



WORTHY

The Scouting Adventures
and Football Life of

DAVE WORTHINGTON

with Philip Dawkes

LIST: THE CHINESE FOR J...

Name	Club	Pos
KAWA		
Charles Andrew	St. Helen	Midf
Karim Bougacha	Bolton	Str
Ali, Ali	Leeds	Str
Quarson	Luton	Str
Giovanni Margherita	Leeds	Str
Pavle	Leeds	Str
Kara	Leeds	Str
David	Leeds	Str

Cobham Training Ground 08/09
Chelsea Football Club

Dave Worthington
International Scout
Chelsea Football Club

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Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Foreword	9
1. Shelf Life.	11
2. Worthington Drive.	24
3. It's Pro Time.	35
4. Barrow Boy to Man	52
5. The Prime of the Consistent Mariner	66
6. The Run	82
7. South End	114
8. Hauling Myself Up.	139
9. Shay Man	159
10. The Wanderer	175
11. A Year in the Roman Empire	207
12. Spain, Trains and Automobiles	226
13. Frankly Exceptional	249
14. Stats All, Folks	268
Epilogue: Moving On	281

One

Shelf Life

(1945–1954)

Tucked away on a small street in the tiny, evocatively named village of Shelf near Halifax is a humble one-up, one-down stone terrace house. One of many like it. In the one downstairs window stands a woman. She's ironing but not concentrating on the task. Instead, she's watching what is going on just over the street, in the car park of the pub opposite. In the tight, triangular space in front of her, three young boys are playing football. Her boys.

The smallest and youngest of the three is on the right wing, dribbling the ball between his feet, in a world of his own, where all that matters is the next flick to beat his man.

The middle brother stands to near military attention in front of the metal garage door – the makeshift goal – patiently waiting for a cross and the end of an attack that could signal his chance to be back playing outfield.

Finally, there's the lad in the middle, the eldest, a look of determination on his face. He is waiting for the ball, for the chance to score.

WHEN I think back to those games, fiercely contested between my brothers and me on our very first pitch in front of the Duke of York, I remember my mum at the window, her dark hair piled high with rollers, a look of contentment on her face. She watched on partly to make sure we were safe, not because she was fearful of

the small community – these were the early 1950s and the horrific, wrenching experiences of war had given people a renewed sense of care for each other – but because she knew her boys. We were competitive siblings, winners at all cost, cut from a cloth she helped sew. Happy play could descend into argument and confrontation in a heartbeat if one of us felt another had crossed the line. Fights were frequent and often in need of an impartial referee.

She also watched because she loved football. In her childhood, she would accompany four of her brothers – Arnold, Arthur, Ernest and Jack, all fanatical – to watch Halifax Town. Later, as her three sons grew and moved to different parts of the country to play, she would travel to Holker Street, Blundell Park, Meadow Lane, Leeds Road, Filbert Street and more but her true supporter's heart always lay at The Shay.

She had been a player herself during the war. A small joy to savour when she wasn't fulfilling her duties driving troops to and from RAF Woolsington, near Durham. All of us kids – Bob, Frank, our younger sister, Julie, and I – would regularly hear the story of the time she scored nine goals in a single game for her women's RAF side. We never had cause to doubt the claim. She backed it up on family summer holidays to sunny Bolton or Manchester, playing up front in overgrown fields, hammering the ball home past one of us with the crest of her bare right foot, where the laces of a boot would be. The technique of an old pro.

She would enhance her credentials in a mind-blowing way on the one real family holiday I remember – a four-day trip to Blackpool.

Throughout the 1950s, Joe Smith's Seaside had been one of the best teams in the country, containing the magical Stanley Matthews, rock-solid defender Harry Johnston and South African-born outside-left Bill Perry. They also had Stan Mortensen, one

of the finest centre-forwards in the game, with a gravity-defying leap and a shot of unnerving power and accuracy. Despite being a football superstar, he owned and worked in a sports shop in Blackpool – a real sign of the times – and it happened to be 200 yards away from the guest house in which we were staying. One day, my mum took us there.

With his beer-barrel chest and defender-repelling cornflake box shoulders, Stan was immediately recognisable behind the counter. For a moment, I was in awe, dumbstruck. ‘I’m just going to say hello,’ declared my mum, breaking the spell. I was indignant: ‘You don’t know him? He’s a famous footballer!’ But off she went, to not only say hello to one of the greatest goalscorers the English game had ever seen but to have a long, warm chat like long-lost friends. To this day, I’m none the wiser as to whether she actually knew him or not. It forever cemented in my mind, though, that my mum knew her football.

I like to think she was also savvy enough, as she watched on from that downstairs window, to recognise the burgeoning talent on display in that tiny, gravel-decked space over the road. She might even have foreseen all three of us forging a future in the game, so long as we applied ourselves properly, listened and learned. And we did. Mostly. In many ways she was the very first scout in my life, before the concept of the job that would come to consume the latter part of my career had even entered my mind.

If Mum was the talent spotter, Dad was the man who nurtured it. He was our first coach. There was no doubting his credentials. Born in Manchester, he had played for United’s A team as a youth with the likes of Johnny Carey and Stan Pearson, future giants of the club and who both would go on to make more than 300 first-team appearances. He also impressed in local league football for Manchester North End and Denton United. Pride of place in one of

my scrapbooks are the beautifully embroidered badges awarded to him to mark his appearances for the Manchester County Football Association between 1937 and 1939. A now faded and battered newspaper cutting below attests to his quality as a youngster in the Cheshire County League. 'Better wingers than Worthington and Hazeltine, of North End and Salford, will be hard to find,' it states.

Just prior to the war, he moved to Halifax Town, where he would finally make a mark in the professional game, in [the Third Division](#) North. While there, over four largely wartime seasons, he would play with the likes of Tom Barkas, an inside-right and Town legend famed for his craft and vision, and full-back Bill Allsop, who has still played more games for the club than any other player – more than 500 of them. Again, the prized snippets of reports, wafer thin and frayed, clinging desperately to the coloured pages of my scrapbook, speak of my dad as a 'forceful raider' down the right wing and a 'robust and energetic leader'. He was a 'player of promise'.

His career, like so many others, could have been much more fruitful had the war not interrupted and taken him away to help with a much greater cause. He began as a Royal Engineer but opted to become a paratrooper when he discovered such roles paid better. I'm not sure he fully grasped that this would mean having to jump out of an airplane with a parachute on his back and Germans shooting at him.

He was one of more than 10,000 soldiers to drop on Arnhem as part of Operation Market Garden in September 1944. He was one of only 2,000 to return. He never spoke of it. I don't think anyone who survived the horrors did. The only time he ever expressed to me any feelings regarding the war was during a cinema trip to Halifax Odeon. I can only have been six or seven. It was to see a film called *Theirs Is the Glory*, which was about Arnhem and

mixed original footage with archive from the battle. More than 200 veterans appeared as actors. I recall sitting in the back row, enraptured by the aircraft setting off en route to the Netherlands on the big screen. Next to me, my dad was animated. He kept leaning forward and pointing, excitedly exclaiming: 'I'm sure that's my mate Dinky Durkin from Keighley.' He was picking out soldiers he thought he recognised from the footage, men preparing for battle or later in hospital beds, their ultimate fate uncertain.

His sacrifice, in comparison to so many, was relatively minor but it deprived him of the opportunity to fully realise his dream. In the latter years of his playing career, the ones I was old enough to witness for myself, he would appear for the local team down the road, Shelf United. The thing I remember most from watching him is the ferocity of his shot, blasted from a cannon of a right foot and almost spiteful in its disregard for opposition goalkeepers. Fury mixed with frustration.

The coaching sessions by the pub, which comprise some of my earliest memories, saw my dad teach me how to crack a ball like him, along with something far more delicate. He would stress the importance of close control – a quality I would strive to perfect as a player and later, as a scout, spend 20 years seeking out in others. He demonstrated how to trap the ball with the insole and then watched as I repeated the skill. It was thrilling for me and convenient for him, as he could balance out imparting advice with a trip inside the Duke of York for a well-earned pint or two.

I had a head start on my younger brothers but we all received the same tutelage from the stocky man with slicked back hair, deep-set, focussed eyes and a near constant cigarette in his mouth. Once we were old enough to play together in the car park, we were well drilled in the requirements of a cushion-like first touch. And nothing hones the need like a floaty plastic ball and a tight, angular

pitch down one side of which flew regular passing cars and buses. One errant touch and our next onrushing opponent would be the No.47, rumbling up the road from Brighouse. Not even our Frank had a trick to get around that.

We didn't live in luxury. We weren't showered with gifts. The house was barely big enough to fit us all, with one bedroom in which we all slept and an outside toilet you'd need to creep across freezing cold cobbles to reach. I would have cardboard strips put in my shoes to plug holes and eke out a few extra precious months of wear from the soles. My parents were not wealthy people nor were they truly poor. They were like so many folk after the war, striving to pick up the pieces, make ends meet and move on by reclaiming lives that had been so unjustly halted.

We three boys didn't receive an abundance of affection either – no cuddles or regular displays of tenderness – but we were never left in any doubt that we were loved. Care and support were always there, as was a clip round the ear when you'd earned it. Along with her comforting presence at the downstairs window, the other thing I remember most about my mum from my youth is her narrow-eyed, exasperated look when she caught one of us being naughty. Her mantra would soon follow: 'If you boys don't stop it, I'll tell your dad when he gets home.' Often she didn't but the threat itself was enough. Having seen the ferocity of his shot, I certainly didn't fancy being on the receiving end of his palm to the back of my calves or backside. On the rare occasions she did tell him ... oof! Mum provided the assist and dad finished it.

The most significant gift they bestowed on us, though, was one of finest things any parent can hand down to their child. Something that has tailored our lives, provided us with careers, connections, lifelong friends and immeasurable joy. They gave us a passion for the game of football.

I was born on 28 March 1945 in Halifax General Infirmary, the first child of Eric and Alice Worthington. Bob and Frank would follow at two-year intervals. My parents waited until 1957 to have another child, my sister, Julie, arriving to finally provide them with the girl they longed for to complete the family. I imagine it must have been a relief after 12 years of us boys running amok. Little did they know that Julie would prove to be just as boisterous as her three big brothers. A Worthington through and through.

During the week, dad worked as a labourer, principally for a machine tool parts company, although his eye for an opportunity and a bit more money saw him change jobs fairly regularly. In fact, such was his ethic, he would even find casual work on our holidays to Bolton to stay with my mum's sister, May, and her husband, Harry, getting up early to head down to a nearby farm to muck out the stables from eight in the morning until two in the afternoon. The need placed on him to support a growing family meant he wasn't as solid a presence in the house as my mum. He would be up early to catch the bus into Halifax for a shift and return late, even later if money was tight at the end of the week and he had to walk the journey.

After giving birth to her three sons, my mum worked on a till at Woolworths and Brow Lane Stores in the village. She also cleaned for the Whitaker family of Halifax brewery fame and did shifts at Mackintosh's sweet factory. She would often return laden with misshapen, leftover toffee for us kids to fight over, the one consistent luxury we were afforded.

For the first year of my life, Dad would leave us on winter Saturdays to turn out for Town, the result and standard of his performance dictating the evening mood. With luck, he would return energised, with tales of derring-do on the field – a dominant display in a 5-2 victory over Carlisle, a lobbed finish over a helpless

Bradford City goalkeeper, two-goal heroics against Sheffield Wednesday. If things didn't go to plan, a sombre silence could descend on the house. I was way too young to understand why but I imagine that even then I sensed the difference that winning or losing brought to my own little world.

It wasn't long before I cottoned on as to why the village, and our house in particular, was such a hubbub of emotion on a Saturday. There were other places to be and other things to do, of course. Every Sunday, the popular Shelf Working Men's Club would host bingo, a particular love of my mum's, and the Duke of York, another hub of the community, was literally over the road and seemingly never shut. My parents loved music, too. Dad had played in a jazz band in Manchester and was a keen piano player.

There was never a shortage of pastimes for a young lad. In the summer, we would go swimming at Wibsey Baths, funded in part by the rewards provided for sliding down the coal shoot of our neighbours to help them get back into their house if they had locked themselves out. During the winter, when snow fell, we'd sledge down the sloping streets that fell away from the house. All year round, we raced each other over ever-increasing distances on an improvised track along the roads. Football, though, was the thing that truly energised us all.

I still have an old picture, taken in front of the house, of my brothers and me and three of our friends – Davey Lewis, John Cutts and Kenny Reilly – ahead of a game on the street. Little Frank stands near the centre, a cheeky look on his face. Bob is on the end, stood to attention, with me looking casual next to him, each of us sporting a big, expectant grin. All of us are wearing full kit, including boots with leather studs. Ready for action.

After a cartilage injury did for my dad's slim remaining hopes of making it as a professional player, he turned to local football

for his fix. I would delight at being taken to watch him play for Shelf United, standing on the touchline of a mudbath of a pitch, enraptured alongside my mum as she held young Bob. As the years passed, he would join me by her side to be replaced by the infant Frank in her arms. I was blown away by the energy and ferocity on display. It might only have been local amateur football but it was keenly contested, with plenty of ability on show from players who had previously represented Football League clubs, some as high as the First Division. It was an early education in the levels required if you were going to make it in the game.

Dad would also turn out for the pub team on a Wednesday. Mr Gregson, the landlord, played too, as a defender. He would also ferry the team to away games in his big American limousine-style car. There would be two players in the long front seat next to him, two on backward-facing seats behind and at least three in the back. Our Bob and me would sit in the footwell. We were like the Ant Hill Mob, chugging up hills to the likes of Wainstalls, Midgley and Heptonstall.

By the time I was able to kick a ball, I was quickly put to good, albeit nefarious use in the operation. Just before a game, my dad would call me over for our own secret team talk. 'David, I want you to head off down the bottom there with your friends,' he'd say, pointing to the goal housing the opposition goalkeeper. 'You go kick the ball about behind that goal.' Off we would go, to play away merrily and, to the unsuspecting eye at least, innocently. If we did our job properly, we would create enough of a distraction that the keeper might allow one of my dad's trademark 30-yard thunderbolts to fly past him. Eventually, the goalkeeper would cotton on and we'd receive a stern demand to 'sod off, you nippers!' Unwittingly, I was making my first strides into competitive football, as Shelf United's unofficial 12th man.

The game made local celebrities of us. Even the shortest walk out with Dad would last an age as he stopped to chat to everyone we came across, me listening in at his side. They would ask about last week's game, about this week's, about a goal someone had seen him score or even just discuss whether he thought Halifax might go up that year.

With my dad's influence, his origins over the other side of the Pennines and youthful experiences with Manchester United, it was, perhaps, inevitable that I would look for the results of the Reds as I began to discover football fandom. This was the Matt Busby era, before the Munich air disaster stripped them of so much when Duncan Edwards, Dennis Viollet and David Pegg were breaking through and league titles followed. As I grew a bit older, Halifax inevitably came to the fore – a passion I could share with both my parents and wider family. There was also an early indication of my rebellious side when I decided to lend my support to Bradford City. They and Bradford Park Avenue were the other significant local sides in the area – both in [the Third Division](#) North at the time – and a lot of the lads in the village supported the latter. Not wanting to follow the crowd, I declared myself for City. On one occasion, I caught a train on my own to go and watch the Bantams play away at Scunthorpe. It was a stubborn early foray to a part of the world I would later get to know very well.

The only other significant club in my pre-adolescent life were Newcastle United. Not the real Newcastle side mind but a one-inch-high version made of plastic that I kept in a tray and controlled by flicking around a felt pitch. Subbuteo, the famous football game in which you direct a team of small players by tapping them about with your index finger, was our indoor vice and Newcastle were my prized side. Every year, we would have a cup knockout competition at one of the lads' houses, in which I would strive to tap

my way to victory, led by a miniature, blank-faced but nonetheless prolific Jackie Milburn. Most of us could only afford to have a team of players but Kenny Riley, who was a few years older and had a bit more money by dint of his parents owning the local greengrocers, had a proper pitch and even the little floodlights to put in each corner. There was never a debate over whose house held major finals.

In stark contrast to later in my life, I had little concept of football or the players that played it beyond England's shores. There would be newspaper reports of World Cups and descriptions of exotic-sounding Brazilian forwards like Ademir but little else. There would be very few foreign players or managers in England – a country still firmly holding on to the belief that, having invented the game, they did it better. That would all begin to change on 25 November 1953.

It was a Wednesday and England were playing Hungary at Wembley. The game was being televised but, back then, few people had a TV set. We certainly didn't. However, a lad who lived near us, Martin Lister, had the luxury of a set. For two days ahead of the game, he became my best friend. When gameday came around and school finished, I was straight around to his house. 'Hi, Mrs Lister, is Martin home? Oh, he's watching the game? Mind if I join him?' She barely had time to respond before I was through the door, my coat off, heading for the living room.

The next 90 minutes, sat glued to that black-and-white, hazy screen, were a football education. Hungary tore England to shreds. The way they passed the ball, their movement and skill was light years ahead of anything I'd seen before. They had Nándor Hidegkuti, who scored a hat-trick playing as a deep-lying centre-forward, a position we didn't know was even possible, and, as a second striker, a stocky lad by the name of Ferenc Puskás. He was

some player – strong and quick but also crafty and gentle, with little feints and touches to take him past opponents and into empty space. He ran poor England defender Harry Johnston ragged.

I didn't appreciate the Hungarians' brilliance at the time. I'd gone round to Martin's house to watch England win, to see Stanley Matthews and my mum's mate, Stan Mortensen, put on a show, playing the English way. It was the naivety of a young football fan that knows no different. I didn't particularly enjoy watching our lads get embarrassed by these fancy foreigners, flicking it around so brilliantly with the outside of their foot or over their head. It clearly struck a chord, though, with all of us. It wasn't long before we were all out on the street or in the park, trying to emulate Puskás.

I was often the youngest in my group of mates. The creep towards adolescence brought with it a desire to establish myself in a bigger, braver world, prompting me to hang out with the older lads. It occasionally got me into bother. The savvy ones of our gang would make the youngest like myself do the naughty stuff, so if we were caught they could deny involvement and lay the blame on us. There would be fights, too, with other gangs from Buttershaw or Queensbury. I would often be the littlest one, keeping to the back, but I quickly learned how to look after myself and not to back down – a trait that has never left me.

Thankfully, my parents had planted a smart enough head on my shoulders to recognise the far more positive and pointed inspirations to be drawn from my peers, chief amongst them Dennis Wilkinson. Dennis was the older brother of my mate Neville and served in the forces, although he was too young to have gone to war. Nev wasn't a great footballer but Dennis had real talent. He was a giant of a lad, 6ft 5in, strong and quick. On occasions when he was back home on leave, he would join us for kickabouts and we would bounce off him as we tried to get the ball. What made

him truly special, though, was his trial with Aston Villa. He didn't end up signing for them but it still meant something to me that a big First Division club had scouted a lad from Shelf and that I'd shared a pitch with him. It laid a pathway for me to follow, provided the inspiration I needed to achieve my dream of becoming a professional footballer.

Inevitably, Shelf has changed much over the years. But many of the landmarks of my youth remain. My childhood home is still there, as is the Duke of York, although the car park has changed. Instead of an open gravel space, perfect for football, it is now decked in part and strewn with picnic benches and planters. In the wall is a modern glass-filled archway that would be threatened by even the lightest of impacts from a misdirected plastic ball.

In my mind, it will always be that empty, triangular patch of gravel, the spot where three young lads learnt how to play and a woman with rollers in her hair and a contented smile watched on from a nearby window. Even a scene so humble owes itself to the hard work and sacrifices of my parents. It was they who provided the platform, allowing me to go off and pursue my dreams. In my most reflective moments, I'm left with questions. Did I give it my all, achieve all I could and become the man my parents hoped? Was I decent, dependable, deserving? Worthy?