

Tony Rickson

KICKING ON

**How Footballers
Win the
Post-Retirement
Game of Life**



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Exciting Times Ahead

OUR LONG-SERVING professional is now 35 – young in life, but getting a bit ancient for football. Looking around the dressing room, there's nothing the old pro doesn't know about the team-mates in there. The names of their kids. Their favourite dinner. What car(s) they drive. What they like to watch on TV. They've spent many an hour together in this room, on top of all the coach and plane journeys they've shared, the meeting rooms they've sat in, the dining areas they've eaten in and the hotels they've slept in.

What's constantly on the mind now is the word all footballers dread: retirement. It comes to everyone – even Sir Stanley Matthews, although he was 50 when he got there – and it's common knowledge that the time to consider retiring from the game is just before the manager thinks about doing it for you. Even though our good old seasoned pro knows they'll only be making way for someone with less experience and almost certainly less ability ...

The law of averages says only one of the players in that dressing room will likely go on to make it as a manager. And quite probably not for too long if they ever get that far, as it's not the most secure job around. It's not a given that the best player

goes on to be a successful manager. A whole new skill-set is required, starting most importantly with people management. There's also tactical acumen, ability to make quick decisions, skills in dealing with the media, with staff and with the chief exec or whoever's in charge of the club's finances. Successful managers such as Arsène Wenger and José Mourinho – and, before them, double-winning Bertie Mee, who took on the top job after being the club physiotherapist at Arsenal – had no background as players themselves.

Look back at the England World Cup-winning team of 1966 – seven of them had a shot at management after retiring from playing, but only Jack Charlton and Alan Ball really made successful second careers out of it. Not for me, is the conclusion many ex-players reach. Another former England legend, Nat Lofthouse, was once quoted as saying, 'I've been associated with Bolton Wanderers for 50 years. Forty-eight of them were happy. The other two I was manager!'

The opinionated one in the dressing room who's always had the most to say may well continue in football after retirement as a pundit, commentator or journalist, with ever-widening opportunities to work in TV, radio, newspapers, podcasts and social media. On top of the traditional punditry that we enjoy in media coverage of football, former players branch out and diversify on the strength of their familiar faces. So Gary Lineker does presenting, makes adverts, and all sorts of other things; Peter Crouch gets his own prime time Saturday night TV entertainment show and a huge podcast; Gary Neville is busier than ever with all his various interests, including punditry, a university and a hotel; Ian Wright makes a serious documentary about domestic abuse; Alex Scott and Jermaine Jenas are seen by millions hosting *The One Show*.

Others will happily stay in the game, perhaps as coaches or working in a club's academy. But that still means as many as half of any team will be thrown out in the cold with no more football, despite it having been the be-all and end-all of their adult life up till then.

Sadly, four in ten retired players are reckoned to suffer mental health problems. Depression, alcoholism, bad investments, bankruptcy, divorce, drug addiction, degenerative injuries, sometimes even prison or suicide. It's a tragic list of some of the potential problems out there. From fame, riches, adulation, never having to think for yourself, to suddenly bereft of finding a point in a lonely life with no support network any longer.

Every player imagines they're going to play for ever, according to the head of player welfare at the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA), Michael Bennett. 'It's hard to think about life after sport when you're in a constant battle to hold down a position,' he said. 'Players are told what to eat, when to eat, when to sleep, and then they're suddenly left to completely fend for themselves and we expect them to cope.'

Just as well, then, that this book very much looks at the other side of the coin. Alongside players who chose management, coaching or media work, hundreds have found new challenges and learned new skills to go on to fulfilling and successful second careers. Tackling the post-football game of life head-on.

Look at the example of Norway international Claus Lundekvam, who was forced to retire in 2008 with an ankle injury at the age of 35. He'd played nearly 400 matches for Southampton but found he simply couldn't cope with life after football. He later told the BBC in a moving interview:

I obviously took a few wrong turns and wrong decisions after my career. Looking back, I would strongly advise players to find something meaningful to get you up in the morning. Find something, work-wise, that you enjoy. For me, at the time, I had everything. I had a lot of money, a wonderful family, a great house. But I was depressed and I felt lonely. I felt that nobody needed me any more. That was the loss of the dressing room. The loss of performing every week with your team-mates. I found that very difficult. You are so dedicated to performing and running out to thousands of fans. You're never going to replace that adrenaline kick with anything.

In retirement he became addicted to drink and drugs, his wife divorced him and he tried to take his own life. But Lundekvam eventually admitted the depth of his problems and enrolled at the Sporting Chance Clinic, which helps ex-sports players just when they need it most. His recovery wasn't all plain sailing but he eventually turned his life around. Completely. He began working full-time with the Psychiatry Alliance in Norway, helping people who have struggled to put meaning back into their lives, through training and physical activity.

What a redemption, not only plumbing the very life-or-death depths before overcoming a severe problem, but then resetting yourself to help others marooned in a similar way.

Not every story in this book is as dramatic as the way Lundekvam had to turn everything around in his life but there's a tremendous theme running through it of former players who have embarked on successful, rewarding, exciting second careers. Starting with a favourite example, which is in no way pants.