



WINGIN' IT

THE MARK WALTERS STORY

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Chapter One

Humble Beginnings

IF being born with a football attached to your feet was an option, I would've happily left Marston Green Hospital dressed in an Aston Villa babygrow and clutching a size four Mitre. When I was growing up, I didn't need much, and Mum always knew where to find me. If by some strange reason I missed an evening 'curfew' all she had to look out for was the mini Afro on a little guy kicking a ball around under the nearest street lamp. When I was a kid, that scene would've played out in Handsworth, Birmingham. Previously a sprawling inner city – but now apparently a city within a city – it's almost impossible to imagine that once upon a time Handsworth was a rural village in the county of Staffordshire, instead of the thriving Afro-Caribbean community it evolved into a decade or so before I was born.

Thousands of people were invited over to the UK from British colonies in the Caribbean to work in local munitions factories during the Second World War, with many more arriving to assist in the rebuilding of the area once the war had ended: the so-called 'Windrush Generation'. My mum was among those who arrived from Jamaica to take up the post-war offer

due to a shortage of British men and women of an employable age. Meanwhile, my father had come over from Nigeria and, unbeknown to each other at the time, they both settled in or around Handsworth, thankfully long before racial tension and rioting in the mid-1980s brought the area to a standstill.

In June 1964 though, Handsworth was just another part of Birmingham and home to me, young Mark Everton Walters, fresh out of Marston Green. Mum was renting a room from relations who had also come over to the UK from their native Jamaica, which is the way it was in 1960s Britain, when families looked after each other, especially those who had made a pretty big sacrifice to start a new and better life almost 5,000 miles from home.

At my cousin's, I shared a room with mum and my brother, Michael, who was two years my senior. At that point, I also had a brother and sister I had never met. They were still living in Jamaica, awaiting the green light to come to the UK. That green light would illuminate when we had our own place. As it was, Michael and I slept in the same bed and we had a potty underneath in case we needed the toilet during the night. It sounds light years away today, but we didn't complain as we had never known anything else. I spent the first five years of my life in Handsworth, and I was very happy. Naturally, memories of the early days are sketchy, but having loads of cousins around meant there was always someone to play with, and any recollections I have of that period are positive.

I hadn't long celebrated my fifth birthday when mum was successful in applying for a flat in Newtown. Soon, Michael and I were joined by our older siblings, Kenneth and Vita. We were super excited but apparently that delight wasn't shared by our Jamaican grandparents who were adamant Kenneth and Vita

should remain in the Caribbean. Mum eventually got her way and within a few weeks we were finally a proper family. We were grateful for the help given to us by our extended family, but with four kids vying for a shot at the television or bathroom, or even a place at the kitchen table, having our own place was important.

Newtown was, as its name suggests, a purpose-built housing scheme a few miles from Birmingham city centre. In the late 60s, the local authority created the new community by throwing up loads of high-rise flats and maisonette-type blocks in an effort to ease some of the pressure on areas like Handsworth, which were starting to suffer chronic overcrowding. Our new maisonette flat was close to the tower blocks and I remember there was real drama one night when one of the kids fell out of an open window in the close next to ours. We all rushed to get closer to the action and it wasn't long before a massive crowd had gathered. I was still a kid but recall the police and ambulances, sirens blaring, arriving at the scene and everyone creating a pathway to let the emergency services through. I was driving past that spot recently and when I stopped to have a look, memories of that night came flooding back. But things were very different from the way I had previously imagined them. In my head, the kid had fallen from a great height, probably 40 or 50ft, but the reality was more like ten feet. Luckily, though, the girl was okay as she had tumbled on to a patch of nice soft grass, another slightly important fact my mind had glossed over.

I enjoyed living in Newtown, although the excitement Michael and I had earlier felt about being joined by our brother and sister from Jamaica soon dissipated a little as there was quite an age gap and we struggled to bond, probably because

they had outgrown the things Michael and I were now up to. But as soon as we were settled in Newtown, I was off to Hampton Junior School to make new friends and begin my education, although I didn't get off to the best of starts. The group of kids I started to hang around with weren't exactly the nicest. Mind you, two of them, Rohan 'Rocky' Rowe and Taju Forlarin, were pretty cool and we remained friends for a long time. But the others introduced me into their world of devilment, which included something akin to a mini protection racket, which saw a few of us hang around outside the school gates and take lunch money off some of the other pupils as they were heading to class. We would store our ill-gotten gains in a little metal combination safe, which one of the lads would then stash away just in case anyone had the audacity to try and nick it! Looking back, I acted appallingly and I'm ashamed to have been a part of it. I was a bit boisterous at the time but I certainly wouldn't describe myself as a gang member, far less the leader. It was only when I reached seven or eight years old that I realised I was decent at football and had a chance, and that if I didn't behave myself then I wouldn't be allowed to play anymore.

In fact, many years later I met one of the lads we used to 'rob'. His name was Wilf O'Reilly and he had become a really successful speed skater, winning a couple of gold medals at the 1980 Winter Olympics in Calgary, and also the 1991 World Championship. He was part of the commentary team at the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea. I was delighted to hear he had been successful.

I suppose I was a bad boy for a little while but it wasn't long until I started concentrating solely on my football, which was the perfect escape from the rocky road I seemed to be travelling down. I can't remember if Mum was ever called up to the school

because I was misbehaving. Probably not, as she would have sorted me out without a moment's hesitation. Believe me, I would definitely have remembered that!

My mum, Ivy Millicent Walters, was my rock when I was growing up. She came over to Britain in the 1950s and got a job at the West Midlands transport authority where she cleaned the buses as they arrived back into the depot at night. It was there she met my father, Lawrence Johnson Wabara, a mechanic, and originally from Nigeria. The story goes that when I was born, my father wanted to call me after his favourite Brazilian football team, Santos. He was apparently a big fan of the great Pele, who would also, in time, become a huge favourite of mine, but Mum got her way and they settled on Mark. You might think he then claimed a small victory by including 'Everton' as my middle name, but you'd be wrong. That was also Mum. Everton is a really common West Indian name – almost the equivalent of John – and with Mum having absolutely no interest in football (if anything, she would occasionally watch a bit of cricket) it was a couple of normal names for yours truly.

Sadly, they split not long after I was born so I grew up in a one-parent household, but as the baby of the family I was well looked after by my older siblings, which was some consolation for not having my father around. Mind you, it's not like he had taken off and disappeared into the night. Nope. As I was soon to discover, he was living not more than a mile away; information I stumbled upon while nipping out from school to the shops one lunchtime. I was in Hampton at the time and was ambling along the road towards the local bakery when this car slowed down alongside me. I recognised the man as my father but I felt no paternal connection with him. He asked where I was going and, thinking back, he was eyeing me with a degree of suspicion. I

told him I was out to get some lunch and then I was going back to school. He just sort of scoffed and drove off. What I didn't realise at the time was that he was married and had another family. He lived on the same road I'd been walking along when he stopped me, so he probably thought I had been sent to spy on him. I had no idea about his secret life so it had all been a coincidence but I'm sure he didn't see it that way. When I eventually found out about his double life, and where he lived, I had a little chuckle at how uncomfortable I must have made him feel that day, even though I was genuinely oblivious to my incredible detective skills!

But even though he didn't live that far from us, he never once came to see how his 'other' kids were faring, and later in life that really pissed me off. Just because you have a new family doesn't mean you disconnect from your other children, as we hadn't done anything wrong and didn't understand why we were being ignored. There are lots of things you don't get when you're a kid and it doesn't make it any easier when adults keep things from you – especially important things.

One of the earliest memories I have of my father is of him coming to watch me playing in a kickabout with my mates in a field behind a block of maisonettes close to our house. We hadn't long moved to Newtown so he had obviously been keeping tabs on us. It would have suited him better to have tried to be a part of our lives rather than just showing up every once in a while. At the time I didn't know he'd been a bit of a footballer himself, and that he'd played for Nigeria in the 1950s. My mother understandably didn't talk about the positive aspects of his life, so it came as a bit of a shock. Later on, I saw a picture of him playing for Nigeria against England. He was one of the smaller players, so I imagine he might have played

up front. He had also, apparently, tried to get a trial with Villa at one point, but had been unsuccessful.

Hampton was one of around a dozen schools in the area which took part in an annual football competition, and I would have loved my father to have come and watch me play. It was a big deal for an eight- or nine-year-old, especially when the parents of all the other boys were there to cheer on their kids. My mum was brilliant and would always try and get to see me playing, but because she was a single parent holding down a number of jobs to try and make ends meet, her time was precious. I loved when she was there, though, and when we ran out of the pavilion before kick-off, we were playing in the World Cup, and the small scattering of parents numbered 50,000!

Growing up, I could count on one hand how many times I saw my father. There was the time behind the maisonettes when we were playing football, and the day he thought I was spying on him. I was told he had been to see me play for Villa Reserves when I was 15, but I hadn't seen him as he'd shot off straight after the game. About two years later, after a home match for the first team, he was standing outside the stadium when I came out of the players' entrance. It felt really strange. When he spotted me, he walked over slowly and it was as though he was plucking up the courage to speak to me. I waited until he had finished and said, 'Don't you think it's a bit late? I've managed without you up until now. I don't need anything from you, least of all your money. I'm not interested,' and I stormed off. To be honest, it was quite a put down and I regret doing it, but I've spoken to a few people in a similar position and they said my response was quite normal. It was simply the way I felt about my situation at that time and was

probably a lot of my bottled-up childhood frustrations coming out in a rant.

I'm often asked how I felt about him having another family. As a grown man it doesn't really bother me. I know what it's like. I'm divorced myself and well aware that these things happen. At the time, though, it was different. I'm not gonna lie and say it was easy. It was difficult for me to accept that we lived so close to one another yet I didn't ever get a birthday or Christmas card. Things like that bothered me. I know money was tight, particularly in the 70s, but a card would've been ample and he would've had me for life, so I suppose it was the fact I was being snubbed that took me a while to get over. It wouldn't have taken too much effort from him to be a semi-permanent fixture in my life.

When I was about 13 or 14, Mum and I came into a bit of money. All of a sudden we were £300 richer, which was a lot of money back then. I was chuffed but I didn't know where it had come from. When I found out Mum had been forced to take my father to court to pay some maintenance it disgusted me. When I think about it now, if I had to be forced to go to court to pay something towards the upkeep of my children it would be a sad day. So that was the type of thing that made me bitter towards my father, and I didn't get over that until I had my own children.

My parents never married, but he should still have come up with the money to maintain his children. Apparently during the court proceedings, he even denied he was my father, which really hurt me at the time and if the truth be told, it still does to this day and he has been dead nearly 20 years. That is probably the main reason I told him to get lost when he waited for me that day outside Villa Park.

I later found out that my father owned a café in Aston, but it wasn't just any old café. Johnson's Café was the hang-out – and name inspiration – for the notorious Johnson Crew, who, along with the Burger Bar Boys, ruled Birmingham with an iron fist for many years. A succession of gangland assassinations and shootings culminated in the tragic deaths of teenage girls Letisha Shakespeare and Charlene Ellis in 2003 outside a hairdressing salon in Aston. It was an awful period in the history of my city and eventually leaders of both gangs teamed up to try and bring peace and stability to the black neighbourhoods of Aston and Handsworth.

But the disappointment of my father aside, my childhood was an enjoyable one, and I could normally be found outside with a ball at my feet. Most of my friends also loved football and we would play anywhere, any time. We played mostly in the street, although it wasn't like the present day, when kids get a ticking off for playing there. For starters, there wasn't the same number of vehicles on the road so it was a little safer and there was more room. We would also play in the school yard and have little games of keepy-uppy. In those days everyone watched *Match of the Day*, so we would be trying out some of the moves we had seen on the TV and take turns showing off our new-found skills.

I also enjoyed playing cricket and did so until I was about 12 or 13 but, as we were all getting bigger, faster and stronger, it was becoming quite dangerous, especially if you had a chance of making it in football. I had witnessed a couple of lads getting hit on the head with a cricket ball so I decided to stop playing, largely for my own safety. I still played for the school at cricket but gave that up when I was about 14. I also played a bit of basketball. In fact, I took part in anything sporty

at school, and that included athletics. I was one of the quickest at Holte Comprehensive, which came in handy on a number of occasions!

In terms of age, I just missed out on the cut-off for school, which meant I was 11 when I went to secondary, while most of the others were 12, and some even approaching 13. At that age, six or seven months can mean quite a difference in size, sometimes a few inches. In fact, I remember a football survey which reckoned children born from October to December were physically more developed and had more of a chance of getting on in the game because of that. In my age group, clubs always went for the biggest and strongest, so the little ones sometimes got left on the shelf. Thankfully my skills weren't size dependent. I was small, compared to most other lads, but I stood out a bit more because of what I could do with the ball. Sadly, though, the really small ones were getting pushed about a bit. If you look at football nowadays, there are far more big guys around than small ones. Physique certainly counts for a lot in today's game.

I was about ten when Mum was offered a house in Aston, which was only a mile or so from Newtown. It was nicer and bigger and for the first time we had a garden. It was certainly a good move for the family and having some outside space was the icing on the cake. And that house, which my mum still lives in, was the perfect base for a burgeoning young footballer, as the moment you opened the front door you could see the floodlights at Villa Park. Imagine a midweek game early evening in winter and those huge floodlights – with the initials 'AV' carved into them – casting a huge blanket of light over the entire area. It was a magical sight. My secondary school, Holte Comprehensive, which shared its name with the famous

terraced end at Villa Park, was now about a mile from our house but that didn't bother me one bit. I would walk to school with a ball at my feet and the extra distance meant I could have fun for longer. And one of the positive things about eventually becoming a footballer was that I was able to buy the house for Mum, as she loved it and still does.

At that time most of the kids at school wanted to play for Villa, and we all had our favourite players – guys that we aspired to be like. *Match of the Day* provided us with our staple diet of football so we got to know a lot of the big-time players. But then I went through a very short phase of craving an alternative career. Can you believe it? I was an avid reader of the little *Commando* comics, which were very popular among young boys in the 1970s, and through reading them I decided I would join the army when I was old enough. The stories in these little comic books were fantastic, and made real heroes of their central characters. For a while I would cut out army recruitment posters from newspapers and magazines and pin them up on my wall. I suppose I was kind of obsessed, until one day a couple of friends came to the house and asked my mum if I was allowed out to play football. She told them I was in my room and to go straight up. My army obsession wasn't something I had spoken of much so very few of my friends knew about it. When the lads walked in, one of them said, 'These posters are really cool, Mark,' while the other was a bit more to the point and offered, 'Do you know you can get killed in the army?' That was all he said, while continuing to eye the information that was plastered all over the walls. That was the moment any aspirations of dressing up in khaki ground to a halt. I quickly realised becoming a footballer was a slightly safer bet, and from the moment I realised I was pretty decent at

it, I was determined to do everything I could to try and realise my dream.

I fell completely in love with football again and never missed a game on TV, but even that was no substitute for the real thing – which meant watching Villa play on a Saturday afternoon. The main obstacle to that was cash, or rather the lack of it. Mum couldn't afford to shell out the entrance fee so my friends and I would do our best to sneak in, although, if the worst came to the worst, we would wait until they opened the gates with around 20 minutes to go and dive in. Anything was better than nothing.

Villa Park was a fantastic ground in which to watch football. When I started going there, they always had a big crowd in and the atmosphere was superb. European nights were extra special, as I would hear the crowd the moment I opened my front door. The excitement I felt walking to Villa Park in those days was unbelievable. For a young lad it was quite exhilarating, even if we didn't manage to get inside, in which case we would stand outside listening to the 'oohs' and 'ahs' of 30,000 fans and imagine Villa on the attack, or defending stoutly against the big teams. I suppose if we actually got into the ground it was a real bonus.

We lapped it up and I loved watching guys like Brian Little. He was my favourite at the time. He was a great player, and the type I wanted to become: fast and skilful. When I started my love affair with Villa I reckon Brian was the best player at the club.

One of my earliest memories is of sneaking in to see Villa play Arsenal, and marvelling at the contrast of their bright red kit against our claret and sky-blue. Everyone knew all about Arsenal as they were arguably the most famous name in English football at the time. I was mesmerised watching them play.

Andy Gray was doing well for Villa at that time, and I had the pleasure of playing alongside him when he returned to Villa Park in 1985, after spells at Wolves and Everton. I then teamed up with Andy again at Rangers a few years later. I think Villa bought Andy, the first time round, when Keith Leonard got injured. Keith was another of the first batch of players I enjoyed watching at Villa Park, and he would later become my youth coach.

That was that. I was hooked on football. It had reeled me in and it was the start of a lifelong love affair, perhaps even an obsession. It was time to start pulling on the boots, although there was one pretty big stumbling block to that which left my career almost over before it had started.