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# WHY ARE WE ALWAYS ON LAST?

Running Match of the Day and  
Other Adventures in TV and Football

'Fascinating  
insight into  
football on TV.'

Henry Winter, *The Times*

FOREWORD BY

**GARY  
LINEKER**

PAUL ARMSTRONG

# WHY ARE WE ALWAYS ON LAST?

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Other Adventures in TV and Football

P A U L A R M S T R O N G



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# 1.

## Sportsnights, and days with David Coleman

Before I move on to my BBC baptism of fire with David Coleman and Esther Rantzen (not at the same time, that really would have finished me off), here's how I set off on an unlikely route to more than a quarter of a century at BBC Sport.

I was born, and spent my first 14 years, in Smoggieland: the unglamorous, and in football terms less deluded corner of the North East. Teesside was booming when I was born in 1964, but it didn't last long. When my Dad was moved south by the area's main employer ICI in 1979, the local economy was already on the slide. We had Captain Cook, and in the case of my hometown of Stockton-on-Tees, 1820s glory with the world's first passenger railway and the invention of the friction match by James Walker the chemist, but in the modern era we had chemical plants, steel and sport. I attended Ian Ramsey Comprehensive School which was founded in 1963, the year before I was born.

All the well-known alumni listed on Wikipedia played sport at the top level: Olympic athlete and 5 Live commentator Alison Curbishley; former flying Leicester Tigers winger Steve Hackney; and, among a number of professional footballers, the

‘combative’ Lee Cattermole of Boro and Sunderland fame – or infamy.

I was never in that sporting bracket – I was far too much of a lightweight fancy dan to ‘Cattermole’ anyone, for starters – but we did live the clichéd existence of playing football every break time and after school until it got dark, then cricket every day from May until September. I recently discovered that one of the more talented Stockton lads I kicked a ball around with went on to play and score in international football. Come on down Martin Todd of the Bahamas, Gold Cup qualifying, 1999. Along with playing briefly up front at college with an Irish sporting legend, Brendan Mullen (rugby union, bit crap at football, but very quick), my sporting cv is slowly coming together<sup>2</sup>. Thanks, Facebook.

And I watched everything and anything to do with sport on TV. To my eternal regret, I remember the 1970 Mexico World Cup opening ceremony (‘why are we called Inglaterra, Dad?’) but not the best-ever tournament that followed. By 1971, though, I was across it all. Charlie George lying on his back after his FA Cup Final winner, David Coleman telling us excitedly that Colchester were now 3-0 up in the fifth round of the cup against the mighty Leeds, Johan Cruyff’s Ajax beating the exotically named Panathinaikos in a Wembley European Cup Final, the equally exotic Bishen Bedi tying Boycott and co. up in knots in that summer’s Tests, Geoff Lewis and the great Mill Reef winning the Derby from Linden Tree and Irish Ball, Lee Trevino pipping Mr Lu of Taiwan (‘where’s Taiwan, Dad?’) to the Open, Eddie Waring describing Sid Hines’s ‘early bath’ in the Challenge Cup Final, David Bedford being outpaced by a Finn and an East German in an epic sprint finish in the European

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2 My brother John has the best sporting claim to fame in the family. He played junior football in Kent alongside future England international John Salako. Then, as a decent spin bowler at Leeds University in the late 80s, he and his team-mates sniggered as their opponents, an Indian youth team, sent out a tiny figure in a sunhat to face them. They weren’t laughing when he despatched their bowling all over West Yorkshire. John felt much better about it when Sachin Tendulkar toured England with the Test team the following summer.

Championship 10,000m. I sat glued to them all in that golden year of 1971. I don't even follow some of those sports now, but if it was on TV – and unless you were a bit naff and wanted to watch wrestling, the ITV Seven or cliff-diving from Acapulco – that pretty much always meant the BBC and *Grandstand*, and I was there.

And I was also beginning to discover the joys of spectating. Durham, then of the Minor Counties, often played cricket at Stockton, and Yorkshire played a match a season at Acklam Park, Middlesbrough. We had family outings to high-quality flat racing at York. And we had the mighty Boro. Middlesbrough FC had never won anything, unless you counted the Amateur Cup back in the 1890s. They were poised to win the league both seasons that the world wars broke out, according to the old-timers, and had been robbed countless times in FA Cup quarter-finals – but we'd spent about half our existence in the top flight and produced a string of great local players like Wilf Mannion and Brian Clough.

The first game I saw was a 5-0 win against Norwich in February 1971 (Downing, Hickton (2), McIlmoyle, Laidlaw) and with Stan Anderson later replaced by Jack Charlton in his first job in management, and Bobby Murdoch coming in to supplement Graeme Souness and David Armstrong in a phenomenal midfield, I didn't see a home defeat at Ayresome Park until QPR won there in 1976/77, by which time they were established in the top flight. We didn't go to every home game, by any means – my Dad and uncle wisely kept me away from likely 70s flared-trousered flashpoints when the Leeds or Manchester United hordes came to town – but I was left with a wildly exaggerated faith in my club's prowess, which sowed the seeds for many future disappointments. I also only discovered later that most of the rest of the country viewed Big Jack's team as a carbuncle on the backside of the beautiful game. Away from home in that era of two points for a win, our uncompromising defence of Craggs, Spraggon, Boam and Maddren (as the peerless Boro writer Harry Pearson once wrote, 'sounding like a collection of Anglo-Saxon farming implements') booted the

rest of the country up in the air and ground out countless 0-0 draws to Cockney cries of 'Borrring, Borrring Barrah'. Good. It served the 'soft southern bastards' right.

Then suddenly, I was one of them. A soft southerner, that is. My Dad was relocated to ICI's London HQ. We moved down to Kent and I found myself starting my 'O' level studies at Judd School, Tonbridge, a state grammar with an excellent academic record – some outstanding sixth-form politics and English teachers eventually helped get me good enough 'A' level grades to get into Oxford – but one which at the time was, socially at least, a desperate public-school wannabe. 'All fur coat and no knickers', as northern ladies of a certain vintage used to say about upwardly mobile women. Starting the fourth year there felt like arriving in outer space. There were no girls (a bit of a downer for a hormonal teenager who'd begun to enjoy their company); incomprehensible traditional maths (I'd been learning some trendy modern version); you were addressed by your surname and supposed to say 'Sir' back and, most appalling of all, there was no football. Until the summer term, when you could play cricket or tennis, there was only rugby (rugby union, not that other northern abomination), or if you were a lily-livered wimp who valued his teeth, you could go on an invigorating cross-country run instead. Those were your only choices.

In my first games lesson in Kent, I was asked what position I played. I explained that I'd always played football. 'You mean soccer,' sneered the games teacher, before shooting me a look so cold I was tempted to go back and fetch my coat from the changing room. He spent the next four years telling me to fasten my top button whenever he passed me in the corridor. The first XV thought he was great; he called them by their Christian names and took them on tours to places like Canada and Japan. The irony is that the top public schools like Eton, Harrow and Charterhouse had codified the rules of football, dominated the early FA Cup and still happily play the game to this day. Somewhere along the line,

a confused young chap in a Warwickshire backwater had cheated by picking up the ball and, boy, were we going to suffer for it. Such was the snobbery about football, we weren't even allowed to play at break times. I was never going to overtake those who were steeped in chasing the egg and make the first XV, nor would I have wanted to, but I was able to kick and catch the non-sphere after a fashion, so managed to survive games lessons. I didn't play competitive football again – though I could soon do 1,000 keepy-ups on my own in the garden – until I reached university, by which time I'd lost out on the crucial years when you learn positional play and how to function as part of a team. And while I was quite bitter about it all at the time (no, really), looking back it did me a huge favour.

I made lasting friendships through the secret fellowship of football. Our neighbour in Kent was a warm, unstuffy Scottish chap called Doug McAllister. He and some friends had season tickets at Crystal Palace, so I often went with them to Selhurst Park when a seat was available, and at school, after a bit of digging around, I discovered some other undercover football heretics. John Luke had come to Kent from the Midlands and was a Villa fan – I'd always liked the Andy Gray and Brian Little-inspired team of that era – so we went to watch them whenever they came to London; Jon Rycroft's dad was from Carlisle, where the already-brilliant Peter Beardsley was coming through the ranks, so we cheered them on at places like Gillingham and Millwall (albeit very quietly when they won at the latter); Mark Turner and I went to as many Spurs games as we could, particularly during their Hoddle-inspired cup runs; and Chris Wise was an Arsenal regular and the only person I ever knew who was allowed to pay 90p to enter the quaintly named Schoolboys' Enclosure at Highbury while sporting a luxuriant moustache.

My close friend and talented musician David Eastwood, who sadly died much too young from a brain tumour, would happily go and watch absolutely any game of football anywhere, no matter how unprepossessing, so we watched Boro whenever they came to the



south-east and always found a fixture somewhere in London every Saturday and most midweeks. David hated rugby. I have an abiding memory of him standing on the wing in the freezing cold, sleeves over his hands Denis Law-style, as I chucked the ball down the line from fly-half. He yelled, 'Oh no, I might get the ball!' and was promptly ordered to run a couple of laps of the pitch for his insubordination. One games lesson, when rugby was completely frozen off, we went to the gym for a makeshift basketball session. I was appointed one of the captains and decided to break with humiliating convention and pick my least athletic mates David and Jon first. I was duly given a detention by that day's games teacher, who happened to be a humourless former England rugby international, all of which just about sums the place up. I'm sure it's better these days – it must have entered at least the 20th century by now.

However, as the Americans discovered during Prohibition, if you drive something underground it tends to flourish and take on a whole new romantic allure. Football became something of an obsession, even as it increasingly became a pariah sport for the government and much of the wider country, while Boro went into a dismal decline which included two relegations before Steve Gibson and his consortium saved them from liquidation in 1986. The game had become a major part of my identity – I played two or three times a week (to a distinctly moderate standard) at university and still watched as many games as possible, in the flesh or on TV – so by the time I applied to become a BBC production trainee in 1987, football was central to my application process. A bit unorthodox, since I'd done a politics and philosophy-based degree; however, I was applying for a scheme which allowed you to spend two years moving around different departments, so I thought I'd probably end up in BBC News and Current Affairs, with its greater output and staffing levels, but at least have a stint at BBC Sport before settling down.

Part of the application process was to review a BBC show you'd watched recently. I suspect most of the other production trainee

applicants opted for highbrow *Panorama* or a gritty drama, but instead I just let rip about an utterly boring, predictable *Match of the Day Live* Liverpool win (at Watford, I think) in which the whole production seemed to consist of one long drool about the men in red. Liverpool were the best team in the country for most of the late 70s and 80s, but they seemed to feature in almost every BBC live game. Norwich City even had an early fanzine in those days called *Liverpool Are On The Telly Again*. It seemed out of all proportion to their entertainment value for the neutral. Ian Rush would score on the break away from home against hapless team X, Hansen and Lawrenson would keep the ball between them and pass it back to Grobbelaar (as they could then) for the rest of the game and it would finish 0-1. Every live TV game for about eight years, or so it seemed. On this occasion, Rush wasn't even named in commentary by Barry Davies, but simply called 'you know who' when he inevitably scored on the break. 'Yes, I do bloody know who,' I think I wrote, 'he's live on my telly almost every sodding week.' Actually, I may have been more wry and subtle than that, but when I turned up for the selection process, at least the distinguished programme-making interview panel knew who I was. The 'token bolshie pleb' I suspect it said in their briefing notes.

Compared to today's graduate aspiring to a career in the media, my cv was bordering on the pathetic. I'd played sport at a modest level, and edited the college magazine briefly, but I was glad no one asked me to show them a copy. I suspect they'd have taken a dim view of the scurrilous, badly produced sub-*Private Eye* in-jokes, cartoons and gossip rag that it was. Actually, that's a bit harsh on the cartoonist – a first-year student called Richard Jolley passed on a whole supplement's worth of talent and satire a few weeks after arriving. These days, he's 'RGJ' in *Private Eye*. Even so, a typical 21st-century media applicant has spent three years on a dedicated media course, run the student radio station, launched their own YouTube channel, blogged about travelling the world, written an opera and had a couple of novels published, but fortunately those

were more half-arsed times, and an unorthodox application in which I opted to review *Match of the Day* somehow got me on to their highbrow shortlist as the wild card.

I already had a place on a more traditional trainee print journalism course lined up. My Auntie Dorothy had written for the *Northern Echo* and once interviewed the Beatles when they played the Globe Theatre in Stockton. In my shambolic, unfocused way, I thought maybe I could follow in her footsteps. So when, to my great surprise, the BBC summoned me for an interview, I was quite relaxed about it. The waiting room was full of nervous wrecks whose parents expected them to be running *Newsnight* or BBC Drama one day, so I was at a considerable advantage with no one, including me, expecting anything to come of it. At that time, as a lazy student with only four channels available on the black-and-white portable in my room, I was up on pretty much everything TV-related. I just chatted about that for an hour and answered a general knowledge quiz heavily skewed towards popular culture. If I went through the same process now, I'd fail horribly. These days I can't keep track of it all, and only really watch sport and news live, record *Have I Got News For You*, *University Challenge* and *Only Connect*, and occasionally discover a good comedy series about three years after everyone else.

So, somewhat stunned, I signed the BBC's contract, put the print journalism career on hold, and turned up at Elstree for a six-week induction course in the autumn of 1987. I had absolutely no idea how TV was put together – some of BBC Sport's techies would say I still don't – so taking turns to direct, go out with a film crew and run cameras and sound equipment ourselves was just fantastic. Then it was time to start our attachments – three months or so working in different departments which, in theory, would end with us applying for a permanent job in an area to which we were best suited. I grew up enormously in those initial couple of years, and went from absolute beginner to fledgling producer, under the tutelage and withering gaze of Coleman, Rantzen and others.

But first came Mike Neville. Most people reading this will have no idea who Mike Neville is. Some keen students of TV may remember his regular accomplished contributions to BBC One's 1970s magazine show *Nationwide*. But if you're above a certain age and come from an area roughly between the Scottish border and the North Yorkshire Moors, the chances are you're well aware that he was one of the greatest broadcasters ever to draw breath. The greatest, if you listened to my elderly relatives who recounted with pride how 'that lot in London' wanted him to be a national star, but he'd chosen to stay amongst his own people. I later had it confirmed that this was more or less true and that Mike had effectively been TV's answer to Matt Le Tissier, choosing to spend his whole football career at Southampton. Better to remain a big fish in a small pond, loved beyond measure and never having to buy a drink in one part of the country, than to become just one more star amongst many – or worse, lose your identity altogether – on a larger stage.

Mike, an actor by training with a glorious speaking voice which became more obviously Geordie after a couple of drinks, had started at Tyne-Tees in regional TV's infancy before moving to anchor the BBC's *Look North* regional news show in 1964. He was a constant backdrop to my life until we moved south in 1979, a gentle but superb interviewer, dry and funny like a proto-Des Lynam, and, when required, an utterly brilliant improviser. I distinctly remember watching a *Look North* in the mid-70s when the technology crashed. Having tried – and failed – to link to every remaining item on the running order, Mike just laughed and picked up a copy of the *Evening Chronicle*. He put his feet on the desk and disappeared behind it, occasionally peeking out with observations like 'those Swan Hunter talks are going on a bit, aren't they?' or 'good result for Sunderland, eh?' until the problem was fixed. That's how I'd like to cope with a crisis when I grow up, I thought, lost in admiration.

For my first experience in real broadcasting to involve working with Mike on *Look North* was a thrill, equalled only by eventually

taking charge of *Match of the Day*. I was only sorry that only one of my grandparents, my grandma Alice in Bishop Auckland, was still around to see it happen. County Durham folk singer Jez Lowe once recorded a song called 'Mike Neville said it (so it must be true)' and that was no exaggeration as far as my family, our friends and indeed a whole region were concerned. Forget Des Lynam leaving for ITV, or the *Great British Bake Off* going to Channel 4, Sol Campbell exchanging Spurs for Arsenal or Luis Figo moving from Barca to Real, when Mike left the BBC and *Look North* to return to Tyne-Tees in 1998, for an area with a strong sense of identity, this was a 'Snatch of the Day' to dwarf them all. When Mike died, aged 80, in 2017, the whole region – Tyneside, Wearside, Teesside and all the rest – put their usual petty divisions aside and mourned as one.

Back in 1987, Mike was unfailingly kind to me and his *Look North* show was the perfect place to embark on a TV career. The veteran Scottish news editor Ronnie Burns was terrifying but darkly funny, his team was mostly lovely and encouraging, and I was quickly allowed to make features on everything from DJ mixing at the legendary Mall nightclub in Stockton to poetry readings on the Shields ferry. Steve Sutton, the genial sports reporter who wasn't a lot older than me, was happy for me to tag along to any football – in fact on my second day there, he phoned Boro and told them to leave a press box pass for me on the gate at Ayresome Park for a game against Ipswich that evening. This was a privilege and a thrill, not least because the home team won 3-1 (Kernaghan, Pallister, Slaven), and it remained so throughout my career. My spell in Newcastle coincided with the first half of the 1987/88 season in which Bruce Rioch's post-bankruptcy Boro team of Bernie Slaven plus ten bleached blond local kids (including future England players Gary Pallister, Colin Cooper and Stuart Ripley), newly promoted from the old Division Three, duly raced to the top of their new league. When Boro were away from home, the young Paul Gascoigne at Newcastle and free-scoring Marco Gabbiadini

at Sunderland were also providing plenty of excitement, and Steve and I would also go to Hartlepool and Darlington for FA Cup ties. It became my pleasurable task to cut the weekend's goals and quotes from the region together every Monday for the sports segment of the show.

Such was the approach to mucking in, and sharing the workload around, the team were more than happy to let me loose with opportunities I would never have had in the glare of network TV, and for that I will always be grateful. I was allowed to vision mix, that is, cut the live cameras, graphics and videotape to air, for the main evening half-hour show. Having not messed that up, I was soon studio directing on my own for the lunchtime and teatime bulletins. A less accomplished, or more insecure, presenter than Mike Neville could have kicked up a fuss or at least raised an eyebrow at some young pup being left in charge of proceedings, but Mike just quietly told me, 'It'll be fine,' and off we went.

Regional TV slots, then as now, involved 'opting out' of BBC One or Two. It may be a slightly different process in these days of BBC North East and Cumbria and co each having their own allotted digital channel, but back then I physically had to press a button in Newcastle, when London told us to 'opt, regions', in order to send our output to the transmitters in our region. I then had to press another button at an exact pre-ordained time at the end to switch the North East back to national programmes. This was exciting and a useful early taste of trying to make *Match of the Day* fit its slot, but it also presented a logistical challenge. Working on the established principle of 'three words a second' for script, and adding in the durations of the videotape clips, the show should be somewhere close to its allotted four and a half minutes. Even so, how could I ensure we'd be bang on duration and therefore opting back at exactly the right moment?

I needn't have worried. I soon discovered that Mike would calmly ask while we were on the last videotape clip, 'How long for the weather, Paul?' We'd have a Met Office summary written down

and intended to fill about 30 seconds, but if it ended up needing to be nearer a minute, Mike would just improvise something about it looking like a good afternoon for a walk round the ramparts at Alnwick Castle, but you might want to think about eating your fish and chips indoors if you were heading down to Whitby. If, as happened at least once, my sums were out in the other direction and we only had five seconds to get off the air, he'd say something like, 'And the weather: min temp 10, max temp 12. See you later for *Look North*.' Five seconds, fifteen words. I'd cut back off the weather graphic at Little Richard piano speed to Mike in vision after the word '12', then back to the network after '*Look North*'. We'd then meet in the studio corridor. No debrief was needed, he'd just smile and pat me paternally on the shoulder. Mike Neville: a true broadcasting legend.

Towards the end of 1987, shortly before I moved on, I was asked to work on the North East element of *Children in Need*. Naturally, Mike presented this too, and I was roped in to help out as a researcher/floor assistant looking after the guests and getting them in and out of the studio during the local opt-outs from the national broadcast. In the middle of the evening, I was told Paul Gascoigne was at the stage door. My first thought was that Gazza wasn't in the running order, but it turned out this was an impromptu visit. I'd seen him play and knew he was going to be a bit special in that regard, but this was my first introduction to the (then 20-year-old) man. He was on the doorstep on his own in his Newcastle United tracksuit, said he'd been at the ground about a mile away, saw the show was on and, even though he had a game the next day, had decided to do his bit for 'the bairns'. He'd got hold of a bucket and walked down to Broadcasting House on Bridge Street, stopping off in every pub en route to persuade the Friday night punters to donate. His bucket was stuffed full of notes and coins – he politely declined my offer to come in and join the show on air, handed over the bucket, shook my hand and wandered off into the freezing cold Tyneside night.

So that was regional TV. The next leg of my apprenticeship came at the hands of arguably the most influential British sports broadcaster of all time. He was the soundtrack to most of my early memories of the biggest sports events on the planet. Whether it was 'Porterfield, one-nil' or simply a pause then 'the Olympic one hundred metres final', even as a small child I knew it was David Coleman growling at me, and it was time to pay attention. I can remember the hostage crisis at the Munich Olympics vividly, but it was only years later when I watched the live coverage back for the documentary we made for the centenary of the modern Olympics that I fully understood just how great a broadcaster he was: hour after hour of live, unscripted broadcasting, which had moved far away from sport into the realms of major international news, and indeed history. He was calm, concise, authoritative and unsensational in the most difficult of circumstances. David was a northern grammar school boy who, along with the pugnacious production pioneer Bryan Cowgill, had been in the vanguard of transforming the gentleman amateur's world of the early years of sport on TV into the professional, hard-nosed journalistic world I joined. He'd reported, commentated, presented and often apparently more or less produced and directed across all the flagship shows to an absurdly high standard for more than three decades. I was sent to BBC Manchester to learn what I could from him.

Even though my broadcasting career was just a few months old, I knew he was the daddy of them all, and the little I'd gleaned of his reputation suggested that he was demanding, and rather fearsome. So, it was with some trepidation that I went with the producer of *A Question of Sport*, Mike Adley, to meet David in the bar of the Midland Hotel in Manchester in January 1988. It was a Saturday evening, two *Q of S* shows would be recorded at the Oxford Road studios next day, and this was where the great man liked to hold court. 'David, this is Paul. He's joining us for this series from the production trainee scheme,' Mike said. David shook my hand, very



firmly, looked me up and down and growled, 'Well, he'll know nothing then.' Mike Neville he wasn't, clearly. I just smiled and ploughed on, talking about sport and as little as possible about television for the rest of the evening. At least I knew about sport, and the fact that my head wasn't bitten off again as we all had a few drinks suggested that much had registered.

I soon learnt that it was all part of the Coleman method of testing you, and that bluntness and mickey-taking – it was too fierce for the modern catch-all term 'banter' – was just what he did. Once you were in, you were in. His team at *A Question of Sport*, or on the athletics circuit – and presumably in previous years on *Grandstand*, *Match of the Day* and *Sportsnight* – were galvanised by his very presence. I was reliably informed by the excellent, ultra-friendly production team – two of whom, Ray Stubbs and Ken Burton, I subsequently worked with for most of my career – that David, who by now was in his 60s, had mellowed almost entirely and was now something of a pussycat. Even so, it was pretty frightening that first programme Sunday to hear a growl of, 'Who wrote this question?' and be summoned on to the set and given the third degree about some half-baked swimming statistic I'd lifted from a reference book during the week.

Each show was rehearsed in the morning with two full teams of sports quizzers. This was partly to allow the cameras and lighting team a run through, but also so that David could test out whether the questions worked. Or, more to the point, whether he thought they did. Woe betide you if one of the quizzers raised an eyebrow at an answer. Up you'd go, blinking into the studio lights, clutching your research. 'Are you sure about this?' he'd growl. I was sent off on one occasion to phone Stan Greenberg, the BBC's athletics statistician, after David decided some fact or other I'd gleaned from our office bookshelf (no internet then) was of questionable provenance. But, for a wet-behind-the-ears, slightly sloppy ex-student, this was exactly the sort of rigour I needed. We wrote the questions, prepared biographies of all the guests, having phoned

them for a chat, and had a lot of fun. Between rehearsals and the actual recording of the shows in the afternoon, everyone – David, resident captains Emlyn Hughes and Bill Beaumont, guests and families, production team – sat down to Sunday lunch. I don't know how or when this had evolved, but it was an inspired idea. David hosted, everyone relaxed and felt part of a team and for a guy like me who'd been playing a mediocre standard of university football less than a year earlier, it was a huge thrill to mingle with the leading sportspeople of the time. And although there was some tension behind the scenes when the shows were recorded, the fact that they weren't live and I wasn't in the hot seat made me mostly just pinch myself that I was doing this for a living.

For a fundamentally serious man, David took great delight in the occasional silly question. Ken was virtually given a lap of honour by him one week for a trick question featuring a ridiculous racing pigeon name. The first week I was there I came up with a riddle along the lines of 'what gradually moved 74cm in 56 years, but has gone nowhere since 1968?' The answer was Bob Beamon's long-jump world record. David liked it and used it, and I was inching, or centimetrating, my way in. We also had that 'fill in the name' game featuring sportspeople who share names with Welsh towns and so on – Joanne Conway, Phil Newport and Ron Barry, since you ask – and because I was prepared to put in the hours to establish myself, I came up with quite a few of those. It also led to some silliness in the office which never made the air, such as the birth cycle 'missing names' round – David Seaman, John Emburey-o, and Foetus Gerulaitis, for the record.

The most creative element of the show for the production team was the mystery personality films – they actually were still films, not video – of sportspeople undertaking some activity or other, cut to music and generally entrusted to Ray Stubbs, who, before he moved to a front-of-camera role, was an imaginative producer. As part of my training, I was often sent to keep him company – we had a chaotic morning at Alex Higgins's country pile in Cheshire,

and an afternoon in Southport with my later nemesis Alan Hansen. Alan got a bit cold during endless takes with the binmen and lorry Stubbsy had rustled up from somewhere, and because I happened also to be wearing jeans and the same brand of Puma trainers, I doubled for the Hansen legs and feet in a couple of shots. I probably should have declared that to a BBC Safeguarding Trust enquiry a long time ago. I can only apologise now to Bill Beaumont who was misled by my slightly shorter legs and said it was the jockey Walter Swinburne, who didn't look like me or Hansen.

But the most memorable of all – him again – was Paul Gascoigne. Stubbsy had mentioned in the office that instead of just cutting shots together to music, he wanted to make a film where the music was more central by asking a sports person to mime along with a musical instrument. It so happened that in February 1988 the *Daily Mirror's* Monty Fresco captured those famous images of Wimbledon's Vinnie Jones squeezing the poor lad's testicles during a game at Plough Lane. I came in on the Monday with the idea of getting Gazza to mime along on the piano to Jerry Lee Lewis's 'Great Balls of Fire'. A slightly risqué play on words, but not blatant enough to offend anyone, and a great piece of music into the bargain.

Stubbsy booked a music venue in Newcastle, hired a 50s teddy boy outfit and off we went. We thought it should work as an idea, but what we weren't prepared for was the gusto Gazza put into it. Before we knew it, he'd put on the costume and was vaulting the piano in his crepe shoes and running his hands up and down the keys. Glissando is the correct musical term, I believe, but I'm not sure even Jerry Lee ended up with bleeding hands from the sheer exuberance of his performance. Gazza just laughed and kept going. I know he's had a chequered life and done some stupid, self-destructive things, but some of the most sensible, undemonstrative football people I've known – Messrs Lineker, Shearer and Venables – love him beyond measure, and after those two encounters with the young Gazza it's easy to see why. That's before you even mention

his phenomenal footballing talent. The mystery personality piece Ray eventually cut was fantastic and was given an unprecedented spontaneous ovation by the studio audience, some achievement for a minute-long pre-filmed segment.

As for David Coleman, he was not the sort of man who would ever want you to call him a mentor or even a major influence on your career, but he really was, and to many other people – Sue Barker and Steve Cram, to name but two current fine BBC Sport figures – over the decades. When he died in 2013, aged 87, Brendan Foster described David as the ‘greatest sports broadcaster that ever lived’. While that may well be true, David would probably have dismissed such a suggestion as ‘bollocks’. In his later years, he turned down the idea of a whole evening on BBC Two being given over to the vast collection of Coleman highlights from the archives with the words, ‘Not even Barbara [his wife] wants to spend “*An Evening with David Coleman*”’, and he didn’t appear in the fine BBC Sport documentary that was shown for his 85th birthday and featured his family and some extraordinary footage of his unparalleled career.

I worked from time to time with David in later years on athletics – once displeasing him with a note I put in front of him as he commentated live on a London Marathon recap I’d edited, to the extent that he crumpled it into a ball and bounced it off the middle of my forehead while calmly listing several Kenyan athletes for the BBC One audience. I’d bump into him at an airport or hotel and he’d cheerily greet me with something like, ‘What the hell are you doing here? Have you learnt anything yet?’ and somehow, it would feel like a compliment. ‘Quite remarkable’, as he would claim he never said if anyone was feeling brave and mentioned *Spitting Image* in his presence: ‘That was Ron Pickering, sunshine.’

Three months later, during which I discovered I was entirely unsuited to Schools Television, I embarked on what was to be my last stint for a quarter of a century or so working anywhere other than BBC Sport. In its own way, working with Esther Rantzen cemented my awareness that I was not a natural habitué of most of television,

but it was a heck of an experience and learning curve. My arrival in the department then called Topical Features coincided with the build-up to the launch of a major new Saturday night Esther vehicle called *Hearts of Gold*, featuring the same production team that had recently finished making the latest series of her long-running Sunday evening fixture *That's Life*.

I went to their office in the famous and by-then dilapidated Lime Grove building to meet a couple of the bigwigs and was asked as an ice-breaker whether I liked *That's Life*. I almost laughed – well, of course I didn't. I was 23, a bit cynical, in recent years Sunday evenings had generally meant a homework or essay crisis rather than watching TV, and anyway the show was something of a byword for naffness. A bizarre mishmash of consumer stories and lighter pieces about talking pets and phallic-shaped vegetables was how I saw it. Have a look on YouTube if you think that can't be right. I mumbled something about not having watched it for some time, and they said this was going to be a different sort of series in any case, and I'd be useful if I knew more than most of them did about sport and popular culture, so I was in. The fact that I was paid my trainee wage from a central fund and would therefore cost their department nothing was probably a clincher, too.

They then outlined the premise behind the show – I sniggered inwardly – which was to film unsung heroes and heroines, lure them into a live studio under a pretext then surprise them with a tribute film, a Heart of Gold award and some kind of reward, an event or moment the research suggested they'd love. I could feel the urge to barf but decided to nod along instead. I was actually intrigued – these were really bright people (even if they were involved in a genre I didn't watch). I'd noticed a disproportionate number of glamorous women as I'd walked through the office, and I reasoned, rightly, that I might never work anywhere like this again, so I'd give it a go. What followed was one of the most full-on periods of my entire life. In her own way, Esther was like Coleman, but even more so. Despite being the queen of popular TV, she

was phenomenally, forensically bright, incredibly demanding and involved in every single aspect of the programme making. She'd examine your research at every stage, and was present as every single item was edited, then scripted everything herself at an old-fashioned typewriter. The intensity of the work schedule was as extreme as the Olympics or World Cups I later worked on but was at that pitch for months on end. When I finally crawled out of there at Christmas 1988 at the end of their first series, I was looking forward to joining BBC Sport in the new year for a rest.

I arrived a month before the studio pilot show was to be recorded. Just a week after the pilot, a full series of eight programmes were scheduled to begin their Saturday evening transmissions. They'd all been tied up with *That's Life*, so very little was in place – I was sent out to vet possible stories, most of which had come from viewers' letters in response to an appeal in the *Radio Times*. Some were absolute red herrings, others were clearly never going to work in TV terms, but a lot of them ended up being made. And at every stage, Esther wanted to know exactly what you were up to, and why you'd formed whatever opinion you had. When I didn't have an opinion, I had to invent one and learn to defend it in programme meetings. The hours were insane, the pressure of moulding a BBC One peak time format on the fly was considerable, but the socialising was like being back at university. Far too little sleep, food and booze on the run, juggling relationships and office politics: it was the full madness of the media world as you see it in films and TV drama. The thought of living like that now gives me cold shivers, but in my mid-20s it was a blast.

A few of my career highlights still come from that time – a day with Bobby and Jack's mum Cissie Charlton in Ashington as she took the local infants' school football lessons, and a wonderful day's filming on the Isle of Wight with the late Stephen Lewis, who'd played Inspector Blakey in the 70s comedy *On the Buses*. The slightly strange, but nevertheless inspired, notion of director Mike Porecki was to surprise a kindly community bus driver with a visit from Blakey, who would berate him for bending the timetable by

helping old ladies with shopping to their door. We arranged to see Stephen in a tearoom in Shanklin and were a little disconcerted to meet the most gently spoken, grey-haired chap imaginable. Mike and I looked at each other nervously and outlined the plan. 'Ah, I see. I think I understand, chaps,' said the ultra-polite actor, reaching into his bag. Out came wig, moustache and inspector's hat, the demented expression took shape on his face, and the full 'I 'ate you, Butler' voice followed. I quickly developed an admiration I've retained to this day for the skills involved in making what sometimes looks like trashy TV. Sports coverage is a craft, too, but the raw material is there for you – in an entertainment show like *Strictly Come Dancing*, the short film inserts are craft masterpieces and are slaved over every week. That doesn't mean I'm all that likely to watch any of those shows – give me sport or news any day – but I have huge respect for those making mass audience TV<sup>3</sup>. If sport's dull, we can blame the participants, but if an entertainment show's dull, it's a non-starter.

I'm sure some of *Hearts of Gold* was on the soppy side, and we certainly wrung every last drop of sentimentality out of some of the stories. But one in particular was very special to me. Thanks to the wonders of YouTube, I've just watched it again and now appear to have something in my eye ... There had been a number of letters from parents and some of their kids in the North East about a pioneering orthopaedic surgeon called Mr Roger Checketts who, along with his team, had devoted his life to improving the lot of countless children whose conditions had previously been deemed inoperable. One of our production meetings watched a rough cut of a quite incredible film about his work. Cynical though TV can be, there are times – as I was later to discover on a *Sport Relief* filming trip to Uganda – when it's impossible not to be overwhelmed by the images in front of you. This was one of those times.

3 Though *Strictly's* wholesome enough, I'm not keen on voting-based shows as a rule. The fun stopped when a reality TV megalomaniac's manufactured contributions were heavily edited to the point where he was seen by millions as a plausible US president.

Our surgeon was going to come on to the show on the pretext of being booked for a medical discussion programme, then be surprised by our film and many of his patients. But what would work as a reward? It seemed as though he'd spent his entire life devoted to his patients. 'He follows a football team, their picture's on his wall,' said one of the producers. 'Well, let's get them on,' said Esther, 'which team is it?' 'Selkirk, I think,' said the producer. I piped up and said it was most likely Celtic if they were wearing green-and-white hoops, and was quickly told that indeed they were. So, as the smart Alec who knew their name, I was told to get them to appear on the next show to be recorded on Thursday, 10 November, just under a week away. Hmm, Glasgow to London, a Thursday night, training next day, alarm bells started ringing – 'I'll check the fixture list,' I said.

Now, there was something of (a more liberal) Margaret Thatcher about Esther, and this was clearly one of those situations where she just wanted it to be sorted out, rather than someone bleating about sportspeople and logistics. Instead of simply trying to pull this rabbit out of a hat, for reasons best known to myself I decided instead to make matters worse by pointing out that as a man in his 50s, Roger's real heroes would have been the Lisbon Lions of 1967, the first British winners of the European Cup. 'Well, get them on too,' said Esther airily, as if they all hung out together in Shepherd's Bush every Thursday and just needed to be fetched from a pub around the corner.

My uneasiness at the task I'd set myself turned to blind panic when I looked at the fixture list. Not only did Celtic have an Old Firm match to play two days after the recording, they were going to be in Germany the evening before it for a European Cup tie with Werder Bremen. There was no way they'd ever agree to a studio appearance in London in between. And how on earth was I going to track down the 1967 team in the next few days and talk them into it? Fortunately, a couple of phone calls to BBC Scotland led me to Jim Craig, the Lisbon Lions' right-back, who was by this



time both a dentist and BBC radio football contributor. To my enormous relief, he loved the idea, thought it would be a great chance for a get-together, and gave me home phone numbers for the whole team. No one had a mobile back then, and not many had answerphones, so he and I phoned round all the numbers and kept in regular touch with each other. Jim even offered to co-ordinate the logistics of getting all 'the boys' to Glasgow Airport to travel to London together. By the next office day, the Monday, we had eight of the 11 booked. Steve Chalmers was living in Australia, Jimmy Johnstone had a fear of flying, and captain Billy McNeill had proved difficult to track down for the understandable reason that he was now Celtic's manager and had been busy masterminding an 8-0 win at Hamilton Accies at the weekend.

At this point I was grateful for a paternal helping hand from one of the senior producers, Richard Woolf. His desk was near mine in the office – he was an extremely sharp operator who was later to become programme controller at Channel 5 and Sky One – and I was keeping him updated on progress while glibly telling Esther that the crowning moment of a show three days away was all in hand. The truth was that we had a group of genuinely legendary old boys willing to join us but hadn't booked their captain or the current team as promised.

I finally got through to Billy's secretary – they were flying to Germany as we spoke and here was the number of the hotel they were staying in. I left a message, nipped out to the canteen, came back into the office clutching a sandwich and will never forget the sight of Richard on the phone giving me the thumbs-up, before putting me on to Billy himself. He'd called our office back in the middle of his preparations for a European Cup tie, been sold the whole idea by Richard and committed the entire current squad to stopping off in London between their game in Bremen and the Glasgow derby. He said they'd be honoured and humbled to do it, and that they'd fit in with whatever travel plans we needed to sort. This was the second gigantic stroke of luck. What a gentleman,

what an ambassador for that 'grand old team'. Even in 1988, that level of co-operation from a man with so much on his plate seemed extraordinary to me but, having never explained how unlikely all this was to happen, I saw no point in telling the rest of the office that Billy McNeill's assent was like a 500/1 winner coming in at the races.

I looked after both sets of players on the programme evening – Roy Aitken, Frank McAvennie and the rest of the modern playing squad were remarkably amenable considering their week's plans had been messed up and rearranged around our show, and that they'd just gone out of Europe 1-0 on aggregate. I can't imagine a modern-day Champions League squad doing anything other than mutinying – possibly through their agents – if asked to emulate them. But the boys of 1967 were something else, ribbing each other, reminiscing and bonding like they'd never been apart. I was particularly thrilled to meet the great Bobby Murdoch, whom I'd watched in awe as he played for Jack Charlton's Boro towards the end of his career – I don't think I ever saw him give the ball away – but they were all humble guys, all from the Glasgow area, who clearly felt blessed to have grown up together and played in Jock Stein's all-conquering team. If you search for 'Hearts of Gold Celtic' on YouTube, you should still be able to see the end result. I'm biased, but it still gives me goose pimples to see Roger Checketts' almost child-like reaction as Esther surprised him with the current squad and then the boys of '67. Billy paid fulsome tribute to Roger's work and invited him to be guest of honour at a game at Celtic Park. The segment went down a storm, and I was flattered to be sought out for a pat on the back after the show by John Morrell, the head of department, and Desmond Wilcox, Esther's husband and a considerable figure in TV production in his own right.

I was learning fast that many of the plaudits and the brickbats you receive in television are for things over which you have no control. An interviewee in the right or wrong mood, a sporting or musical performance which lives up to expectations, or flops, a great

or indifferent camera crew or VT editor, can make or break you. In this case, we had the immense good fortune to have dealt with Jim Craig and Billy McNeill, thoroughly decent, unstarred human beings who were prepared to put themselves out considerably to honour a Celtic fan who had excelled in his own field. The next quarter of a century working full time around sport certainly didn't always pan out like that. But once we'd ended that run of *Hearts of Gold* in a blur of wrap parties then Christmas excesses, it was time to move on and try my luck in BBC Sport, the place I'd wanted to work since I was six years old.

I'd been all over the BBC in a 15-month whistle-stop tour, getting all manner of mistakes out of my system, and my timing was fortunate once more. With several producers leaving or about to leave to join the newly formed BSB (which was later subsumed into Sky), the sports department actually needed some extra pairs of hands. I was ridiculously blessed to have served that apprenticeship with Mike Neville, David Coleman and Esther Rantzen and some fantastically talented and dedicated production teams who had been prepared to teach and trust me. I was far from the finished article when I arrived at the *Grandstand* office in Kensington House just off Shepherd's Bush Green that first week of January in 1989, but I was certainly now better equipped to survive than I had been when I first walked into the BBC.

The first BBC Sport studio, as opposed to office, day in which I was involved was Saturday 7 January 1989, a date notable for non-league Sutton United beating top-flight Coventry City in front of the *Match of the Day* cameras in a famous FA Cup third-round giant-killing. Within 100 days, however, the FA Cup was to provide the backdrop to the darkest of all days for BBC Sport, indeed for the whole of British sport.