mum taught me practical things such as sewing, ironing and cooking. Even today I mend and sew things, especially for the grandchildren. If a costume or bit of clothing needs a needle and thread, the little people will say, 'Pops will mend it.' That's a legacy from Mum that I'm really proud of.

Dad was old-school with his morals and finances. You always told the truth regardless of the implications. He worked on the principle that if you couldn't afford something, then you had to save up and buy it when you could. I learned the value of money through Dad. As a kid I used to practise bowling a leather cricket ball against the back of the house. The target area was the brick below the lounge window. One time I got it very wrong, and the delivery was too high. Rather than hitting the wall it went clean through the window. Seconds later Dad was peering through the

perfectly formed circular hole, with the cricket ball in his hand. If it wasn't so serious, it would have been hilarious. There was no case for the defence. Guilty as charged. Dad didn't shout, but calmly told me that I'd have to pay for the new pane out of my hard-earned pocket money. It was an expensive lesson, but it was good in establishing an appreciation of values and understanding how life worked.

Dad also told me to shake hands with a firm grip and look the person in the eyes when meeting them. That's something I've continued to do. Apparently, Bristol's former world boxing champion Lee Haskins wouldn't shake hands with me in the build-up to a fight to protect his hands!

Mum and Dad were both from Cumbria. Dad was raised on a farm out in the sticks at Brampton. He used to tell us about his ferrets and life as a country bumpkin. He was Cumberland wrestling champion back in the day. Mum was from Carlisle, the daughter of a steam train driver. They met at a dance and married at a church on Warwick Road, which, ironically, was just down the road from Brunton Park, the home of Carlisle United.

We lived a somewhat nomadic lifestyle in my early years. It was the back end of Dad's playing days and we went from Liverpool to Ballymena in Northern Ireland and then to Carlisle via Hartlepool. Pre-school years were in Ballymena. There was a building site at the bottom of the road where we lived and, as you can imagine, it was a source of great excitement to yours truly. When I look back, I was front and centre to a health and safety nightmare and a child protection issue – how times have changed! I used to toddle down to the site with a tin mug and a packed lunch. I'd get stuck in and 'help' the builders. I loved going to the site, and the bricklayers used to love having me there.

I still carry a scar on my lower lip from falling on a pile of bricks on that site! What was far worse, I picked up the industrial language. Much to Mum's horror, her first-born son repeated all sorts of profanities in his cute little Irish accent, which led to me not being allowed out socially until this 'phase' had passed. 'F' bombs were awkward and inappropriate from someone so young.

The next phase of my formative years took us to Hartlepool. Dad became manager of Hartlepool Football Club, but not for long. Memories are vague, to be honest, but I remember going to the ground, which was a shabby place in a state of disrepair. I recall Mum coming home from a hospital appointment elated to tell me I was going to have a new brother or sister. Then, with Mum pregnant, Dad was sacked. The chairman/owner, a Mr Orr, had lined up a certain Brian Clough as the next manager at Victoria Park.

So, for the family of five – soon to be six – it was back to Carlisle. Dad secured a job with the Cumberland Egg Marketing Board. It was a cracking job. He used to drive a lorry around the county, collecting eggs from farms. At the same time, he had spells as manager of non-league clubs Penrith and Morecambe. I used to go as often as I was allowed, and loved sneaking into the dressing room to savour the smells, the atmosphere, the buzz, the banter – it was brilliant.

My recollections from living in Carlisle are hazy. I recall starting school there and hating it. I used to get really upset when Mum dropped me off. I went to watch my first-ever professional game of football in Carlisle. It was an evening game at Brunton Park. I didn't know it at the time, but the main stand was built from the fee that Carlisle received from Liverpool when Dad was transferred to Anfield.

The game was nondescript. The brightest memory was a man in a blue-and-white top hat and tails running on to the pitch before the game and putting 'Olga' the fox on the centre spot. 'Olga' was a stuffed version of Basil Brush. 'Twinkletoes' was the guy who delivered and collected the fox. An incredible ritual, not as emotional as 'You'll Never Walk Alone' at Anfield, but it obviously affected me enough to remember it! By the way, 'Olga' is an anagram of goal. Away from stuffed foxes, I remember the roar of the crowd, the bright floodlights and the smell of Bovril permeating around the ground.

In 1967, as an eight-year-old, I remember the excitement when Dad came in from work to the terraced home in the cobbled East Norfolk Street, Denton Holme, Carlisle and told us he was going on a car journey to Liverpool. He'd had a call from a man called Bill Shankly. Shankly, who'd managed Dad at Carlisle, was manager of Liverpool Football Club. The chief scout, Norman Low, had moved to America, so Shankly wanted to talk with Dad.

It went well, as Dad was offered the opportunity to join the revered Liverpool boot room. The chief scout, with a modest national 'network', oversaw finding talent in the lower divisions that might make the first team at Anfield. The Liverpool squad had aged and needed to be rebuilt.

Dad was, in my opinion, a football genius. To find players in the lower leagues and Scotland to help Liverpool dominate England and Europe was staggering. His eagle eye and astute brain uncovered the likes of Phil Neal, Ian Rush and Alan Hansen. Imagine nowadays going to Chester, paying your admission fee and watching from behind the goal among the home fans as an unknown teenager knocks goals in for fun. Liverpool manager Bob Paisley never saw Ian Rush play before he signed him. Dad assured



him he'd be good enough when Liverpool had to move quickly to seal a deal after Man City had publicly revealed their interest.

Dad spotted Phil Neal when he went to Northampton to watch an opposing player. Neal's basic skills and attributes stood out during the warm-up. Dad's attention switched during the game. He knew the player he'd travelled to watch wasn't ever going to play for Liverpool, but the Northampton No.2 piqued his interest. A few more viewings, £50,000 later, and Liverpool signed a player who went on to be the club's most decorated player. Like I say, a football genius.

So, the nomadic life was back on and the Twentymans returned to Liverpool. We moved into a house owned by the football club, 299 Northway, Maghull, which was halfway between Liverpool and Southport. It was a lovely three-bedroomed semi-detached abode with gardens front and back. Maghull was a popular suburb with footballers from both of the city's clubs. Liverpool legend Tommy Smith lived next door. Captain Ron Yeats was up the road. My mates and I used to occasionally pluck up the courage to knock on his front door and ask for his autograph. He was massive, absolutely huge, but was always welcoming and hospitable. Steve Heighway and the late Larry Lloyd were nearby too.

With Dad's new job at Anfield and the incredible importance of football on Merseyside, I soon became football mad and a huge Liverpool fan. Playing it, talking about it, reading about it – football was the focal point of my life. As kids we played football from dawn to night. We played in the local park. It wasn't always on grass – there was a tarmacked area with a big wall where an electric generator was housed. The wall was brilliant as you could practise all the basic skills on your own – striking it with both feet, control and other skills. Invariably, I played with older lads,

which was very good for my development. My love of football grew and grew.

I had a group of mates who played on our self-maintained ‘Wembley’ at the Peafields in Lydiate, which was the suburb next to Maghull. We used a lawn mower to cut the grass so we could put our own markings down using sand. It was a slightly larger than standard five-a-side pitch. One of the lads even produced handwritten programmes to add to the matchday vibe. Saturday mornings were matchday and we loved it. Dave Rowlands, Andy Mac, Dave Bricklebank and co. were great lads.

My football ability was coming along nicely, and my reputation was growing, but the real football talent in the Twentyman household at the time was my sister, Margaret. Three years older than me, she was a real tomboy. If a young Margaret was about today, she’d have played in the Women’s Super League. Sadly, back then a girl playing football was viewed as an oddity, an exception to the norm. Margaret was strong and skilful. She didn’t just hold her own but many a time she’d be the best player. In her late teens she was a real star in the making, then something happened! With no prior hint or warning, one day she came down the stairs in a dress and had make-up on. The tomboy had gone. A feminine lady had appeared, and our star player was lost to the game of football forever.

Brother Billy was also talented and played for local non-league side Marine before suffering cruciate ligament injuries – not once but twice – after which he called it a day. He’s now well known on Merseyside as a successful barber.

Due to Liverpool FC being part of my everyday life, I never really had an idol as such. Well, let’s be candid at this juncture, I only ever had one idol: Roger Hunt, or ‘Sir Roger Hunt’, was

that footballing god. The Liverpool and England forward was the epitome of all things that were wonderful in the game. He scored goal after goal with a clinical no-nonsense style. He was modest and, of course, was part of the 1966 World Cup-winning team. Wow.

Typhoo Tea did football cards back in the day, which came with every box of tea. I collected them religiously and, if you collected a certain number, you could get a bigger version. I saved and saved and badgered Mum to buy more tea until I got my large version of Roger Hunt. Dad got the great man to sign it for me and it took its rightful position on the wall above my bed. There were no other Liverpool pictures, just that one.

Moving swiftly forward to my 50th birthday, and incredibly my mates organised a game of golf for me with Roger Hunt. It was an extraordinary experience. We played at Portal Golf Club in the north-west of England. Roger, who agreed to do it because he knew Dad, brought his former team-mate Tommy Lawrence along, and I invited a great friend and huge LFC fan Les Gaskell. The sun shone, the sky was blue, and it was humbling to play with someone who achieved so much but was modest to the core. I'll never ever forget standing on the fairway watching Roger about to play a shot and thinking, *That's Roger Hunt, that man helped England to be the champions of the world. I'm blessed to be here today.*

We had a great game that went down to the final putt on the final green. Roger and I lost the match but that was insignificant, it was a truly remarkable day. We had a beer and a bite to eat afterwards, and Tommy, who was also tremendous company, had brought some Liverpool magazines that featured my dad. I got the guys to sign them, and Roger's signature was the same as the one on my Typhoo Tea poster all those years earlier!

Roger and I kept in touch and chatted every Christmas. His passing was extremely sad, but it was a release from a life gripped and ruined by dementia and Alzheimer's. I still send his wife Rowan a Christmas card. I'm blessed to have had Roger Hunt in my life as both a man and a boy.

Working for Liverpool was Dad's job. There was no fascination for me, it was simply what he did. However, my schoolmates were bordering on obsessive. The recurring question was, 'Who are we signing next?' The unwritten rule in the house was to never ask who Dad was watching.

To be fair there were a few amazing experiences. When I was about eight or nine, Dad asked me if I wanted to accompany him to Melwood, Liverpool's training ground, as he needed to collect something. The oblong-shaped building had a corridor that ran all the way around the changing rooms, which were in the central area. At either end there were offices, a few small rooms. Dad left me to wait at one corner of the corridor. I was there minding my own business when in the opposite corner I heard a strong Scottish accent ending a conversation as he appeared to be leaving an office. I couldn't see anything as it was all around the corner, out of sight. Then I heard the noise of steel tips on the heels of someone's shoes 'clipping' along the floor. Again, it was audible, not visible, but whoever it was, was coming my way.

The clipping sound got louder, still out of sight. Then, incredibly, at the opposite end of the corridor, he was walking towards me. I wanted to run away but I couldn't move. He had cropped hair and a huge smile on his face. He was in a suit, collar and tie, with his hands in his pocket trousers. Clippety clop, clippety clop, he was coming my way. A tsunami of charisma filled the corridor. He walked past the double doors to the car

park and the training pitches. He was definitely coming my way. My mouth was dry, my heart was thumping ... I dread to think what my pulse rate was.

Then he came straight towards me. He stopped, and in a deep Scottish accent Bill Shankly said, 'You must be Geoff's son.' I tried to say yes but nothing came out of my arid-dry mouth. I nodded so vigorously that my head nearly fell off my shoulders. Then he ran his hand through my mop of black hair and said, 'That's a fine head of hair you've got, son.' He smiled, put his hands in his pockets and walked off.

It was the most ridiculous, innocuous exchange but was spell-binding and captivating. I remember meeting Bill Shankly for the first time 50-plus years ago like it was yesterday. It's etched deep in my memory and my soul.

This kind of experience and day-to-day life meant everything was football or football-related for the young Geoffrey Twentyman, but there was also school to contend with. The best thing about school for me was the inter-school football matches. I was a striker back in the day. My priority was to make Northway Primary School the dominant force in the town. Time in the classroom seemed to get in the way of football.

In my final year at primary school, I sat the 11 Plus exam. This determined what type of secondary education you'd receive. If you passed it was grammar school, if you failed then you'd be set for a comprehensive school education.

A few months after sitting the exam, the all-important letter dropped on the porch floor. I picked it up. There it was, a brown envelope addressed to 'The Parents or Guardian of Geoffrey Twentyman, 299 Northway, Maghull, Liverpool L31 0BN'; it had Lancashire Education Department printed on it in black letters.

I knew what it was but had no idea what the next few minutes were about to reveal.

Nervously I took the envelope to Mum. She opened it and looked at it for what seemed like an eternity. She then looked at me and said, 'You've passed.'

I replied, 'Have I really?'

'Yes,' she said, but quickly added, 'it says you've passed but I'm going to have to ring them and check, just in case they've sent the wrong letter.'

Later that morning she rang the school for clarity and was told I'd passed the exam with a very good mark. Hilarious! Thanks for the vote of confidence Mum X.

A few weeks later Maghull Grammar School sent through the list of uniform and sports kit that had to be acquired for the forthcoming September. I went through it with Mum. It was going well: navy blazer, cap (eh?), grey trousers, white shirts, tie, etc., then the unimaginable, the unthinkable! Rugby shirt, navy; rugby shirt, white; rugby shorts, navy; rugby socks, navy. Eventually she concluded the list of rugby items. I asked her about the football kit. What colour was the football kit? To my absolute horror she explained that there was no football kit as rugby was the principal grammar school sport. Oh, my days, this was a hammer blow. If only they really had sent the wrong letter. Comprehensive schools played football.

So that was me off to Maghull Grammar School. In fairness, I enjoyed it, except for the older boys throwing your cap on the sports hall roof. The threat of having your head stuck down the toilet and the chain pulled was an urban myth, thankfully.

It was very formal; the teachers wore gowns and mortar-board hats. You had to walk on the left of the corridor. They believed in

high behavioural standards. Mr Garratt, the deputy head, struck the fear of god into you from 50 paces. The cane was dished out for serious offences or repeated indiscretions. I had the ignominy, or notoriety, of receiving the first detention in my form! Miss Clarke, the history teacher, punished me for my continued talking after she'd (allegedly) called silence in the classroom.

Part of the introduction at Maghull Grammar included a one-to-one meeting with the headmaster. Mr Williams was a small-framed, fragile man. He seemed to be ancient. The idea of the chat was to establish some form of career plan. As if at 11 you knew what you wanted to be. Having said that, I actually did.

Going to the head's office was a daunting prospect. He was some kind of modern-day deity. His office was sacrosanct. I was nervous about this meeting, so in preparation I had a chat with Dad.

'I'm going to tell him I want to be a footballer.'

Dad was unimpressed. 'You can't tell the head of a grammar school that you want to be a footballer. Tell him you want to be a physiotherapist.'

'What's that?' I asked.

Dad explained, 'It's somebody who deals with injuries and fitness.'

So, the day before my meeting I kept repeating the word 'physiotherapist, physiotherapist' to ensure I didn't get this long word wrong.

I sat outside Mr Williams's office for what seemed an age but then my name was called out and I entered a huge, plush, wooden-panelled room. After asking how I'd settled in at the school, Mr Williams came to the point and asked what I wanted to be when I left school.

‘I want to be a physiotherapist, sir,’ I said, proudly pushing my chest out as I said this unfamiliar word.

Mr Williams looked at me and said, ‘Oh ... that must be an enormous disappointment to your father, Twentyman. I’d have thought you wanted to be a footballer like he was.’ Wow, my aspirations to be a physiotherapist were laid to rest and I had the chief’s backing to pursue a proper career.

Dad laughed when I got home and told him. It still makes me chuckle, in hindsight. The moral of the story is that you’re better off saying what’s in your heart and to always chase your dreams.

Incredibly, a former teacher at Maghull Grammar, Jill Dodds (aka Miss Dodds), who’d also moved to Bristol decades earlier, contacted me when I left the BBC. She’d been at the Bristol rugby game when a presentation was made to me at half-time. She contacted me and we met up for a coffee some 50 years after she taught me history. It was amazing to see her and reminisce.

So, I was chosen to don the No.15 jersey for Maghull Grammar School. I opted for full-back as I was a huge fan of the late JPR Williams, who was a courageous, front-foot full-back for Wales when they dominated the Five Nations. I used to love watching the rugby on *Grandstand* and marvelled at the imperious tones of Bill McLaren.

I still wince as I vividly remember my first game. The opposition launched a high kick. It was my job to catch it. I did my worst-ever JPR impression. As it dropped out of the sky, I could hear the cavalry coming my way as the opposing forwards chased the kick. As I was about to catch the ball and call for a mark, the oppo hit me like a juggernaut. Bang. Bosh. All I remember was the cheering as they’d gone through for a try behind me. I sat, crestfallen, legs apart, with blood gushing out of my nose.



The teacher ran by and asked if I was okay. I replied, somewhat embarrassed, ‘Sir, was that not a foul?’

He replied, ‘Twentyman, this is a proper sport you are playing now, son.’

So that was my introduction to the oval ball, and although it’s a sport I love today, back then rugby was more a case of survival for me, and I have the utmost admiration for everyone who plays it.

After three years of rugby the good news for this boy was that, due to a government change in its education policy, the school turned from a grammar to a comprehensive. The standards in teaching and discipline at Old Hall High dropped but football became the main sport. It was a fair trade-off as far as I was concerned.

By my early teens, a combination of playing for Kirkstone Dynamos in the Bootle and Litherland Sunday League, regular school team football and practising every spare minute I had, meant my football was developing well. The Bootle and Litherland Sunday League was a high standard but it was tough! There was a combination of talented footballers and streetwise nutters. The England international Connor Coady’s dad, Andy, played for us. He was more the former than the latter. Our home games were played in Bootle, but we often played at Buckley Hill in Litherland. The multitude of pitches were in a wind tunnel. Rolls-Royce could have tested their aeroplane engines there. I have great memories of playing for Davey Wilson, even if at times it was life-threatening.

I was getting occasional recognition in the *Liverpool Echo*, the city’s evening newspaper, and I noticed I’d developed one of the longest names in Liverpool. I was referred to as ‘Geoff Twentyman Junior, the son of the Liverpool chief scout and former player of the same name ...’ That rolled off the tongue, eventually.

By now I was working my way backwards and was often playing in midfield. I was selected for trials for the Lancashire representative side. Geographically, Maghull came under the authority of Lancashire as opposed to Liverpool. There was huge kudos to be included in the trials. Dad was working for LFC, and Mum couldn't take me, so an art teacher, Mr Roberts, kindly took me to Burnley for the Saturday morning selection process.

There were dozens of players there from all corners of Lancashire. There were two matches and every player had 20 minutes to highlight their skills. As they called out the teams I was named at right-back. Right-back! These were uncharted waters for me, and I struggled. The entire group gathered in a huge hall afterwards and it was no surprise that when they announced the squad I wasn't included. It was a good experience, and you have to have knock-backs to appreciate the good times.

Dad was watching three football matches or so a week as he set up a scouting network across the country, which would produce players that, in the great Shankly's words, 'would make Liverpool a bastion of invincibility'. Liverpool was an incredible football club. Despite their domination of the domestic and European game, everything was low key and understated.

One great memory I do have, and a definite benefit of being Geoff Twentyman Junior, was when I came home from school in 1977. There was a strange-shaped 'something' in the middle of the floor in the lounge. It was two or three feet high, two feet wide, covered in a green velvet bag. I walked through to the kitchen and asked Dad what it was, and he told me to take the cover off it and have a look.

I was absolutely staggered to peel back the bag and see the European Cup, what's now the Champions League trophy, in our

lounge. A few weeks earlier Emlyn Hughes had lifted the massive piece of silverware after Liverpool beat Borussia Mönchengladbach in Rome. There it was in our house, gleaming and glorious. Of course, I picked it up and held it aloft. Sadly, in 1977 there were no mobile phones, no selfies, no internet. Even more sadly, we didn't take any photographs of it. Like I say, as incredible as it sounds, this was all part and parcel of Dad working for LFC.

So why was this iconic piece of football history in the Twentymans' front room? Dad had told Bob Paisley he was doing a talk at a local amateur football club that night so, in typical Liverpool fashion, Paisley suggested that he should take the trophy along to show them. That night the European Cup, the very trophy that great players such as Charlton, Best, Di Stéfano, Cruyff and Beckenbauer had all picked up was in the boot of Dad's car – thankfully it was safely locked up in the garage.

Life was never dull in the Twentymans household, that's for sure.