



THE
**FRANCIS
LEE**
AUTOBIOGRAPHY

TRIUMPHS, TREACHERY AND TOILET ROLLS

WITH
BILL BRADSHAW

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Chapter One

Early Days

MILLIONAIRE FOOTBALLERS are commonplace in England these days. The unbelievable riches on offer in the Premier League guarantee that any decent journeyman player who plies his trade in the top league in the world will be guaranteed to become a millionaire, even if he stays fit for just a modest number of seasons in the game.

Those at the next level, who are *outstanding* players in the modern game, regularly starring for top-six clubs and perhaps involving themselves in one or two high-level transfers, will be massively wealthy. Such young men would be agog if they read the story of the guy who was probably – almost certainly – England’s first millionaire footballer.

That guy isn’t George Best, Kevin Keegan, Kenny Dalglish or Alan Shearer. That guy is me: Francis Henry Lee.

Having said that, my millions – earned while I was playing the game in the 1960s and 70s – came from dogged

work in my business life rather than my exploits on the pitch. I had a dual way of life ... ambitious professional footballer and, at the same time, aspiring businessman.

Yet to say my origins were humble would be an understatement. That's why the likes of Harry Kane, Raheem Sterling and Jack Grealish would be stunned by my story; the story set out in the pages that follow.

Because I was never meant to amount to anything, or so I was told. If I'd taken at face value, the 'advice' offered by those in the business of doling out such pearls of wisdom – my schoolteachers or my first manager at Bolton Wanderers – I'd have given up on making any real mark. I was constantly reminded that my future was strictly limited. I felt like Marlon Brando's character, Terry, in *On the Waterfront*, when he famously said, 'I'm a bum – I gotta one-way ticket to Palookaville.' Except I never did say it, and I never did take any notice of those dishing out career advice. I had my own ideas and my own ambitions. I wasn't listening to that stuff.

I could, I suppose, understand some of their limited thinking. I came from a humble background, from a very, very working-class family in a poor Lancashire town. Not the typical material from which millionaires are cut.

I was a war baby, born on 29 April 1944. As a young kid, I lived in a typical mill-town terraced house – 5 Gladstone Street, Westhoughton – four miles from Bolton,

with the city of Manchester 13 miles distant. The folk of Westhoughton worked in the cotton mills or down the colliery. Before moving a little later to a more modern post-war council house, our old home was so cold that we'd go 30 yards up the road to where there was a baker's shop. Not for a warm treat; no, we'd stand with our hands pressed against the outside bakery wall where the ovens were pumping out heat inside, just to get warm before we went to school.

No central heating for us. No washing machine. My mother, Millie, had a big boiler in the scullery, and she'd light a fire beneath it to heat the water, and there would be the rubbing boards for washing the clothes on. It was basic all right, but it was home.

All those terraced houses had fireplaces in the bedrooms upstairs. That's when you knew someone was poorly ... when they lit a fire in the bedroom upstairs to keep the patient warm. Whoever was in that room must have been ill! And if they actually brought the bed downstairs, they were bloody ill. It made it easier to carry them out when they died.

I remember walking with my mother past the old churchyard and all the railings had been cut down. I asked her why they'd been cut. 'Oh, they had to be cut down for the war effort,' she said. They'd been removed to recycle for making tanks and planes and ammunition. So, people were

poor where I came from. As I grew up in Westhoughton, they had nothing, not even railings.

My father, Colin, worked in the cotton mill, Taylor and Hartley Textile Holdings, on Bolton Road. My mother worked in the same mill till she had the children – me, my brother Arthur and sister Irene. My father became weaving shed foreman and he actually died on the premises many years later. We'd been to Leicester when Manchester City played there in an FA Cup replay. We got beaten that night – Dad saw me score first with a penalty in a ding-dong game that we lost 4-3, and it was foggy on the way back. He didn't get back home until half four in the morning. He then got changed and went straight to work and he died at half seven. He smoked 40 or 50 fags a day, was overweight and he liked a pint or two.

Dad was six feet tall and 17 stone – and he was the smallest in the family! His brothers were enormous. Uncle Harold and Uncle Fred were both six-four; Uncle Arthur was six-three. Dad's father was a horrible little bastard, an ex-miner who wouldn't let any of his lads go down the pit. He really was *horrible* – but, I suppose, he was good in that way. Uncle Harold was killed in the war, fighting in the Far East, while Dad got drafted into the fire brigade in Liverpool.

After the war they'd work all week in the mill but then, come Saturday and the weekend, that was reserved

for something special. That's when they'd treat themselves to something a bit different – like picnics at the cricket in summer or football matches in winter. They followed the local cricket team, Westhoughton, and you'd go down to their ground, the Tyldesleys, named after the famous local cricketing family, and there would be 3,000 watching the cricket there. That's why so many good overseas pros used to come to the leagues, and they could then move from there to the county, Lancashire.

Sunday, we had to go to school – Sunday school – in the morning and afternoon. It was at Central Hall Mission Church. I know exactly why we *had* to do that. Yes, we were god-fearing citizens, but also it was the only chance my mum and dad had to get their leg over!

When I got to about seven or eight, as we entered the early 50s, we moved into that new council house on the estate. It would have been 1951 and these were really nice council houses compared with our old terraced home. The new place was in Hazel Avenue, and it had an inside bathroom and toilet, plus an outside toilet as well. This was great as, not long after moving, my younger brother Trevor had arrived, too. The new houses were only 27s 6d. rent or £1.37 a week in today's decimal cash. You can understand the delight when I signed for Bolton as a ground-staff boy in the late 1950s on £5 a week; half my wages paid for the council house rent ... it had gone up by a few bob by then!

Life started to improve for working people who had voted out Winston Churchill and the Tories in 1945. But, by 1951, he was back in office and a later Tory prime minister, Harold Macmillan, told the country in 1957 that we'd 'never had it so good'. That was probably true, with rationing finally ended and the economy starting to improve. But I bet he'd never had it as bad as we had in Westhoughton! Macmillan was a very well-to-do chap, educated at Eton and Oxford and he wanted for nothing, certainly not a warm home! He was at the head of a publishing empire and perfectly represented the establishment.

Whereas my family perfectly represented hard work. They weren't particularly sporting. Everybody in the family circle, both mother's side – the Tonge family – and father's side, were either miners or worked in a cotton mill. My father's side were such big fellows, although not particularly athletic; but my mother, Millie's side, certainly were. Her father, Henry, and his brother Frank were both champion wrestlers when it was a real sport, not this modern WWF rubbish. I get my athleticism and smaller stature from mother's side of the family, the Tonges.

I can remember coming out of the house to go to the primary school where 200 kids would go. We used to play football at school during all the breaks and, when it was summer, we'd switch to cricket. I was a good footballer, but I was a bloody good cricketer, too. We played both the

main sports all the time. Every minute of the day – there was nothing else to do!

In my early days at school I showed a streak of entrepreneurship that was to flourish as I grew towards adulthood. I started my own mini business selling snacks to my classmates. If we'd never had it so good, what was wrong in trying to make it a little better? I quickly realised that if you could do a good deal, then do it. That was to stand me in good stead as I got older.

And what proved key to me becoming a footballer was the vital schooldays switch I had to make when I got to the age of 11. I was decent at schoolwork and the 11-plus was looming. The 11-plus was the academic test in those pre-comprehensive schooldays that decided a kid's future; whether he or she would go on to an academic education at a grammar school or, for those who failed the test, a secondary modern school, with a curriculum suited to more basic trades and manual work.

There were A and B forms at school, and I was in the A stream. They gave us all a letter to give to our parents with the option of taking the 11-plus – passing that entrance exam meant the prize of going to a grammar school. There would have been a choice of three for me: Bolton Grammar School, Rivington and Blackrod Grammar or Hindley and Abram Grammar. I'd have certainly got into one of them ... had I *taken* the exam!

But I decided I wasn't going to even sit the exam. So, I didn't tell my parents about the letter, because I knew going to a grammar would have meant my football options would be limited. I simply wouldn't have made it as a player in a school where football was played occasionally and where rugby union was the main winter sport on the agenda.

For me to progress as a footballer, I had to get into the town schoolboys' team – Horwich and Westhoughton Boys. Just as you had to get into the Bolton Boys, Manchester Boys or Liverpool Boys teams if you were in those school areas.

I'd have played some football at a grammar school, but other sports as well. It wouldn't have been so intense as at a secondary modern, where football was king. If you did well and played for the town team, all the scouts would be there and, if you were decent, there would be the chance to progress to the Lancashire County Schools' side. If you did *that*, you could be picked up by a professional club as one of the 11 to 15 elite schoolboys in the county.

So, when I got my letter about the 11-plus, I looked at the envelope and decided *not* to hand it over to my parents. Days later, my teacher got hold of me and asked why the school had heard nothing from my folks about the exam. I said that my folks didn't want me to take it because they fancied I'd do well in the engineering line and wanted me to go to the secondary modern school until I was 12, and then

go to Horwich Technical School, where you could become a draughtsman, engineer or an electrician.

Somehow, my dad found out about my little scheme. You didn't argue with my dad – he'd give you a good hiding if you did, especially for telling lies – and he said to me, 'What's all this about?' I told him that I wanted to be a footballer, but that I couldn't do that if I went to one of the grammars. I told him I wanted to go to Horwich Tech and take my chance at getting into the town team. To my eternal relief and gratitude, my dad said he understood where I wanted to be and why I wanted to go. 'I hope you're making the right decision,' he told me. 'I only hope you're going to be all right with your football.' He knew, though, that Horwich was a good college and they fed kids into the local locomotive works and the aircraft builders, de Havilland – the makers of the famous Comet jet airliner – which became part of Hawker Siddeley.

As it happened, when I went to the secondary modern, I got picked early for the town team even before I moved on to Horwich Tech. My gamble was paying off! I was the smallest boy on the team and my shirt used to come out of the bottom of my shorts! At first people criticised me for not being that good, and for being too weak, but they persevered with me.

I was in the Horwich Secondary Modern school team, too, that was the under-15s and I was three years behind

them, no wonder I looked small! I was like a waif, about 4ft 11in and six stone six. And I was picked to play on the wing because I was regarded as a good footballer.

How did I manage that? Well, I was self-taught; I'd play, kicking a ball against the wall on my own or practising dribbling with a bunch of mates. Then there were house matches at school between the four houses. Playing the house matches got me into the secondary modern school team and, from there, into the town team, where I knew there would be scouts.

As far as I was concerned, everything at home revolved around sport. Depending on the time of year, there was a weekly football or cricket match – which I also loved – with our neighbours when we visited my grandma for Sunday tea.

Everything was going according to plan, except it was difficult in that I was playing against much bigger lads. At 13 I went on to Horwich Tech, as planned, after passing my exam. At that time a guy called John Winrow, in Westhoughton, formed his own boys team to play in the Bolton Boys Federation – the side was called Winrows because he had two sons who were footballers. A few of us joined Winrows, and in our first season we won the under-14s championship. Then, the season after that, we won the under-15s, with most of us younger than that. I was by now also playing for Horwich Tech School team and the town team ... and I then got picked for Lancashire Boys when

I was 14. I played twice a day, for the school or the town team in the morning and in the afternoon for Winrows. When you played twice a day, in that type of football, the scouts started asking questions, especially when they were told that I was younger than the age group I was playing in.

When I'd progressed into the Horwich and Westhoughton Boys' team, Dad had stopped watching football and was watching Leigh's rugby league side instead. That puzzled me. Looking back, I think he was worried that I might not turn out to be as good as he'd thought I would be. But that changed after Vic Wilcox, the father of one of my team-mates, urged him to come and watch me. After that, he didn't miss a single game.

And after moving up to Horwich Tech there was an amazing transformation, too, because I started to grow! I shot up from 4ft 11in and six stone six to 5ft 7in and about ten stone. Everybody thought, 'Christ, he's going to be as big as his dad!' But after 15, I stopped growing and I'm only 5ft 7½in now!

Through playing in the Boys Federation, the town team and Lancashire Boys, all the scouts were interested, and I had about six offers from clubs. But they didn't realise I was so young; I was only 13 or 14 then. The town team won the Talbot Cup, a tournament for all town sides in Lancashire, and then the interest really intensified. All the scouts flocked around Lancashire Boys. I went for a trial

for the county at Southport, when I was about 15, and I got picked – played well for them – and then got a trial for England Boys. I was playing a *lot* of football.

Alec Rudd, who looked after the Horwich Tech team, had his concerns and he warned me: ‘You’re playing well, but I’m worried that you’re doing too much. You could burn yourself out.’ I said, ‘No, I’m enjoying it!’ and carried on. And then Lancashire Boys put me in for that England Schoolboys’ trial and I had to go to Darlington.

Alec Rudd and Joe Wallwork, one of my teachers at Horwich Tech, had driven me up to County Durham in a little Morris Minor. The trial was England North vs England South and I was picked for the North. At half-time we were winning 3-0 and I’d scored two and made one. Job done? Maybe – I was taken off at the interval.

On the way back, we were chugging along in the little Morris and Alec and Joe were puffing away on their fags (with me nearly heaving in the smoke swirling around the back seat). ‘Well, Lee,’ they said, ‘it’s a special day for Horwich and Westhoughton Boys because you will be our first schoolboy international.’ I didn’t feel much like a schoolboy international in the back of that little motor – I felt like asking them to wind down the window because I thought I was about to throw up!

Alec announced at the Monday assembly – when they made the usual sporting announcements – that F.H. Lee

would be picked for England Boys. It was a proud day and then we waited for the official call-up. And waited ... and I never heard another bloody thing!

I don't know if it was *that* disappointment that made me say to myself, 'I'll bloody show them.' By now the scouts were coming to my house to see my dad: Burnley, Bolton, Wolverhampton to name just a few. The Manchester clubs didn't come knocking because they had a really large influx of Manchester boys – they all seemed to be really big lads, and size, apparently, mattered when it came to picking the England Boys' team. Maybe that's why I wasn't selected.

What happened after that shows they got it wrong because only 18 months after that England trial I'd joined Bolton Wanderers. Not only had I joined them, but I was also playing for them in the First Division, then England's top-flight elite league.

I'd said to my dad, 'I really do think I could be a professional footballer.' He said, 'Look, I've worked 42 years in the mill, and it's been something I've hated every single morning. It's like being in prison. You're the first in the family who can choose what he's going to do.'

Dad often reminded me that he'd been a good player, and he'd always encouraged me with my football. He must have seen something because, from about the age of four, all my Christmas presents were connected to the game – and we'd play almost every day in the house. That was great fun,

but it could create the odd problem. One night, I knocked the mantelpiece clock off its perch and it went flying. My mum was in another room, and it was a couple of weeks before she noticed the clock had no glass on it!

When we played together, Dad used to give me the odd dig and knock me around a little. I realised he was trying to toughen me up and I think it really worked. I could more than hold my own with older lads when I was picked to play in older-age-group teams.

What he was saying about me giving football a go and avoiding a life sentence in the mill sounded encouraging, but he added a warning: 'If I allow you to join a club at 15, you must prepare for what you'll have to do if you don't make the grade at 18 and, secondly, prepare yourself for life after the game, because it doesn't last forever.' Those words resonated and stayed with me. It was my creed for life.

The important thing was that my dad, mum and I agreed that I'd give football a go. I had their full support. I then had to go to see the principal of Horwich Tech, a Mr L.G. King, who sat there in his cap and gown, and I gave him a letter from my father. 'What's all this about?' he asked. I told him I thought I had a good chance of making it as a professional player but that if, at 17 or 18, it looked like I wasn't going to make it, I could always go to evening classes and take draughtsmanship qualifications. 'I think you're a complete fool,' he told me. 'You've been

badly advised by your parents, and I shall write them a letter accordingly.' Thanks for that, Mr King.

There I was, a fool. I wasn't going to make it. My parents were badly advising me. I wouldn't amount to anything going down that route. I begged to disagree, although I kept that to myself. It wouldn't be the only time someone in authority tried to put me in my place, but I was determined to follow my dream.

So it was that I signed for Bolton Wanderers. Why Bolton? Because my mother didn't want me moving away from home. When I was just 15½, I was playing in their reserve side and the following season it was the first team. I was on my way.