



Chapter One

INNOCENCE

Some things stay with you for life. Events so momentous that time can neither diminish nor distort them.

They remain burnt into the psyche, available for precise instant recall, no matter where, no matter when. So vivid are these memories that 35 years can melt away in a split-second. One such experience is indelibly etched into my memory and survives as an instant focal point to summarise a particularly significant period of my life in a brief moment.

This earth-shattering event happened on my first day as a professional footballer. I will say it again – my first day as a professional footballer. July 31, 1975.

Can you imagine what it felt like to sign for the club you supported? Think about it for a while. People talk, superficially, about “dreams coming true”, a convenient and well-used phrase but seldom with any substance. But not in this case. I had truly stepped off the terrace and into the dressing room at Birmingham City.

I was, as the Americans would say, “living the dream”. Look, the facts don’t lie. Virtually every kid on the planet has played football, but only the best of the best of the very best can ever be good enough to earn a living from it.

The incident in question happened early in the morning of that very first day. Standing at the edge of the training ground, I became aware of a presence next to me. I don't know whether I had actually half-looked across or it was a psychic moment, but I just knew it was him – the man from my bedroom wall.

To people who didn't frequent St Andrew's during that period, it is so difficult to convey the demi-god-like status this man enjoyed. He was Rooney, Gerrard and Lampard all rolled into one. His cult status was probably even greater than those players because, while they were superstars in teams of superstars, Trevor Francis was a superstar in a team of relatively ordinary British First Division players.

Every morning, when I opened my eyes, I saw Trevor staring down from my bedroom wall. Trevor scoring, Trevor shooting, Trevor gliding, Trevor flowing, Trevor magnificent in the blue-and-white penguin kit Birmingham City wore during that period (there were also a few pictures of Linda Lovelace, Deep Purple, Charlie's Angels and those two blokes from *Easy Rider* riding Harley Davidsons).

It had become a lifetime quest just to get the autograph of my hero, let alone play in the same team as him. How many times had my brother and I waited, to no avail, outside the players' entrance at St Andrew's after matches? And now? Well, I could actually have reached out and touched him. Talk about surreal. It is almost impossible to put into words what that experience was like to someone such as me – the fan from the Tilton Road End.

In some ways, what happened next would play a major part in the formation of the rest of my life. Sometimes small, seemingly unimportant events set in train a course of actions that ultimately shape and affect one's life. Incidents in some way trivial, yet with long-term ramifications. Now, as I sit back and reflect upon my life and the key points which shaped and altered it, this one, of all, is the most profound, although it wasn't until much later that I was truly aware of the significance of what was about to happen.

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I was standing next to my hero and it seemed a conversation must ensue. It was a truly incredible and momentous experience. I was, however, becoming aware of a series of unpleasant physiological responses, presumably a result of being in the vicinity of this legend. I had butterflies in my stomach – well, more like a flock of seagulls picking at my insides. Nausea overwhelmed me. I felt that sudden release of sweat on my forehead and then, in quick succession, my armpits and finally the palms of my hands.

It was quite a warm day, but not hot enough to provoke such a severe reaction, and my mouth became much drier than it would be in two hours' time after we had completed the first cross country.

My heart was racing. My body was telling me to move away and seek respite from the emotion of the occasion, but my legs had become heavy and resistant to movement. Looking back now I suppose I was having some kind of panic attack – in fact, I may indeed have invented the panic attack as there was really no such thing in those days. I think the simplest thing is to refer to it as a Trevor attack!

It's quite easy to explain. Let's be honest, I have spent enough time reliving it over the past 35 years. I had elevated, in my mind, this man to such a level of adulation that now, as he stood next to me in flesh and blood, his metamorphosis from bedroom wall-occupying icon to potential team-mate who I might conceivably become friends with or, even more unbelievably, play in the same team as, was simply too much for my adolescent mind to handle, hence the alarming reaction. Or to put it more simply and in layman's terms – he was God and I was an insignificant, incapable of being in his company, hence the collywobbles.

This uncomfortable impasse lasted for minutes (probably seconds). Fucking hell, if he speaks to me, I think I might possibly drop dead with shock, let alone engage him in small talk.

But he didn't speak; he just sort of drifted away – well, anyway,

he wasn't there any more and my heart returned to normal and my legs regained the ability to move.

Sadly, that would not be my last Trevor attack. We were teammates for four years, though I doubt if he even noticed. Every day when he did speak to me, even if it was just a brief "good morning", I would clam up and end up stuttering and stammering some unintelligible reply. And as for actually passing the ball to the guy, forget it, not a chance. I would look up, see it was him and, as if by magic, my leg would lose all its sensory input and he would curse me as the ball evaded his touch. I don't know what he really thought of me. Presumably that I must have been retarded mentally and physically. Of course, I was neither (I don't think); I just couldn't take him down from the bedroom wall.

We went our different ways – eventually. He became the first million-pound player and I slowly but surely drifted down the leagues. I am not blaming Trevor for that, of course, but in many ways he was unknowingly responsible, in small part, because our mismatched relationship highlighted the difficulties I encountered when trying to 'make it' at my local club.

The struggle to make it at your 'home' team, when all your family, friends and old schoolteachers are watching you, kicking every ball for you, praying you will play well – or, more pointedly, some of them praying you will not play well – can be a crushing experience.

An interesting footnote to the Trevor Francis experience happened about 20 years later when I next spoke to him.

I was the physiotherapist at Preston North End and we were about to play Arsenal in a live televised FA Cup tie at Deepdale on a Friday night. I had, on many occasions, told stories about my inability to pass or kick the ball to Trevor, taking advantage of my gift of accurately impersonating his distinctive Devonian accent when he would bollock me as my passes evaded him. My best friend, Brian Hickson (the Preston kit man), had enjoyed them many times over the years.

I was in the medical room at about 6.30pm with the door

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slightly ajar and could hear Brian, who was outside in the corridor, saying, “Good evening Mr Francis, there is a bald-headed bloke behind that door who knows you very well and speaks very highly of you, and I am certain he would love to meet you again.”

The penny dropped – Trevor was the Sky Sports commentator for the match and, more to the point, was about to walk into the room. It was surreal as the door slowly opened and once again I felt the sweat start to break out – even after all that time. It had been almost a quarter of a century since my last Trevor attack.

What happened? Well, surprisingly little. We chatted and reminisced and laughed and, more to the point, spoke (without the stammering) as old pals and ex-team-mates do. What a nice guy. I wish we could have had more time to talk. I could have explained I wasn’t retarded and, what’s more, was actually a very good player who simply could not cope with that extra pressure which playing for your hometown club brought, but still ended up having a decent career at a respectable level.

But I didn’t explain any of that. How can you ever really relate to anybody the implications of that incident on that warm summer’s day all those years ago – especially the man himself?

So began my career at Birmingham City. The Blues were in the First Division (in the days before the First Division became the Third Division). I really was the boy next door, and walked to training every day from the family home in Sheldon singing *Bohemian Rhapsody* and walking tall in my platform shoes. This was the era of the ground staff – the apprentice who spent as much time cleaning boots as actually wearing them. In what was probably the last vestige of the slave trade and in return for our £16 per week and cheese sandwiches at lunchtime, we were expected to clean the baths, boots, training ground, manager’s car, St Andrew’s, coach’s car, etc. I had six pairs of boots to clean every day – 14, 16, 29, 32, 39 and 42 (we had more than 50

professionals at the time). Later, I retained those 'lucky' numbers as my lottery numbers and, surprise surprise, over the last 15 years have never won so much as a sodding tenner. Maybe that was a portent of what was to come.

The environment the young apprentices operated in then was totally different to that which today's 'academy students' enjoy. Notwithstanding the fact today's hopefuls don't do any jobs while we spent at least 50 per cent of our apprenticeship performing – let's say – off-field duties, there was also a vast difference in the senior players' perception of the role of the young players and, more importantly, their perceived status at the club.

Back in the mid-'70s things were very different. (There was no naughty step at home – if you misbehaved you got a bloody clip around the ear.) Discipline in the workplace, schools and football clubs was much tougher than in today's liberal environment; the young players just did not go into the senior players' dressing room uninvited and did not initiate conversation with them. They were generally treated with disdain by the senior players. Similarly, some of the coaches seemed to enjoy exerting their authority over the young boys. I will stop short of using the word bullying – but only just. I think some of the treatment we were on the receiving end of might be described in those terms by some of today's more liberal thinkers.

It was tough. The club seemed to purposely create an unnecessarily harsh environment. Maybe their theory was that one day you would be going out into the hostile atmosphere of a first-team game where the criticism could be vocal and fierce, and perhaps they thought in treating us that way it would toughen us up and prepare us for that day. Perhaps they were right. Survival of the fittest, natural selection and all that. But I didn't like it, didn't thrive on it and it didn't make me a better player.

Let me try and be a little bit more specific about the social dynamics in place at a soccer club in those days. If you had the wrong type of jeans, the wrong width of tie, a lisp or a big nose

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(which I did), then it was open season on you from the other players – and that included the coaches and other staff. However, it was done not with good humour but with malice, and every comment was designed to cause maximum hurt. And God forbid if you gave anybody a bad pass. Things like that were seized upon voraciously by the pack and the fragile self-confidence of the young players was ripped to shreds.

There was a really dark side to the whole proceedings and I admit I was terrified of going into the first-team dressing room. I remember in my first pre-season one of my fellow newcomers had started a week after us because of a family holiday, presumably booked before he was offered an apprenticeship at Birmingham. When he reported for his first day, the second-team coach started screaming at him for not being in the previous week. Really aggressive and unpleasant, and to what purpose? Well, I don't know – maybe he could tell us – but that just seemed to be the norm at the club then with a permanent open season on the young lads.

One thing, though, that was better back then was that the clubs didn't start getting interested in talent-spotting young players until they were 14 or 15 years old. Unlike today where we have the crazy system of scouting four and five-year-olds. For Christ's sake. When I was four years old, I was more concerned about getting my first cubs uniform and saving up my 10p-a-week pocket money for the latest Action Man than being invited to join a football academy. Back then, everything went through the schoolboy football system; the best players got picked for the school team, and then the best players in the school team got sent for trials for the Birmingham schools team, and then the best players in that team got selected for the county team (Warwickshire, not the West Midlands, in those days). And that was it, nice and simple. No pressure stuff but, more importantly, absolutely no thought or suggestion of becoming professional footballers. It was just about the honour of representing your school, city or county and designed solely for physical recreation.

THE SMELL OF FOOTBALL

If you didn't get picked, it was no big deal, or if you got into the county team, it was pats on the back and well done's all round, but no feeling you were anything special or destined for stardom.

I went through all those trials and ended up captain of both Birmingham and Warwickshire schools – I was very proud and pleased of this, but didn't have any grandiose ideas about the future. The point is this: I was allowed to play all my junior football up until the age of 15 or 16 with no pressure at all. At the excellent school I went to, Sir Wilfrid Martineau, you were expected to partake equally in all the sporting activities, so I played a lot of rugby and did a lot of cricket and cross country and athletics and enjoyed all these sports.

Naturally, we all loved soccer the most and dreamed of being professional footballers, but without any of the associated pressures that, dare I say, are heaped on to today's talented younger generation. It was only in the final years of school that a few scouts from the local clubs dropped by at the county games and started to express an interest in the better players, and this is how it was – almost perfunctory.

I was invited to sign apprentice forms for a host of local clubs but opted for the Blues because I supported them and it also meant I could continue to live at home. It was only really at that stage that the excitement and realisation that I was on the verge of a career in professional football grabbed me. The beauty of that system – although it wasn't really a system as such – was when you got to the club on your first day it was all new, exciting and even a bit daunting because you hadn't had the exposure to this environment since you were four. Nowadays you could get a testimonial on your 14th birthday.

At 4pm every afternoon, the young apprentices would congregate in the boot room at St Andrew's, waiting for the ritual inspection of the jobs we had done by one of the senior coaches. If I close my eyes, I can still remember all the smells from that little room – polish, leather from the room itself intermingled with the Deep

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Heat and Vicks Vapour Rub from the physio room and the smell of drying kit from the laundry. Throw in the stench – and I use that word advisedly – of the lads’ aftershaves of that era (Blue Stratos, Brut and Old Spice) and you had a heady mix. Those smells are implanted in my memory.

However, there was a degree of tension to proceedings as the jobs were thoroughly scrutinised in a sort of parody of the national service era – you know, fingers running along edges, skirting boards, studs of boots, rim of toilets (my job), before inevitably finding fault with some small aspect of the work to justify making us all get changed into our kits again to redo everything. That guy, who we all hated, would then walk away muttering the immortal words, “Sloppy off the pitch, sloppy on the pitch.”

As I said before, it was probably not overtly bullying, but more just a case of him being a twat, and for no other reason than to make everybody miserable for an hour or so and to show us what a big man (wanker) he was.

Despite all the child labour, my first season in a football life of more than 35 years was the one I enjoyed the most – not because it was the first and not because I was a Birmingham City player (or cleaner). No, it was a time of intense happiness and genuine joy to get up and walk to our Elmdon training ground with the same thoughts going through my head constantly: “You are being paid to play football, you are being paid to play football, you are being paid to play football”, or to paraphrase good old Freddie Mercury: “Is this the real life, or is this just fantasy?” It took me about six months to come to terms with this marvellous situation I was in.

I grew up in a typical working-class, close, happy family. Dad had a shit day job in a factory and Mom worked a shit night job in a factory. They were the best parents ever and my greatest sorrow is that my dad died at 47 and never saw me play (for Blackburn Rovers, not Birmingham City, as you’ll quickly

realise), especially when I consider my joy at watching my own son play.

My childhood, my life, was football. Every opportunity to kick a ball was eagerly accepted. Before school, morning break, lunch-time, afternoon break, after school, evening practice, Saturday morning match, a break to watch Blues in the afternoon, and two games on a Sunday. And guess what (and this goes to all the fitness gurus)? Nobody got injured and nobody got burnt out. Why? Because we were left alone to enjoy it, that's why. Not a coach in sight; just the teacher picking the teams. Of course, I wanted to be a footballer from the day I first walked and so did all the kids I grew up with. Is it still the case today? I doubt it. I think the PlayStation has prevailed.

But now I was truly living the dream. Pinch yourself, you are being paid to play football with Trevor Francis, Kenny Burns and Howard Kendall – OK, fair enough, they didn't really know I existed. We were training at the opposite end of the training ground, we weren't allowed into their changing room (except to clean it), we weren't allowed to talk to them and were only getting £16 per week, and there was this unpleasant atmosphere of intimidation that pervaded the place, but so what? I was technically a Birmingham City player and nobody could take that away from me.

I was one of 16 or so other apprentices – half of them my age, half a year older. Those second-years were greatly experienced in giving all the shit jobs to the new crop. It always surprised me that the majority of the lads came from all over the UK and few from Birmingham itself.

We reported to the training ground at 9am to start getting the kits and boots ready for the senior players who would arrive at 10am. We had a big drying room to hang the wet kit in overnight as, in those far-off days, the keepers wore woollen gloves and the players wore big woollen jumpers over their training kit on cold days. Sometimes, wet boots were left in there with newspaper inside them, and I used to love that smell – the

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smell of damp leather, damp wool and damp paper. I can still recall those smells even today.

After the pros' needs were met and if we had any energy left, then it was time for our own training. Training which can only be described as fantastic. Ken Oliver, the youth-team coach, took us every day – warm-up, crossing and shooting, and five-a-side. Perfection. They were halcyon days. We played matches on a Wednesday afternoon and on a Saturday morning. We had a mediocre team but Ken never bollocked us. He cared for us, looked after us and provided a tranquil nurturing environment well away from the angry 'others'. Thanks for everything, Ken. I will never forget your kindness.

In that wonderfully sheltered and protected environment, it was almost an age of innocence – free kit, free boots on demand, free cheese sandwiches in the afternoons and, most importantly, free entry to the home games (to do the jobs). We were young, fit and happy – baggy pants, platform shoes, kipper ties, Slade, Gary Glitter (I told you it was an age of innocence!), Babychams, Cherry Bs, Ford Anglias, Capris and Cortinas, *Steptoe and Son*, *Till Death us do Part*, *Parkinson* and *Crossroads*, Watergate and the Ali/Frazier trilogy, Black Power and troops out of Vietnam. A historic period worldwide and a historic period for me. The world was our proverbial oyster and we thought the sun was going to shine all day.

I vividly remember my second day at the club when Ray, the kit man, took me down to St Andrew's and unlocked the door to a hidden room. I gasped in amazement and my eyes lit up like a child's on Christmas morning. This room was filled from floor to ceiling with hundreds of blue Adidas football boot boxes emblazoned with those legendary names – Santiago, 2000, Penarol, World Cup. Every model in every size.

We are talking about the mid-'70s here and I, like the majority of kids my age, came from a working-class background. We couldn't afford boots like that. You wore what you could afford, often the ones your older brother wore last season. Talk about an

Aladdin's Cave – and that deep, rich, almost intoxicating smell of brand new leather.

“OK,” Ray said. “You are getting three pairs. What size are you?”

“Right, thanks, two eights and a nine please.”

“Yeah and how does that work?”

“Well, just in case my feet grow.”

“Here,” he said. “Here's three eights and tell your brother to fucking well buy his own.”

But that's what it was like in those days; most kids went to school in jumpers knitted by their moms. Can you imagine that happening today? In fact, do people even still knit today now that Primark has landed?

But, as I was to discover the next season, the real reason why we were so ridiculously happy was we had not tasted any real pressure – the pressure to win. In fact, the pressure to win at all costs, any cost, or otherwise feel the wrath of the manager, fans, other players or press.

Sadly, over the next couple of years, I would come to realise how the whole thing worked – we weren't really being paid to enjoy playing football at all; we were being paid to win games, and I came to realise, with dismay, just how diametrically opposed these two things could be.

But, at that time, in the 1975/76 season, life was achingly good. Magic moments like cleaning the away team dressing room after a match at St Andrew's when stars of the likes of Lou Macari, Malcolm Macdonald and Kevin Keegan spoke to me. Mind you, they were usually in a good mood as they were frequent winners – the Blues were crap that season (and the next and the next... in fact, pretty much every season until a couple of years ago). Often the away teams would allow us to start our cleaning jobs while they were still getting changed.

Oh, to be invited into that most sacred of places – the dressing room, the footballers' inner sanctum. Steam from the bath, the noise of the players and, above all, those marvellous smells

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– leather, Vicks, Deep Heat, shampoo and soap. I would go into so many dressing rooms over the next 35 years at every level of the game and in every role in the game, and one thing always remained reassuringly the same – those smells. But back then, rubbing shoulders with those legends (when I was mopping) was truly miraculous. Once Steve Kindon of Wolves was drying himself and asked me to pick up his flip-flops. As I bent down, he farted in my face and everybody laughed. What joy. What an honour to be included in one of Big Stevie’s jokes.

One thing I did notice at this time was I seemed to be progressing a lot better than the rest of the other lads of my age and the word from above was that I was destined for the first team at an early age. Wow, that actually scared me to death – all the piss-taking from the senior players and stick from the fans – which on reflection probably wasn’t the correct reaction from a supposedly aspiring young player.

A couple of things stick in my mind from those days. We were each given a bottle of full-fat milk after every training session. Some of the modern nutritionists might be surprised to discover not only did nobody drop dead, but we could still manage to run around for 90 minutes without obvious harm or hardship. Nothing tasted as good as ice-cold, full-fat milk taken from the crates at the side of the training pitch as soon as training was over.

Sometimes though (probably because of the milk), you did get injured and then you were well and truly fucked. Being injured was probably a bit like the classic analogy of war – 99 per cent boredom and one per cent terror. You hung around all day while the senior players got their treatment and then had short periods of intense discomfort as they stuck needles containing this new wonder drug Cortisone into you. I had a couple into my groin and it bloody hurt.

Did it cure me? Yes it did, because there was no fucking way I was going back for another. If you weren’t getting jabbed, you received a deep massage to the area, which was all the rage at the

time (in fact, it's probably been in and out of vogue four or five times since, which tells you a lot about sports medicine). Basically, it consisted of the physio sticking his thumbs, with all his body-weight, into your most tender area until you thought you would pass out with pain.

Before I got the injection, I had undergone this brutality on my poor adolescent groin. I had been trying to play through the injury for ages because I knew exactly what the treatment consisted of, but it hadn't worked and I was booked in for the torture.

One afternoon, late obviously because all the senior players had to get looked after first, I was given the dreaded friction massage. I screamed so loudly that Lionel, the groundsman, came rushing into the medical room brandishing his scythe, fearing, in his words, "somebody was getting fucking murdered!"

In a strange way, that extremely painful ordeal stood me in good stead for the future and taught me a valuable lesson for when I became a physio myself. That was to ensure all the players under my care, whether the most famous international or the humblest junior, were treated identically in terms of respect and consideration, and were treated in the most professional way possible by the best people available, notwithstanding their value to the club. Most importantly, I can categorically state, in all the years I was a physio at a professional club, I never urged any player to take a steroid injection, and I certainly didn't friction-massage the players until they were passing out with pain. (I've always been far too lazy for that.)

And so that magical first season slipped away in a blur, but a blur of pure joy. Unfortunately, virtually all the second-year apprentices were released and I remember looking at their tear-stained faces as they emerged from the coach's office one by one with the realisation they would never fulfil their dreams of becoming professional footballers. So near yet, at the same time, so far. It might sound cruel and heartless, but I don't even remember feeling too sorry for those lads – when you are young and insensitive it doesn't really register too much. It was nearly 20 years later

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– when I would be that man, breaking the same bad news to a different generation – that I was at last able to understand the pain of the occasion.

But now, to more important things – holidays. I had just spent ten months getting paid for playing for the Blues; now I was going to be paid for going on holiday for two months. Surely it couldn't get any better than this? Sadly, it couldn't.