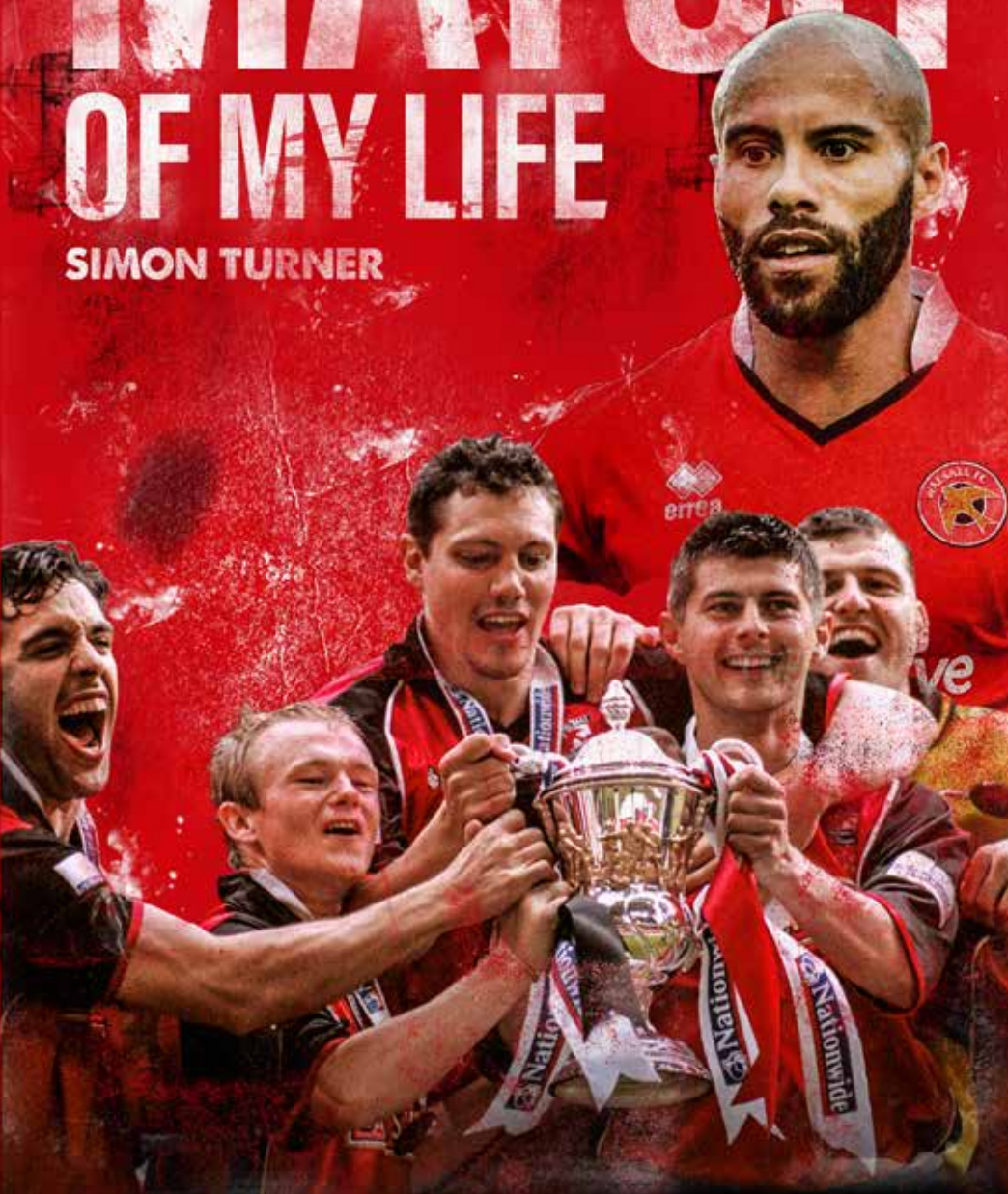


WALSALL

MATCH OF MY LIFE

SIMON TURNER



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ALLAN CLARKE



Allan Clarke

Striker, 1963–66

Ashington may have produced the Charlton brothers and Bury may have given us the Nevilles, but those towns have got nothing on Short Heath. The Clarke family produced no less than five footballing brothers, four of whom played for the mighty Saddlers. Allan, the second eldest of the five, had easily the most successful career in the game. Nicknamed ‘Sniffer’ due to his ability to scent even the slimmest of chances, he was a born goalscorer.

Clarke joined Walsall at the tender age of 15 and soon made his way into the first team. Within a couple of years, his goals almost single-handedly saved the club from relegation. That may have proved a heavy burden for some, but Clarke’s young shoulders were more than capable of bearing the strain. The goals continued to flow and even the most optimistic of Saddlers fans knew it was too good to last. Early in 1966, Clarke left for the bright lights of Fulham, aged still only 19.

Before the decade was out, Clarke was twice the subject of British record transfer fees, with Leicester City splashing the cash to acquire him in 1968 and Leeds United doing likewise in 1969. It was with the West Yorkshire club that Clarke reached the pinnacle of his career. In the space of six seasons he won a league title, an FA Cup and a Fairs Cup (the spiritual predecessor of the UEFA Cup and Europa League). During that spell Leeds also finished second in the league on three occasions, twice lost the FA Cup Final and were runners-up in the European Cup.

Unsurprisingly, international honours also came Clarke’s way. He made his debut in the 1970 World Cup finals, coolly converting a penalty to give England a victory over Czechoslovakia. He went on to score a total of ten goals in 19 appearances for his country, a better ratio than Wayne Rooney, Bobby Charlton or Michael Owen ever managed. Allan Clarke was, indeed, the Harry Kane of his day. Over half a century has elapsed since Walsall produced a striker of his calibre, and goodness knows how many more decades will have to pass before Saddlers fans get to glimpse a young talent like his again.

Stoke City 0 – 2 Walsall

FA Cup Third Round

Saturday, 22 January 1966

Victoria Ground, Stoke-on-Trent

Attendance: 32,676

Stoke City

Bobby Irvine
Calvin Palmer
Tony Allen
Eric Skeels
Maurice Setters
Alan Bloor
Dennis Viollet
Peter Dobing
John Ritchie
Roy Vernon
Harry Burrows

Walsall

Terry Carling
Frank Gregg
John Harris
Graham Sissons
Stan Bennett
Nick Atthey
Howard Riley
Allan Clarke
George Kirby
Jimmy McMorran
Colin Taylor

Managers

Tony Waddington

Ray Shaw

Scorers

Howard Riley (16)

Allan Clarke (45)

Referee

F. Cowen

I ONLY had one aim in life when I was young, and that was to be a footballer. Nothing else mattered. When I was 12 and 13 years old, I used to play for the South East Staffordshire District team on a Saturday morning and my father would give me a rub down the night before the game. I remember him saying to me once while he did this, 'Do you want to be a footballer when you grow up?' 'Of course, I do,' I replied. 'Well, you don't want a girlfriend then?' he asked. 'I'm not interested in girls,' I said. 'I just want to be a footballer.' And that's how it was. I never had a single girlfriend at school, not one.

I wasn't much interested in school, either. Each year I would come home with a report from my headteacher and it always said the same thing: 'If Allan concentrated in his lessons like he does on the football field, he'd be top of the class.' That never changed throughout my education, from when I started at New Invention Infant School as a five-year-old until I left Short Heath Secondary Modern at the age of 15. Thankfully, my dream of becoming a footballer came true, but if it hadn't, I would probably have ended up working in a factory. I didn't get the qualifications to do anything different. The one thing I regret in life is not studying when I had the chance to. When I talk to kids who want to become footballers, I always tell them not to neglect their education because football is a short career. When I finished playing at the age of 34, I hadn't earned enough money to pay my mortgage off. No one in my era did. We all had to find other ways of earning a living.

I used to train with Aston Villa's first team during school holidays, and the plan was that I would join them once I turned 15. They used to give me two free tickets for

every home match and so I regularly went to watch them with my dad. Villa were in the top division at the time and had some great players, including Gerry Hitchens who went on to play for Inter Milan and England. Joe Mercer was the Villa manager back then, and his number two was Ray Shaw. That was the first time I came across Ray, who was to become an important figure during the early part of my career. A few years later, he took over as manager at Walsall, gave me my first long run in the team and was in charge when we played against Stoke City in the FA Cup.

About three to four weeks before I was due to leave school, I told my mom and dad that I didn't want to join Villa. I knew a lot of lads who were going to go there, and they were all England schoolboy internationals. I'd never even had a trial for my country, so I wasn't sure about how I'd get on in that company. Saying that, I think I should have been given a chance as I was banging in goals all the time for the South East Staffordshire District and Birmingham County Boys teams. Unfortunately, there was a lot of politics involved in schoolboy football in those days. Maybe if I'd been born down south it would have been different. A few years later, the baby of our family, Wayne, followed in my footsteps. Like me, he played for the District and County teams but, unlike me, he got a trial and was picked to play for England Schoolboys. I'd made a name for myself in the game by that time, and I'm sure being Allan Clarke's younger brother didn't do Wayne's chances any harm at all. Anyway, my dad was very supportive about me not going to the Villa. He told me I could go to whichever club I wanted to, and so I joined Walsall.

I started at Walsall in 1962 as an apprentice, or as a ground staff boy as we were all called back then. There were eight of us, six of whom worked with the groundsman, maintaining Fellows Park. I looked after the professionals with Stan Bennett, who had started at the club a year before me. We cleaned boots, got the training kit out, took it to the laundry when it needed washing and put the baths on. The only time we saw a ball was on Tuesday and Thursday nights, when we trained with the amateurs. That all changed during my time in the game. I later spent 12 years in management and my apprentices worked with the professionals every single day. Looking back, the start that me, Stan and the other ground staff boys had in football gave us a lot of discipline, which was no bad thing.

You won't believe this, but when I left school and joined Walsall, I was only 4ft 5in tall. Whenever I played for South East Staffordshire District and Birmingham County Boys, I was referred to in the local papers as 'Tiny Clarke' because of my height, or lack of it. I did a lot of growing during my spell with the Saddlers and was a six-footer by the time I was 19. All that growing absolutely drained me of energy, and I was often in bed by eight o'clock in the evening as a result.

I made my debut just over a year after joining Walsall. It came in a home game against Reading and their centre-half kicked absolute chunks out of me. Bill Moore gave me my first start, but he left the club about a month later and I only played four more games that season. The new manager knew I wanted to play more often, and I was able to establish myself in the team at the start of the following campaign. The Walsall fans gave me a lot of encouragement

as I made my way in the game. I couldn't afford a car at the time, so if we had a home match, I would have to catch two buses: one from Short Heath into Walsall town centre, and another out to Fellows Park. I would be with Saddlers fans on the bus, and before the game they would ask, 'Are you going to score today, Allan?', and I'd reply, 'Of course, I am!' The supporters paid my wages and I never forgot that. It was marvellous to be able to mingle with the fans before and after matches, but it wouldn't happen nowadays. Money has taken over football and supporters can't get anywhere near the players they go to watch. It's sad really, but there you are.

One of the most exciting players in that team was the left-winger, Colin Taylor. He was at the club when I started out as a ground staff boy but left a year later to join Newcastle United. He only stayed with them for one season before being re-signed by Walsall. By the time he came back I had made my way into the first team and so we played together in the forward line until I left the club. A few years later I moved to Leeds United and Peter Lorimer was one of my team-mates. He was called 'Hotshot Lorimer' because of the power of his shooting and was once proven to have the hardest shot in football. Colin Taylor may not have been as well known a footballer as Peter, but he could hit the ball just as hard, I can tell you. The only difference between them was that Peter was right-footed, while Colin would naturally strike the ball with his left.

One memory I have of Colin was when we played a midweek league match away at Port Vale. He had the ball about 40 yards from goal and I was yelling at him to pass it to me. I shouted to him twice, but he obviously didn't

hear me. Not many footballers can shoot at goal from that distance, but because of his shooting power, that was well within Colin's range. Anyway, he decided to give it a go, and the Port Vale full-back made the mistake of getting in the way. He was about ten yards in front of Colin and the ball hit him right on his forehead. The poor fellow went down as if he'd been shot. He was knocked out cold! That happened right in front of me, and you just don't forget things like that.

Walsall reached the third round of the 1965/66 FA Cup by beating Swansea by six goals to three at Fellows Park and then knocking out Aldershot by two goals to nil away from home. Getting a tie against Stoke City was a big deal for Walsall. Not only was it a local Staffordshire derby but Stoke were a top-ten Division One team at the time. They had some cracking players in their side, such as the striker Dennis Viollet who had previously been at Manchester United and had survived the Munich air disaster. Over the years I played with some great footballers including Alan Ball, Gordon Banks, Bobby Charlton, Bobby Moore and Martin Peters. However, the best footballer I ever played with, and against, was the Leeds United and Scotland midfielder, Billy Bremner.

Me and Billy were very similar in that we didn't have a nerve in our bodies. The bigger the crowd, the more we wanted it. No manager ever had to inspire Billy Bremner or Allan Clarke. We motivated ourselves. That was something I had from a very young age as I always believed in my own ability. Throughout my career I never worried about centre-halves; I let them worry about me. I'm not being brash in saying that. I am just one of those fortunate people who isn't

easily perturbed by things. So, I wasn't at all apprehensive before Walsall took on Stoke. Some players can get nervous before a big game like that, but not me. My only emotion was excitement. We were a Third Division side taking on one of the best teams in the country, and I couldn't wait for the kick-off.

The tie was held at the Victoria Ground, which was where Stoke used to play before they moved to their new stadium. There were over 30,000 spectators in the crowd, and that was just perfect for me. At that time Walsall's kit was red shorts and white shirts with 'WFC' emblazoned in red across the front of them. There were no strip sponsors back then. Like now, Stoke City played in red and white stripes, which meant there was a clash of colours. Walsall therefore borrowed some claret and blue shirts from Aston Villa, and we played in those instead.

In the summer before we drew Stoke in the FA Cup, Walsall signed George Kirby to play up front with me. He was coming towards the end of his career but had played for some top clubs, such as Everton, Sheffield Wednesday and Southampton. George was a hard lad and I learnt a lot from him about how to look after myself on a football field. Maurice Setters was one of the Stoke centre-halves that afternoon. He'd previously been at West Bromwich Albion and Manchester United and had clearly crossed paths with George before. After the captains had tossed the coin to see who would be kicking which way, the two teams changed ends and George and Maurice walked past each other. As they did so, Maurice called out: 'Are we going to have a quiet afternoon, George?' 'That's up to you, Maurice!' came the quick reply.

A few weeks before the cup tie against Stoke, we played a league match away at Millwall, which was always a tough place to go. George was up against their centre-half and he fouled him near the halfway line, about 20 yards away from me. The referee blew up, stopped play and awarded a free kick to the opposition. The Millwall trainer came on to the pitch to treat the injured player, when suddenly one of the home spectators ran past me with a weapon in his hand. He was headed straight for George, so I shouted out to warn him. George turned around in the nick of time, grabbed hold of this fan and then completely flattened him. I remember thinking 'Well done, George!' The Old Den had quite a reputation in those days, but for all the wrong reasons.

Stoke came at us from the start of the game, but we managed to weather the storm. Then, after about quarter of an hour, Jimmy McMorran was on the receiving end of a hard tackle. He tried to carry on for a bit, but soon limped off and spent much of the rest of the game in the dressing room. There were no substitutes allowed in the FA Cup back then, so we had to carry on without him. Taking on a top tier side with 11 men was hard enough, but now we had to do it with ten. We were awarded a free kick for the foul on Jimmy and the ball was launched into their penalty area. It rebounded off George before Howard Riley got hold of it and smashed it into the net to give us the lead.

Not too much longer afterwards, Stoke thought they had equalised when a shot from Dennis Viollet ended up in the back of our net. The trouble was that it had come through a hole in the side netting! The Stoke players appealed for a goal, but thankfully the referee decided to consult with the

linesman who was able to confirm what had really happened. The net was repaired and so we carried on, taking the game to Stoke. Just before half-time, I went through on goal and their keeper brought me down. The referee immediately pointed to the spot, and so I picked the ball up, placed it down and sent the goalkeeper the wrong way. The Stoke manager, Tony Waddington, was so unhappy about what their keeper had done that he never played him in the first team again.

I was the regular penalty taker for Walsall, and it was a job I took seriously. Before the start of a match, when the captains were tossing up to see who would kick off, the players used to take shots at the goalkeeper to allow him to get a feel of the ball. I would use that time to take a good look at the opposition keeper, seeing whether he was naturally left- or right-handed. Most goalkeepers favoured their right, but there was the odd one who was different. Once I'd found out which was their weaker hand, I knew exactly which side of the goal my penalty would go to if we got one. I watch Premier League players take spot-kicks these days and I don't think they're doing their job like I did. You have to do your preparation; you have to be ready.

Later that season I moved to Fulham, but I wasn't first in line to take penalties there. That duty fell to Bobby Robson, who was coming towards the end of his playing career before going on to become one of the country's finest-ever managers. I remember playing in a match at Craven Cottage once and we were awarded a penalty. As Bobby put the ball down on the spot, I leant in and said, 'Take your time, son.' There I was, a 19-year-old, advising an ex-England player! Bobby was probably thinking, 'Who the hell is this lad,

telling me what to do?’ But that’s how I was at the time, a young man full of confidence and self-belief.

We started the second half two goals in front and Stoke put us under a lot of pressure. It didn’t help that they had an extra man because of the injury to Jimmy McMorran. George Kirby went back to help the defence, and we managed to hold out for a famous victory. We lost away to Norwich City in the next round, but I don’t remember anything about that match at all. The win over Stoke sticks in the memory because it was an act of giant-killing in a local derby; it was what the FA Cup is all about. Games like the one against Norwich just fade away.

The fact that Walsall had beaten a First Division side was just unbelievable, and that was where I wanted to play: right at the top. The publicity from our win over Stoke didn’t do my chances any harm at all, particularly because I had scored a goal. I remember on a Sunday morning my mom and dad would get a newspaper and there would often be snippets in there about which big clubs were looking at me. That happened for a while, but no one came in for me, so I stayed in the shop window, banging goals in for Walsall. I would have loved it if a local club like Aston Villa, Birmingham City, West Bromwich Albion or Wolverhampton Wanderers had come after me, because I could have stayed at home with my mom and dad. But they didn’t.

In the end, the only club that made a firm offer to Walsall was Fulham. Their manager was Vic Buckingham, who had previously been in charge at the Albion, Sheffield Wednesday and Ajax. I went into training one day, about six weeks after we’d beaten Stoke, and Ray Shaw told me that the manager from a First Division club had come up from

London. Ray wanted to know whether I wanted to speak to him. 'Of course, I do!' I replied. So, I met Vic Buckingham, we managed to agree terms and the club accepted Fulham's offer for me. They paid a transfer fee of £37,500, which was a huge amount of money for Walsall in those days. It paid a lot of wages for a long time. It also turned out to be a decent piece of business for Fulham, because 18 months later they sold me to Leicester City for £150,000. That wasn't a bad profit at all.

I was still only 19 and had realised my ambition of joining a First Division club. Fulham had some great players at that time. In addition to Bobby Robson there was Johnny Haynes, who had captained England and was the first '£100 a week footballer' when the maximum wage was abolished. They also had George Cohen who was the right-back in the England side that won the World Cup that summer. I moved down to London on my own and went into digs until the end of the season. I had planned to get married in the summer, but Fulham had already arranged a tour of the Far East and the dates clashed. I discussed it with Vic Buckingham, and we agreed that I would play in the first four of the six games before flying home on my own. So, I went out there, played in places like Hong Kong, Penang and Singapore, and then came home to get married to Margaret. We've been together ever since.

I only managed to get as far as the fourth round of the FA Cup with Walsall, but I had more success in the competition later in my career. I joined Leicester City in 1968, having turned down an opportunity to sign for Manchester United. They had players like George Best, Bobby Charlton and Denis Law in their side, but I could see they were on the

decline. In the one season I spent at Leicester City, we reached the final of the FA Cup, losing 1-0 to Manchester City. I was in the final again a year later, that time as a Leeds United player. We lost in a replay to Chelsea, but two seasons later I finally tasted victory, scoring the only goal when Leeds beat Arsenal to win the FA Cup for the first and, so far, only time in their history.

Leeds United were the best team in England for a decade, so if anyone was going to win anything, they had to get past us first. Sadly, these days it's almost as if my era never existed. The television pundits talk about how many appearances a player has made in the Premier League, or how many goals he has scored or assists he has made. You'd think football didn't begin until 1992. It drives me crackers. England actually won a World Cup during my time as a player. They're not winning it now. You need great players to win a World Cup, and my era had them in abundance. There were no weak international sides when I played for my country, but there are plenty now. I reckon if we had played against them in my day, I would have scored three or four goals myself, let alone what my team-mates would have got. Yet England struggle to beat some of these sides. It's an absolute joke.

There's so much more money in football now than there was when I played. When I started out as a ground staff boy at Walsall, I was on £5 a week like all the others. It went up by £1 a week until you got to 18, when the club either had to give you a professional contract or else let you go. I was the club's top striker by the age of 17, so they signed me on professional terms a year earlier than they normally would have done. Even then, I was only on £25 a week. When I

was in the First Division with Leicester City, I was on £100 a week and they told me I was their highest-paid player. When Leeds United came in for me in 1969, I asked for another £10 a week, but the gaffer, Don Revie, had done his homework and found out what Leicester were paying me. He told me he couldn't give me that as all his players were on the same wage. Who was I to disbelieve the gaffer? So, I signed for Leeds United without getting a pay rise. I did it because I wanted to play for Leeds, but what modern player would do that? In my opinion, money has spoilt the game. It has absolutely ruined it.

Looking back, I can see now that I got a break when Vic Buckingham took a chance on me as a teenager. I came through the ranks at Walsall with Nick Atthey and we're still friends now, nearly 60 years after we first met. Nick was good enough to play in the First Division, but he never got a break like I did and so spent his whole career at Walsall. It really is a thin line. After Nick had spent ten years at the club he was entitled to a testimonial game and so he asked me whether Don Revie would bring Leeds United down to Fellows Park. I had a word with the gaffer, who was always there to help people, and he agreed. That game took place just a couple of weeks before Leeds played Bayern Munich in the 1975 European Cup Final and was the only time I turned out against Walsall during my playing career. It ended in a 3-3 draw and I got one of the goals, which was good.

When I was at Leeds United, reporters often used to ask me what I planned to do when my playing career was over. My answer was that I wanted to have a go at management. All the great managers at the time had started out at the

bottom. Bill Shankly had managed Carlisle United; Brian Clough had been at Hartlepool United while Don Revie had taken over at Leeds United when they were in the Second Division. I wanted to do the same thing: begin at a club in the Third or Fourth Division and learn the ropes there. I also told reporters that, ideally, the club I'd like to start in management with was Walsall. That's what I would have loved to have done. I heard once that somebody mentioned me in the boardroom at Walsall, but it never came to anything.

Instead, I ended up at Barnsley and took them to promotion in my first season in charge. A few years later, I took them to play against Walsall in a league match at Fellows Park. That was a very proud day for me, putting out a team to take on the club where I had started out as a 15-year-old boy. I remember Colin Taylor coming into the visiting dressing room after we had won that match, and it was great to see him again. Ever since I left the Saddlers to join Fulham, I have always looked out for the Walsall score on a Saturday afternoon, and I always will.