A Bittersweet, Real-Life Story from Football's Grass Roots

WE ARE SUNDAY LEAGUE

EWAN FLYNN

"Amusing and touching ... a lovely read"
Donald McRae, The Guardian

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pitch

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Introduction

IN the suburbs of north London, there are 15 or so men in their thirties – lads, well boys really – bound together by a great shared experience. Not going to war, thank Christ. Or the fact they all went to school together since the age of 11. But the experience of playing years and years (eight full seasons to be precise) of Sunday League football for their team, our team, the Wizards FC.

These boys are a family of sorts; dysfunctional at times, petty and jealous on occasion, but forever connected. And like a family, the years are now ticking by and we don't see each other as much. But, whenever we do, after the customary, 'How is the missus and kids?' the conversation always heads in the same direction, the Wizards. The Wizards played in the Edmonton and District Sunday Football League (EDSFL) from September 2002 to May 2010, with a brief hiatus to the more upmarket, but less fun, Mercury and Waltham League for a season in 2003.

A fella called Charles Dickens, who doesn't seem to have been much of a Sunday footballer, could have been writing the unauthorised history of the Wizards when he opens *A Tale of Two Cities* with, 'It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.'

That's how it was playing Sunday League in north London. We'd go from buzzing with euphoria when we won, to being frightened to death by 11 skinheads on the other side (some just

out of prison, some soon to be on their way there, who, whilst questioning the virtue of your mother, girlfriend or family pet, broke you in half with an X-rated tackle).

It was on Sunday mornings that I learned the following crucial life lessons: having 11 men to start the game is better than having nine; never believe your centre-forward when he says, 'Don't worry mate, you can trust me to remember the clocks are changing on Saturday night'; and finally, if the opposition have a short fat fella in goal, he's probably not their normal keeper, so shoot on sight.

The chasm Sunday League football has left behind is not one that is easily filled. Which is why we all still love telling and hearing the stories. Some of them for the millionth time when we get together and have had a few drinks.

Real life is far harder than it was in those halcyon days. When all I really worried about was if I could get to 200 competitive appearances and win a league title. When Monday to Saturday was a blend of fear and excitement, with all roads leading to 11am on Sunday.

Reading this you might think, probably with some justification, this guy is a plonker. It's only Sunday League football. And rationally, yes that's all it was. Schoolboy dreams of being spotted for football stardom were long since gone. It was now simply about playing a game in the park with your mates against a team of strangers, just like you'd done every weekend for as long as you could remember. But it meant the world to me and the other boys who were the core of the team. It still does now. Winning the Division 1 title is the greatest achievement of my life. If it weren't for the fact that potential employers wouldn't understand, it would be at the very top of my CV. Only my fully completed collection of Panini World Cup™ sticker albums, 1986 through to 2014, gets anywhere near.

Now there are plenty of men who are more obsessed with football than I am. Some plan their whole lives around it. I am a Spurs season ticket holder, but I am not one of those superfans/

weirdos who hasn't missed a match, home or away, for 20 years, including both reserve team games and pre-season tours of Asia, wearing the fact that they missed their own daughter's wedding because she didn't refer to the fixture list when setting the date as some sort of badge of honour (you know who you are).

I know that there are other things in life than football. At 18, when being a football fundamentalist seemed a pretty attractive way of life, even I knew that there had to be limits. When a fellow Spur I met at university in Southampton told me he'd spent pretty much all his student loan to travel to Chişinău in Moldova to see Spurs play out a 0-0 draw with FC Zimbru, having won the first leg 3-0, I knew he wasn't quite right.

When it came to the Wizards, however, the same kind of obsession overtook me. I point-blank refused to drink or be out late on Saturday before a game for eight years during my twenties. Some of which time, it may shock you to hear, I didn't have a girlfriend. Even when I did finally meet a girl who would put up with this regime (thanks Melissa), we could never go away for the weekend anywhere between September and May.

Any trips to see her parents in Canada for Christmas had to be tactically planned, so they coincided with the Christmas holidays in the only part of the world that really mattered, the Edmonton and District Sunday Football League. One time we were booking Sunday flights from Heathrow to Vancouver. I remember making up some old bollocks about night flights being safer, owing to the estimated strength of crosswinds, in order to cover up the truth. The only reason I wanted to take the late flight was so that I could play in a cup game that morning, and still have time to go home, get showered and on the tube, even making a pit stop at Chase Farm A&E if needed.

Mercifully for my long-term domestic bliss, the game was called off that morning due to inclement weather, not crosswinds. (As an aside, I love the word inclement; you only ever hear it in relation to football fixtures being cancelled or as a warning at the precise moment you go arse over tit on rain-soaked surfaces

by the escalator at Holborn tube.) I made the flight and arrived in Vancouver annoyed that if the game was not rescheduled, I would be down on my number of appearances compared to last year. It was only when Mel's lovely mum, Albina, said to me, 'I heard you were going to play football before going to the airport. What's wrong with you?' I realised my cover story had been blown and perhaps my priorities were a bit skewed. Next time just pay the extra couple of hundred quid and fly out Monday morning instead.

Chapter One

In the mixer

MY EARLIEST football memory relates to one of the most famous games ever played. It was the evening of Sunday 22 June 1986, England were playing Argentina in the quarter-finals of the World Cup in Mexico. As a four-year-old, the 'Hand of God' and 'Goal of the Century', both scored by Maradona within the space of five minutes early in the second half, passed me by as I slept under the gentle glow of my Thomas the Tank Engine night light. With nine minutes to go, substitute John Barnes crossed for Gary Lineker to score and bring England back into the game at 2-1.

I don't know if it was the shouts of celebration from my mum that woke me up or those immediately after of alarm, as straight from kick-off Argentina went down the other end and hit the inside of Peter Shilton's post. Either way, just as Barnes picked up the ball again on the left wing with three minutes left in the game, I sleepily made my way into the room in time to see him beat his man and send over another cross. Lineker threw himself at the ball, a scream went up from Barry Davies and Jimmy Hill in Mexico, my mum in north London and probably the entire nation. For a split second, they thought Lineker had scored the

equaliser. However, my mum's wild shout turned from joy to anguish, making me burst into frightened tears. It was Lineker rather than the ball that had ended up in the back of the net. This was an early lesson for me of the strange and dangerous power football could have over people.

A year later came my next infant football trauma, the 1987 FA Cup Final at Wembley, Spurs v Coventry, with Spurs the firm favourite to win. By now I'd started school in Edmonton and I knew for a fact that Tottenham are the greatest team the world has ever seen. Lo and behold, Clive Allen put Spurs one goal up inside the first two minutes! And then he scored again! And then again from a different angle!

As a five-year-old I hadn't quite gotten my head around instant replays. I couldn't believe my mum when she tried to explain away what I'd seen with my own eyes, albeit in slow motion. Spurs went on to lose 3-2. The sharp correlation between supporting Tottenham and disappointment was to be a key feature of my experience of football.

It was in the 1988/89 season that my football consciousness really took off. Although I was born in Edmonton, we'd moved to a bigger house in more upmarket Palmers Green. Now, we had a long back garden that served as my own personal training ground and later, both FA Cup and World Cup Final pitches. It was a place notorious for decisions favouring the home team, where the 'ref' always gave me a penalty to win the game in the last minute from age six to 29.

But my sister Rosanne and I still both went to Latymer All Saints Infant and Primary School in Edmonton. My mum and dad thought changing schools was a bad idea. Edmonton is a very working class area, where people new to London from other parts of the UK or the wider world in the early 1980s tended to arrive. Then, if they'd made a bit of money, they'd get out as quickly as possible. Edmonton borders on Tottenham. If you went to Latymer All Saints you had the choice; support Tottenham and play football at playtime or play kiss chase with

the girls. Naturally, I opted for the former and the direction of my life was decided.

Anytime there was a day at school where we were allowed to wear non-uniform, I would faithfully turn up in full Spurs replica kit, complete with matching Spurs shin pads. As would pretty much all the other boys in the class, other than the weird ones who didn't like football. I went to my first game at White Hart Lane in the 1988/89 season, a 1-1 draw against Charlton Athletic with Gary Mabbutt scoring the goal for Spurs. I continued to wear full kit and shin pads whenever I went, in the hope that an injury would lead to a call across the tannoy for any seven-year-old boy already in the kit, to make himself known to the stewards so that he could be brought on as sub.

It was during this season that my sister came home from school one day early in December and coolly announced that she and some of her classmates had been selected to sing Christmas carols on the pitch at White Hart Lane during a league game. All the good Christian lessons we had been given in assembly about not being jealous of your neighbour's ox went completely out the window. I was fuming. She didn't even like Spurs and was now going to get onto the pitch. She had even said that she supported Arsenal just to wind me up when I pushed her on the subject. When the day came, off she went to the Lane leaving her younger brother sat sulking at home, in full kit of course. Being so overcome with jealousy, I came to believe afterwards that Terry Venables dressed up as Santa and gave them all presents. Given that the singing took place at half-time this does seem unlikely, although thinking about some of the managers Spurs have had subsequently, anything's possible.

I was at home one sunny day in spring 1989 with my big Spurs mate, Terry Mordecai, thrashing out a deal to swap his Spurs pencil case and stationery for one of my Centurion action figures (Ray, the green one with the 'tache). Terry was always a shrewd operator and didn't take a lot of convincing as he was definitely getting the better deal, but I wanted the pencil case so badly. That

day, 15 April 1989, as it unfolded, turned out to be one of the very worst in the history of English football and English policing. Terry and I listened in shock as news of people dying at a football match came through on the radio from Hillsborough.

On Monday at school our teacher, Mr Hindell, Spurs mug on his desk as usual, tried to explain to a class of seven- and eight-year-olds what had happened. He chalked a picture of the terrace behind a goal on the board and explained that too many fans had been allowed into the same part of the stadium and that this had led to a crush. Hillsborough has always been burned into my memory, as I am sure it was for every football fan old enough to remember those awful events. It probably speaks volumes as to why the families of the 96 victims of the disaster have had to fight so long and hard for justice, that my primary school teacher did a more accurate job of explaining what had happened 48 hours after the horrendous events than elements of the press and authorities did for over 20 years. *The Sun*'s disgraceful coverage of the disaster, blaming Liverpool fans, meant that when the Premier League launched, there was to be no talking my dad into getting Sky to allow me to watch the games. His disdain for anything owned by Rupert Murdoch ran deep. He told me how 6,000 people lost their jobs when News International moved operations for *The Sun*, *News of the World*, *The Times* and the *Sunday Times* to Wapping, and how union resistance was crushed.[1] While I have grown to respect this principled stance, annoyingly typical of my dad, it didn't hold much weight in the school playground, where the division between the haves and have-nots in terms of who had been able to watch *Ford Super Sunday* was all too clear.[2]

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1 The defeat of the strike at Wapping hit my dad's family hard. My dad's dad, Vincent Flynn, had been a lifelong trade unionist, and was general secretary of the print union SOGAT (Society of Graphical and Allied Trades) before retiring in 1974.

2 After years of my own kind of campaigning I reached a compromise with my dad whereby we got the Sky Sports channels through Cable London.

The only sort of football coaching I received at Latymer All Saints Primary School was when a man came in just before the start of World Cup 90 to do a demonstration of skills in the playground. He had a sack full of red, white and green Coca-Cola mini balls, emblazoned with 'Ciao', the Italia 90 (and unquestionably best ever) World Cup mascot.

It wasn't until a family holiday at Center Parcs, that I finally got some proper coaching. Our family holidays were always a bit strained; my mum and dad didn't seem to have much fun together. Dad was a journalist, specialising in industrial disasters and asbestosis, that kind of thing. He can be quite a serious character and his idea of holiday reading would be a book about the Holocaust or the suffering of those working in the blood diamond trade in Angola. Perhaps my dad thought that bringing along his elderly Scottish parents, and us all staying together in the cabin fever conditions of a self-catering lodge, was just the tonic for a flagging marriage. Unsurprisingly, this did not result in a romantic reawakening for mum and dad. It did however, give me one of the few vivid memories I have of my granddad before he died. The years rolled back as he momentarily forgot that he needed his crutches to move around and tried to get on the end of a loose pass from me that fell in his direction. Thankfully, my dad got hold of him just in time before he lost his balance completely, saving a trip to the Center Parcs medical centre. Beyond this memory, I was delighted to have granny and granddad there that holiday as they had bought me the full Hummel Spurs kit for my birthday with Holsten across the middle – although they then lectured me on the evils of advertising beer on children's clothing.

This was a more innocent time, when those killjoys in government hadn't yet outlawed alcohol firms displaying their names across the front of children's football shirts. It certainly didn't have any impact on me; I'm confident my requests to my dad to henceforth only buy Holsten were purely coincidental. I think this was one of the last children's Spurs kits to bear Holsten's

name. I remember getting the 1990/91 season goalkeeper's shirt as worn by my hero Erik Thorstvedt as a present soon after, and being horrified that there was no sponsor on it, so much so that I immediately cut the letters H O L S T E N out of a piece of paper to affix them to the shirt with Copydex glue. Not only was my shirt sponsor-less, it now had glue stains down the front. From then on I insisted on having men's sized Spurs shirts to avoid the embarrassment of not having a sponsor. It meant I could lord it over all the other boys whose shirts didn't have the all-important Holsten, even though my shirts looked like I had stolen them from the men's lost property.

Having learned that it was best to join some sort of club or activity on holiday rather than be around mum and dad all the time, I signed up for football coaching with Dennis Longhorn. Dennis was the first professional footballer I ever met. I was in awe to hear that he had only just retired from a career that had taken in spells at Mansfield Town, Aldershot and Colchester United among several other teams that, like these, I had never heard of. Accrington Stanley? Who are they? Exactly! At the end of the two days of football training all the boys had a penalty competition, which I won. The prize I received from Dennis was a copy of *Shoot!* magazine, which he pointed out had a poster of the whole Liverpool squad with their (printed) autographs on it. I wasn't fooled; I knew it was a rubbish prize. Dennis then said it was traditional for the winning boy to have a penalty shoot-out with his dad. My dad had come by to pick me up in some ill-fitting 80s tennis shorts and brown leather boat shoes and reluctantly agreed to take part.

Dad wasn't at his athletic peak at this time; once he went to university his boyhood interest in football had been pushed aside in order to make plans for a socialist world revolution, and long, slow marches from the LSE to Hyde Park or Trafalgar Square were never going to be optimum for keeping fit. Nevertheless, when Dennis said the loser of this competition between father and son would have to do 20 press-ups, I saw something change

in him. I remember him saying to himself loudly enough for me and several of the other young boys to hear, 'I'm not doing any fucking press-ups.' He then proceeded to smash five of the hardest penalties he could muster past his helpless, shocked eight-year-old son. Poor old Dennis Longhorn didn't know where to look, and the competitive dad sketch on the *Fast Show* will resonate with me for the rest of my life. I should say I took my revenge on dad a few years later playing tennis on our last-ever family holiday. In the sweltering Portuguese sun, I hit the sweetest forehand into his bollocks from the back of the court before fleeing the scene shouting over my shoulder, 'That's for Center Parcs.'

With my sister moving up to secondary school, my mum and dad decided it would be better for me to move to a school nearer to our house for my final two years in primary. They claim that they had for some weeks gently told me this was on the horizon. In fact, we all went together to meet the head teacher and look round the other school. I have no memory of this at all. Maybe I thought it was some kind of wind-up; maybe I was in denial. Anyway, one day when rifling through their wardrobe looking for my birthday presents during the summer holidays I found a red Hazelwood school jumper. It seemed clear it was destined for me to wear. All the crying in the world and threats to run away held no sway, and at the start of the new school year off to Hazelwood Junior School I went. In hindsight, it was absolutely the best thing for me; having school and new friends walking distance away was great, and I was able to be at the park by 9.30am every weekend to play 2-on-2 games of football, which seemed to last the whole day long.

It was at Hazelwood recreation ground that I first encountered Sunday League football. Seeing teams in full matching kit playing with referees and sometimes even linesmen just down the road was more exciting to me than going through the back of a wardrobe to discover Narnia. I remember one time being down the rec kicking about with some pals just as the nets were being

put up for a Sunday League game that morning. Usually at this time, we were politely asked to 'Fucking get out of the goals', but this particular week the goalkeeper asked us to warm him up by taking a few shots at him. It is safe to say that he must have seen us playing before as he felt sufficiently confident in his own ability, or our lack thereof, to offer us a tenner if we could score past him. Suffice to say after ten or so scuffed shots, none of which required him to make a save, it was time for us to 'fuck off'. Upon reflection, of all the things a small boy might be offered cash for by a stranger in a public park, I think we got away lightly.

Although I had broken into the school team at centre-back, it was around this time that my love of Erik Thorstvedt, and a new story about a young goalkeeper in *Roy of the Rovers* who I thought looked like me, inspired me to start playing in goal. I tried to do everything like Erik the Viking, right down to wearing a knee strapping when playing despite having no knee injury, only to pretend I did when people asked what the bandage was for.

The early 90s was not a vintage period for English football. Graham Taylor was presiding over the national team as it stumbled through qualification for the European Championships, and direct 'up and at 'em' football was very much in vogue. 'Put it in the mixer' – a phrase repeated up and down every Sunday League pitch in the country – also seemed to be the go-to tactic for half of the Barclays First Division. Even as a nine-year-old, especially now playing in goal, I realised that it was perhaps asking a lot of primary school children to play on full-size pitches with full-size goals. Basically, the surest way to score a goal was to give the other team a goal kick. Their goalkeeper, barely able to kick the ball out of the penalty area, would then present the ball straight to your striker who knew even if he shot wide the goal kick that followed would immediately present him with another chance to score.

The fortunes of our school team peaked and then troughed with the arrival and departure of a boy called Abdi part way through the year. Abdi was from Somalia. He was a lovely, quiet

boy who was infinitely better than any of us at football. He was also well on the way to six foot tall, and as is so often the way in boys' football when there is one boy who has developed much faster than the rest, he would basically win our matches single-handedly.

The tactics were always the same: 'Get the ball to Abdi!' All was well and we were unbeatable until Abdi moved to another school in the district. When it was our turn to play his new school, Abdi demonstrated just how much of a one-man team Hazelwood had been. With him on the other side, it was a non-contest. We consoled ourselves that although we maybe weren't a very strong side anymore, at least we had a pitch. Our Lady of Lourdes Primary School played *their* school games on a pioneering new all-weather surface – a concrete playground. Playing them we came away with the win plus matching battle scars, cut knees and elbows. That school literally used jumpers for goalposts.

The Metropolitan Police would organise an annual five-a-side tournament for schools on the immaculate pitches of the Tesco Country Club at Goff's Oak, which incidentally were used for training by the Swiss national team during Euro '96. Playing there was obviously a Very Big Deal. However, thanks to the meddling of Esther Rantzen, I nearly never got to share my gift of pretty average goalkeeping with the wider world.

Esther Rantzen's programme, *That's Life,* was compulsory viewing on a Sunday evening in our super-safety-conscious house. Most of the time it had funny items, like people being stopped in the street and asked silly questions, or being set up in some ridiculous scenario. But then it had some serious items too. The Sunday night before the tournament, with timing that seemed to be aimed deliberately to cause me the maximum embarrassment, Rantzen ran a feature on the dangers of five-a-side goalposts and how up and down the country there had been a spate of serious and even fatal injuries to young goalkeepers caused by the collapse of the goal on top of them. With hindsight,

I should be grateful that my mum was so concerned with my wellbeing that she took it upon herself not just to drive me to the sports ground, but also to linger. This was a public safety matter and she wanted answers. She set about inspecting all the goals to see how they were fixed to the ground, and was not satisfied. There are few worse things in a ten-year-old's life than having to tell your team-mates that you might not be allowed to play because your mum says it's not safe. But that's what I had to endure that night. Eventually, she spoke to the police officer in charge and gave him an earful about what she had seen on Esther's ever-helpful show, and how there should at least be sandbags on the back of the goals weighing them down. At this point, I started to cry and prepared to make the walk of shame back to the car in front of carloads of other boys whose mums had correctly understood that child safety should not get in the way of five-a-side school football. Thankfully the police officer, no doubt drawing on years of professional experience in handling overly vocal people, while at the same time mourning the loss of manliness in the youth of today, said, 'Well it's up to you madam!' Mercifully my mum saw the light, and I was able to play on.

Goalkeeping did turn out to be a hazardous occupation for me all the same. Around the time of 'goalpost gate', I started going to midweek football lessons in a local secondary school gym. Back then, the only credentials you needed to run football lessons seemed to be owning a few footballs and the ability to hire an indoor space for an hour each week. Having ticked these two boxes, our coach was a man in his early twenties who clearly modelled himself on Roberto Baggio. Right down to 'the divine ponytail', glitzy earring and Juventus leisurewear. Two weeks in, he was putting on a training drill, the title of which might have been, 'How to impress the younger mums sitting on benches round the edge of the gym to watch the session'. As I was the only goalkeeper in the group, he made me stand in front of a high jump crash mat propped up on its side to represent a goal, and

then demonstrated just how hard he could shoot. What exactly this was meant to teach any of us was unclear. However, the ball arrowed directly into my face and left me dazed on the floor with a bloody nose. Baggio's apology, he hadn't expected me to try to save it – didn't cut the mustard with my mum. That was the end of the course for me.

The year after I left junior school a friend of mine, let's call him 'David', in the year below me was made captain of the school team. A new teacher had taken on responsibility for coaching them. David recalls that football training that year consisted of very little football, but was more about lots of stretching or walking on hands and knees across the floor of the dinner hall, that doubled up as a sports hall. Towards the end of the school year, before he was to join me at secondary school, David and one of the other boys got word that the teacher wanted to see them at lunchtime on important football team business. The two of them duly reported to the teacher's classroom, where he explained that as they were soon to be leaving the school and had been such good footballers, they could really help next year's boys by appearing in a training video. David recalls feeling immensely proud, thinking he would be forever immortalised in the folklore of the school football team. He was only too keen to participate.

There was a video camera in the classroom and the boys were asked to change into their football kit before being asked to do some role-play. Firstly one boy had to do some stretches touching his toes, while the other boy acted as the teacher and told him where he was going wrong. Then they were given a wooden metre stick and told to tap each other on the backside when the stretches weren't done properly. Finally, David remembers being asked to do a 'sit-up thing on top of each other'. Attempting to rationalise this, he describes it as an assisted stretch even though, now in his early thirties, he understands what was going on. At the time, however, the teacher said the video was to be a special surprise for the school and the boys were not to tell anyone. At that age, there is little more important than the school football

team. So at the end of the session, when the camera was turned off, he didn't say a word to anyone about what had happened, but took great pride in having been selected for this honour. It confirmed what every schoolboy wanted to hear, that he was one of the best footballers in the school. Now, future generations would know it too.

Surprisingly, however, it appears that the teacher had not made the definitive football training video after all, as the following year he made the same request to another boy. This boy must have gone home and told his parents about it. David, at this point in his first year at secondary school, recounts that he was contacted by the police to inquire if he had been asked to do anything unusual in relation to the junior school football team. When I suggest to him that probably the video was viewed by more men than just the teacher who filmed it, there is a brief flicker of discomfort in his eyes. But reflecting back over 20 years since it happened, he says he doesn't feel like he went through a harrowing experience, and doesn't feel as if he was abused or groomed by a paedophile. He also remembers that in his first Sunday League team, the coach on occasion required him to wear a black bin bag and do laps of the pitch because he needed to lose weight. I have heard that professional footballers in the late 1980s and early 90s employed this as a way of excreting the alcohol from their system if they had had a skinful the night before and were trying to go undetected by the manager, but the fact that someone would ask a child with a bit of puppy fat on them to do the same is perhaps indicative of how unregulated youth football was, and how easy it was for well-meaning volunteers, let alone sexual predators, to do massive harm to young boys who would turn up week in, week out, to play the game they loved.

Happily, David channelled these experiences, which never diminished his passion for football, into setting up his own business delivering brilliant weekly football coaching to hundreds of youth footballers across north London and

Hertfordshire. He takes great pride in ensuring that the children in his company's care have a safe environment to develop, and most importantly enjoy their football. He still feels there are companies and coaches out there who cut corners and don't perform the necessary Disclosure and Barring Service checks or have properly robust safeguarding policies. Having been with him on the sidelines when coaching his team in matches against other clubs, it is immediately apparent to me how upsetting he finds it when the conduct of the coach of the opposition team does not meet the standards he sets for anyone in his employ. He says he doesn't ever think about the teacher anymore or feel hatred towards him, but 'now I know if I ever did see him, he would deserve a good kicking'.

At secondary school I was still playing in goal. I'd left the Cubs, which for a while was a great source of organised football and knot tying. This was the time I joined my first proper Sunday League team, Winchmore Hill FC, made up of several of the boys I had played against in the Cubs, and who I now went to school with. Four of us would travel together to training every Thursday, and matches on a Sunday, often driven by Dominic Slatter's dad, Malcolm. He was a rather stern police officer, who would tell us with increasing dismay not to slam the doors of his Vauxhall Cavalier and reprimand me for my goalkeeping gloves. After a couple of weeks of wearing, they smelt like a dead animal and completely overpowered the air freshener each time I entered his pristine vehicle. Looking back, I have to credit Malcolm as he would always be willing to do the driving, even though his son was a perennial substitute and would only be given the last few minutes of a game if the scoreline meant the result was already a formality. Toni Cannas, the dad of Daniele, one of my other mates on the team, was another regular source of lifts to and from games and training. Toni was a small man with a warm, friendly face, dark hair and big moustache which, given our age and his strong Italian accent, made comparisons to Super Mario of Nintendo fame inevitable. I will always be thankful to Toni in

those formative Sunday League years, where I came off the pitch having made at best one bad mistake in the game, but oftentimes many more, for having a kind word to say to me. Which would encourage me to do it all again the following week.

Winchmore Hill was a big club that ran multiple men's football teams and cricket in the summer. The youth football team wore purple and white shirts and short 1980s-style football shorts – unfortunately the longer style ushered in by Spurs and Umbro in the 1991 FA Cup Final took longer to trickle down to amateur football. We were managed by a policeman called Jimmy. Unlike most youth football managers, Jimmy did not have a son in the team. You can usually tell the teams where the manager's son is in the side as he'll be the captain, taking free kicks and penalties and always completing the full 90 minutes despite being the worst player on the pitch. Jimmy was a nice enough guy, although I do remember him laughing when one of the players I didn't know mispronounced my name as 'Urine'. Mercifully, it was only a few years before *Trainspotting* came out and Ewan McGregor made the name familiar to everyone south of the border. I joined part way through the season after the clocks had changed. Training was conducted on a muddy bit of field with one big goal close to the clubhouse. There was a floodlight (singular), which emitted about as much light as would a hand torch gaffer-taped to a pole; you could just about see the person next to you or the ball speeding out of the shadows a split second before it hit you in the face.

Training mostly involved forming a queue, the player at the front of which would pass the ball to Jimmy or one of the dads who served as his assistants, who would then lay it off for the player to have a shot at goal. That was the theory, but this rather depended on firstly the player making an accurate pass to the adult, and then, equally unlikely, the adult returning the ball with any sort of quality to the onrushing player. Should these unlikely stars align, more often than not the player would proceed to either shank his shot wide or miss the ball altogether.

He would then return to the back of the queue and wait for the other 15 boys to do the same before getting another go, by which time he had completely forgotten the sophisticated 'coaching point' he had been given, namely, 'Try kicking the ball next time.' As the goalkeeper in these exercises, I wasn't getting very much practice. While I would like to put it down to that, truth be told, I just wasn't very good in goal.

The team itself was not bad though, with a couple of really talented players. The first was Simon, a pacey forward who was twice the size of everyone else and rattled in the goals every week. He was soon cherry-picked by Tesco, the dominant force in youth football in our area. The second was a boy called Edward. I never actually saw him play, but his prodigious talent at age 11 was constantly spoken about by the dads. Sadly, though, Edward had contracted gangrene, which at school I had learned about as something afflicting soldiers in WWI rather than youth Sunday League footballers in the 1990s.

My debut for Winchmore Hill came in a cup-tie against Bedfont Eagles that necessitated a long drive across London to their home ground right by Heathrow's Terminal 4. As the various cars pulled into the car park and we made our way over to the changing rooms, we all noticed daubed in massive letters across the front of the building, 'Hounslow I had your mum'. This was particularly unfortunate for one boy in our ranks, poor Ben Hounslow. At age 11, there was no greater insult than someone besmirching, or as we all put it, cussing your mum. But Ben received very little sympathy from the rest of us – quite the opposite in fact. We were blissfully ignorant that Hounslow was the name of a town nearby to Heathrow and the insult more than likely related to a team of that name. The game from that point is now a blur. The only real memory I have is of finding it hard to concentrate with the roar of the jets as they barely cleared the crossbar of the goal I was keeping.

But the environment at our home pitch had challenges of its own. A few minutes into the second half of my first league

game a shot went wide, and flew into the trees a few feet behind the goal. I went back into the trees to retrieve the ball, already panicking about the inept goal kick I would shortly be taking. The ball, however, had gone through the trees and out the other side into the stream behind them. After what seemed at least 15 minutes, I finally managed to get the ball and return to the game with sopping wet boots in what would become a regular routine whenever we defended that end. So much so, that I would often dive and try and save the ball even if it was going wide, just to save myself the river walk to fetch it back.

Once I felt established in the team, I noticed that no one seemed to be wearing a captain's armband, even though a blond lad called Mark was clearly captain in that he would do the coin toss before the game. In the garden at home, I would often wear around my upper arm the tennis headband that had come with matching wristbands. I wondered if I just turned up to the game on Sunday doing the same, would I be allowed to be captain from then on? The fact that my captain's armband was white and fluffy and said 'Wilson' in rainbow-coloured letters was a slight cause for concern but it was surely worth a try. I pressed ahead with my plan, until the manager asked me what I was doing and I embarrassedly took it off. Funnily enough, though, the very next week Mark turned up with a proper captain's armband of his own.

Once Simon had left, and with the injured Edward no closer to returning, we went from being a team that won more than we lost, to a side that got beaten regularly and often heavily. As the fact that I could only dive one way, never a strength in a goalkeeper, became more and more exposed, my confidence took a similar one-way nosedive. I would get home obliterated in mud, miserable from having had to pick the ball out of the back of the net over and over. One of the watching mums, called Anne, became my tormentor in chief. Clearly, she believed her son was on course to play professionally but for the limitations of the players around him. Perhaps she was right.

One week at training, after a particularly dismal display by the team, Jimmy lined up all the boys along the goal line. He and the other dad who helped oversee training, plus the boys who had been absent that Sunday, smashed balls into the goal with strict instructions that moving out of the way was not an option. I have ruminated many times since on exactly what this was supposed to teach us, and how it would improve the team. I am still unsure today. The main thing I took from it was that losing Sunday League football wasn't fun, and maybe that was the aim of the lesson. But I think we had already figured that out for ourselves.

Eventually, I came to training to be greeted by the sight of another goalkeeper already there and in the sticks being warmed up. I knew the writing was on the wall for me as the Number 1. Initially we would take turns to play in the matches, like Ray Clemence and Peter Shilton had done for England all those years before. If Clem and Shilts could be imagined as slightly chubby schoolboys, decked out in multi-coloured Umbro replica goalkeeping kits that were big enough to fit two people, with fluorescent Sondico gloves.

We used to receive the team sheet for the coming Sunday's game in the post on a Friday, once Jimmy had overseen training and knew who was available. Thankfully, he stopped this practice of informing us of the team in writing before it got to the point when I was dropped altogether.

In one last attempt to improve my goalkeeping skills, I nagged my mum to pay for me to go to Bob Wilson's three-day residential goalkeeping school, which used to run adverts in *Match* magazine that I also received by post every week. Wearing the full turquoise Spurs keeper kit to Arsenal legend Bob Wilson's school at least made me stand out, and although I did learn to wait to see where the shot was going before diving, it was clear to me when I shook special guest David Seaman's hand at the end-of-course ceremony, that goalkeeping wasn't for me. It was a turning point. I realised I had to get back to playing

centre-back, where my height and love of heading the ball really far would make me a much better and happier footballer for the rest of my school years.