

RM CLARK

# WINNER STAYS ON

England with The FA Cup  
for a Compass

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Chapter One

## Extra Preliminary Round

*Tuffley Rovers vs Slimbridge AFC*  
*Tuffley, Gloucester, Gloucestershire*  
*5–8 August 2022*

THERE WAS a man in the seat opposite me who spoke out loud as he typed. I looked in his diary and saw the words *half-term*. He was either a teacher or a parent, or both. The old lady got on the train and seemed extremely grateful for the opportunity to sit next to him. She thanked him four times and smiled at him in a way that made me jealous.

I was glad to have the extra elbow room but was, nonetheless, irked by the fact that he had done nothing at all to warrant such gratitude and I, a man of both decency and foresight, had shuffled across to the window seat moments earlier, having anticipated the predicament upon the revelation of an unusually well-populated platform at Stockport. The clues had been present in bold type. Tables taken. Bags on seats. I moved. The teacher/parent/man remained inanimate; stuck on a loop, scratching his head, receiving my hard-earned plaudits.

Farmland gave way to new-builds and rugby posts. We were approaching the city, then the train stopped. Outside was the type of business that only ever seems to exist on a train line. Wholesale Gravel, Worldwide Pesticides, Carter and Carter's Mechanical Flanges. We crawled on. Past a car park full of Range Rovers and transit vans, past an outback covered in a layer of dust. I disembarked at Gloucester. There was an empty bike rack and an overflow car park. In the underpass somebody had written that angels walk among us. An addendum, written in a different pen, read: '(But so do buttocks too)'.

I knew I was in Tuffley from the size of the houses. John Hawkins, a local journalist who grew up there, had spoken about his childhood spent in a bungalow. His family had lived in Africa for a few years previously and by the time they moved back to England they had grown used to single-storey housing. His mother developed a distrust of stairs. And everything here was tiny. The buses were single-decker, the skyline was at waist height and the post-boxes sat squat, bright red and rounded, like little old women holding their breath. John described the suburb as a 'very common, ordinary place'. On first impressions, at least, he wasn't wrong.

As far as I could tell it was an area devoted entirely to housing; a land of speed bumps and neighbours and driveways that sloped down away from the road. The hedges were well-trimmed. The dogs were well-trained. I imagined that I was some kind of detective and that I could tell a lot about a family from the appearance of their door knocker.

Vanity cars sat outside houses, blocking sunlight from the weeds. Mazda MX5s and bottom-range Jags that served as evidence, not of any great abundance of wealth in the area, but of a highly concentrated population of men living the suburban dream, bathing in the post-orgasmic afterglow of their midlife crises. Those with less forgiving wives had settled instead for a caravan.

When you ask about the things that have changed in Gloucester that I'm particularly proud of or particularly fond of, the only one that really springs to mind is the dockland. It has made Gloucester now, not just a rival to Cheltenham, but actually, a leader.

*John Hawkins*

Gloucester was once an industrial city. It had the UK's most inland port, a booming flour business, a close working relationship with the Great Western Railway, and several large factories along the length of Bristol Road. It is considered by some to be the birthplace of the mass-production matchstick (*and you'll never sing that!*).

John recalled playing among the workmen as a child and returning home covered in flour dust. Fifty years later I ordered a plant-based burger and a locally brewed pale ale, and I did so through an app.

The money seemed to trickle and thin along the canal leading into the city. What had started with rusted boats, small businesses and topless fishermen changed, over the next three miles, into a picture of residential prosperity.

It didn't appear to be gentrification. Gentrification replaces an existing way of life. It eradicates or overpowers a community in stealth mode; brick by brick, block by block. But here any signs of life were already long gone, and all that remained was ghostly, fading painted sign-work and burned-out orange roofs.

The buildings became binary. They were either shiny and new or they would be soon. They looked like artists' impressions standing glossy against the water, and the closer I walked to the city centre, the further I seemed to be from its past. Soon, even the boats were different; *The Topsy Toad* became *Endeavour*, and the rusted-up weekend projects gave way to floating holiday rentals with repurposed sailing gear and flowerbeds kept neatly across deck.

John is not alone in pinning the city's aspirations to the dockland. The streets regress backwards into the previous century as you walk away from the water, the old and the new separated so bluntly it's as if the canal itself were a spring of youth; all that lies beyond its reflection is destined to remain in the past.

Either that or I was just grumpy; alone on my 24th birthday, failing to find a pub that showed football.

The first place I tried was The Sword Inn. It claimed to show live Sky Sports but all I found was horse racing and a DVD screening of a Pink Floyd concert. I left before you could sing 'we don't need no odds-on favourite', and the pirate-types who stood outside all giggled in my wake. The second place I tried was The Doctors.

The music stopped five minutes before half-time, and when it restarted there was a woman singing over the top

of it. The lyrics were displayed on a handful of screens above the bar. She had a beautiful voice; strong but still vulnerable, gruff without turning hoarse. She sang a piano ballad version of Robyn's 'Dancing On My Own' and her friends on the dancefloor waved their hands slowly through the air. Overhead, a gigantic rippled projector screen showed a slow-motion panning shot of the crowd at Crystal Palace's Selhurst Park and for the briefest of moments I found myself marooned between the here and the there; between the pensioners and the men in dirty work clothes and the thousands of supporters up on the screen, each aspect synced up perfectly together as one and, although I didn't really understand what I was witnessing, I was, nonetheless, helpless but to admit that I found the whole scene rather moving.

\* \* \*

I returned to the land of the bungalows. They looked even more peculiar now, like rows of static houses with chimneys, dwarfed by blocks of two- and three-storey houses divided up into flats. I suspected that these larger homes were not especially grand places to live. Tall, dark wooden fences divided up the gardens. The springs of a trampoline whined out of sight. Yesterday Tuffley had been sleepy. Today it just felt tired.

Welcome To  
Glevum Park  
Home of  
Tuffley Rovers



Dark wooden turnstiles gave way to corrugated metals. I wandered slowly between a series of single-storey buildings at the near end of the pitch. An old man watched television. He didn't hear me as I said hello.

Tuffley Rovers are an amateur football club with a youth set-up, a women's team and five different standards of men's team. In 2006 they fell short of the FA's required ground grading and dropped down to the 13th tier of English football. The next decade was spent recovering to the 9th tier, where they have remained steadily ever since.

Neil was the football secretary; the man who replied to my email. I found him printing programmes in his office. He had the look of a retired League One footballer: dark, slicked-back hair falling fashionably behind his ears. He had an accent that I couldn't imagine shouting, and the frantic, busied demeanour of somebody midway through a to-do list. He redirected me towards the old man, now joined around the television by an ever-expanding group of teenagers. Fulham hosted Liverpool in the lunchtime kick-off. Three older men arrived in matching black uniforms and the atmosphere was only slightly changed.

The head of the trio was called Darren. He looked like the kind of man to keep a back-up set of cards in his glovebox. Everybody looked to him after Fulham were awarded a controversial penalty and he seemed so touched to be considered that I thought he was likely to cry.

It's usually a bad sign if the supporters know a referee's name. But here it was simply evidence of the close-knit world of local football.

The players filtered off into the changing rooms. The supporters headed to the bar. We were left alone now, myself and the old man. And so we spoke. He said that he wrote the match reports for Tuffley's website, he held season tickets at two different football clubs and had attended more than a thousand Liverpool matches in his time. The previous season, at 69 years of age, he had been to 113 different football matches. Why? Because he was an oddball. A *groundhopper*. Somebody who, in lieu of other, more productive pursuits – say, marriage counselling or sitting at home and watching darts – decides that their time is best spent attending football matches. Ideally between two teams that they don't support.

Officially speaking, the goal is to visit – or *tick off* – as many grounds as you can. Unofficially, I suspect that a successful groundhop can be anything that shuts up those lonely voices for an afternoon. Perhaps this theory dates back to the first time I ever met a groundhopper out in the wild. I found him in the pie queue at Winsford United, a ground that is banked around the edges, set in the remains of a former greyhound track. 'It's all about exploring new places,' he said, before going on to recall each of his previous 26 visits.

\* \* \*

The FA Cup is very important to clubs in non-league. Or at least that's what they tell me. So, where then were the tinfoil trophies? The half-and-half scarves, the *que sera, sera's*? The media circus had rolled into town on a tandem bicycle. The crowd had gathered like a pair of pants stuck

up in the crack. The afternoon was all that I had expected and less. If the FA Cup really *was* that important down here in the lower leagues, then they had a funny way of showing their excitement. All of which served to aid a little hypothesis that I had been brewing up: that football at this level has too little wriggle room for the clubs to get all romantic.

To the biggest clubs, the FA Cup remains a nostalgic, romantic competition. The finances are so comparatively insignificant to the rest of their income that victory has become almost entirely symbolic, the repercussions of a win are dwarfed by the act of winning. It is somewhat ironic, perhaps, that only those clubs that have stretched the game so far from its roots remain able to enjoy its most fundamental pleasure.

The match at Tuffley Rovers may have lacked the visible, hard-worn touchstones of the competition's influence, but that was only because it was too busy living in the real world, where a good cup run doesn't just mean bragging rights, but a new set of turnstiles or floodlights, or footballs for the junior team. There is, of course, a time and a place for symbols. But symbols do not pay the bills.

'For this kind of age group now, the FA Cup hasn't got the prestige that it would have done back in my day.' 'My' being Neil 'Muzzy' Mustoe, manager of Tuffley Rovers, and 'my day' being five years in either direction from the turn of the century:

Playing in the FA Cup when I was younger – it was the biggest cup competition in the world.

Now with Sky, the Premiership, the Champions League and all the prize money, clubs focus on other things. But being a local side, if you can get a cup run, like some local clubs have done recently, I think that *then* we start to really see what the magic of the FA Cup is.

I knew all about Muzzy before I had a chance to shake his hand. He had been offered a two-year professional contract at Manchester United, racked up over 400 appearances with Gloucester City, and played nearly 100 times in the Football League. People at Tuffley recounted each of these statistics as if they themselves had achieved them, so proud were they to have a man of his pedigree at the club.

In 1995 he won the FA Youth Cup with Manchester United. They beat Spurs in a two-legged tie that climaxed at Old Trafford before a crowd of 20,000. The recent emergence of the Class of '92 had piqued the United fanbase's interest in the youth teams, so Muzzy and his team-mates were already accustomed to playing in front of large crowds. The Tottenham lads, however, weren't quite so well-adjusted, and several of them were sick with nerves in the tunnel before kick-off.

The match was decided on penalties. Phil Neville missed. Muzzy scored, and their careers soon went in somewhat different directions. To put it kindly, Muzzy's Wikipedia page is considerably shorter than that of his one-time team-mate. It does not, however, contain a paragraph describing his style of play as 'not the most

spectacular or offensive-minded defender ... occasionally criticised by pundits for his lack of pace, as well as his limited passing ability and skill on the ball', so maybe there's an argument to be made in Mustoe's favour regardless.<sup>1</sup>

Clubs such as Tuffley Rovers tend to rely on the services of one or two key people at a time. More often than not they are men and they almost never intend to become as involved as they eventually do. At the time of my visit, that man was Neil. And for many years before him it had been Coke.

Ray 'Coke' Craddock had been involved with the club for 58 consecutive years and pointed out things that he had built as we spoke. The previous decade had seen a change in south-west football, he said. Players used to want to compete at the top of their skill-set; it was about getting to the highest league, playing in front of the biggest crowd. Nowadays they drop down the divisions for the sake of an extra £30 appearance fee. Neither Coke, nor by extension Tuffley Rovers, were interested in playing such games. 'Any money that would go to players is money that would be taken away from building up the club,' he said.

It is this frugal approach – combined with a £43,000 grant from the lottery-funded Sport England – that allowed the club to break free from the restrictive (and expensive) bounds of their tenancy agreement. After the

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1 I know it's early days, but that extract from Neville's Wikipedia page is probably my favourite sentence in the whole book. It's just so ... relentless. Each time you think it's run out of steam it finds another angle from which to attack. Completely unnecessary, completely brutal.

expiry of their long-term lease with British Gas, Rovers succeeded with an offer to purchase the ground for themselves. Coke and his generation have witnessed more changes to Glevum Park since that day than in the 50-odd years that preceded it. And the physical evidence of their progress was obvious: in the new outdoor television area, ingeniously adapted during Covid-19 to meet restrictions, the changing rooms, the PA system, the stand. By contrast, the only remaining structure from *before* stood out like something from the set of a disaster film. Perhaps in another context it might have been embarrassing, but here it was only a sign of maturity, of incremental, sensible growth, and a club that felt neither any shame in its past nor any great rush to the future.

Slimbridge AFC, on the other hand, were awful. Like a non-league Newcastle with fewer beheadings. They were a band of diamond earring mercenaries, riding into Gloucester in the saddle of a 48-seat stallion. Pomposity manifest. Their supporters do not visit, they occupy, and the players are paid in bulging white envelopes stuffed with cash.

\* \* \*

His name was Joe and he had been described to me as *eccentric*, but I just thought he was brilliant. Replica top, baseball cap, drum slung around his neck; he stood at the far end of the ground, away from the clubhouse, in what he alone had dubbed the 'Bog End'. He sang songs, he banged his drum, and from time to time the two would combine to make a sound that was adjacent to music.

And, as he proudly pointed out to me after the match, he produced more noise than the 150 Slimbridge supporters put together.<sup>2</sup>

I had been having nightmares in the lead-up to this match. Sleepwalking, raising offside flags made of clingfilm and practising long-throws with the cat. I expected endless long balls, aimless dumb clearances. I bought a thesaurus and bookmarked *attritional*, then I looked up amateur and I saw the word crap.

But reality was kinder than fiction. Slimbridge played intricate, pompous football, and Tuffley failed to capitalise when it inevitably all went wrong. Despite both teams' lack of killer instinct – and the subsequent lack of goals – the overall quality of play surpassed my expectations considerably, and it feels only fair to note that I've seen far less enjoyable matches played at much higher levels of football.<sup>3</sup>

As time ticked on to its final phase, Tuffley introduced a gigantic, 42-year-old man called Shayne Bradley. Although the years hadn't been especially kind to him, he was once a promising young footballer and had played the role of 'big man' to Michael Owen's 'small man' on several occasions for England schoolboys. In the present day he jogged around the pitch with all the application you would

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2 I had a huge amount of admiration for this pettiness. It was the sole instance of anything tribal in an otherwise begrudgingly respectful afternoon of football. I had heard plenty of 'our fans were louder than your fans' in my time, but never before had the *fan* been singular.

3 If nothing else, both teams appeared to have an active interest in actually winning the match, which is more than can be said for numerous late-season dead-rubbers I had watched on the other side of the summer break.

expect from a man old enough to have once been sold by Glenn Hoddle. But still, I must admit that he changed the game. He held up the ball like the Dead Sea, and gave his team-mates a target to which they knew it would stick. Tuffley were in the ascendancy. And then, just as I was beginning to worry about the prospect of travelling all the way back down to Slimbridge for a replay, it happened. Bradley won a flick-on in midfield, Ryan Dobbins was set free down the right-hand channel and, after avoiding one of the most cynical 'professional' fouls the amateur game has ever seen, squared it across the box to a team-mate, who took one touch to control the ball and another to place it past the keeper. The plucky, Blitz spirit underdogs had done it!

Kick, run, chase. Kick, run, chase.

With only seven minutes remaining, the match became all that I had imagined and worse. Tuffley were sapped of both energy and composure. Slimbridge were relentless, incensed.

Kick, run, chase. Kick, run, chase.

Tuffley conceded a corner. Then another. And another. And a goal. I thought only of myself. How these teams, this cup, meant nothing. Nothing compared to the cost of another night's Airbnb and a full tank of petrol. To the time spent driving.

I would have to go back home to Manchester after the match, then spend two days stacking shelves as scheduled until Tuesday, then hop back in the car and embark on another 300-mile round trip, just to wind up another 20 minutes further down the road. It was farcical. A joke.



And it could even have been a funny one if only I hadn't been operating on such modest supermarket wages. I wasn't stupid. Just ambitious. I knew that across all 14 rounds of the FA Cup I would inevitably bump into a replay. Hell, that was even part of the charm! But to do so at the very first time of asking? In the arse-end of the arse-end of England? I shuddered. The reality of the undertaking dawned on me, weighing so heavily that I couldn't even enjoy the spectacle of the moment before me, a cup tie bursting into glorious, late, chaotic life.

It was a great goal. Something out of nothing; borne of a moment so innocuous that it already escapes the memory, followed by a finish so sumptuous that I doubt it ever will. Slimbridge, from 1-0 down, had won it. Cut in from the left, teed up on to the right, curled past the diving hands of the keeper.

Joe, the one-man-band, motioned towards the pitch. It was turned-up now, not ruined but certainly lived-in. Beyond it was the tightly wound forestry of Robinswood Hill, like the most delicious head of broccoli you've ever seen. It was 5pm. Evening approached, and he waved again, towards the direction of all except the pair of us. 'You can have a lovely day like this,' he said. 'On a Saturday. And it's all going right, and then ... then a ball gets kicked.'

He paused again, or perhaps he was finished entirely. Only I didn't respond. I didn't know how. 'It's a fucking cruel business, this football,' he said.

We were intercepted by Neil behind the dugouts. He sent Joe off in search of the winning ticket for the game's

golden goal and I spoke in clichés, redundant. ‘It’s just moments,’ I said. ‘A game of 90 minutes, I suppose.’

He shook my hand and thanked me for coming down to visit them. We walked along the length of the pitch as we spoke, up towards the clubhouse and the screens and the changing rooms, leaving the pitch and the Bog End behind. I thanked him, and told him that he had been very helpful. I meant it. These were good, honest people, at a good, honest football club, and they were gracious even in the face of defeat.

Neil, who had just seen his team knocked out of the FA Cup in the 90th minute, replied, ‘Well, that’s all we can be really. We can’t have much with our means, but we can always be friendly, and we can always be helpful.’

I left that afternoon with his kindness ringing in my ears. And by the time I got back to Manchester, that replay wasn’t sounding so bad.