

# The game, pure and simple

By Stig Inge Bjørnebye

There exists, apparently, a book of famous quotations by not-so-famous people, where I am accorded the following statement: "Some Norwegians appear to have a stronger sexual relationship to English football than to their wives." I cannot say with certainty when or in what context that statement was made, but I see no reason to deny it.



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When reflecting upon my relationship to English football, I instinctively look beyond my eleven years as a professional footballer, back to the time of my childhood when I began to understand the significance of the English game. More than anything, football deals with feelings, and perhaps this is the simple reason why some people do not understand how important it is: they simply do not have those feelings.

Sometimes – or even quite often – people approach me to talk about football. I can live happily with that, although it is not always my own favourite topic of conversation. The surprising instances are those where people express their deep *dislike* of football. That takes me aback. Do they expect me to stand up and run to the defence of this complex game, its worldwide position, the boyhood dreams it evokes, and the passion that it generates?

My first memories of English football are also the most cherished. I remember how as a six- or seven-year-old I developed my first fixed routine: to run to the mailbox on the Saturday morning to dig into whatever information was available (the *only* information, as it were) about the exotic events to take place in England at four o'clock. *Tippeskampen!* In the left corner of the sports section the game would be accounted for in the most parsimonious way. Later in my life, I have never seen papers print anything with the same brevity and precision: who are playing, where does the match take place, TV at four as usual. Full stop!

Those ceremonial Saturday mornings, alone, barely dressed, in my father's boots, eager and apprehensive, is the closest I get to the emotions of childhood. As a memory it is sacred, reflecting feelings which were so strong that I could not imagine that life would have anything more precious to offer. A few years later I was introduced to a pornographic magazine. There is no

doubt in my mind that such digressions faded away whenever Liverpool FC was announced on a Saturday.

Some people say that becoming a professional footballer is the most widespread boyhood dream there is. That may be true, except for all those who would first need a roof above their heads or enough food on the table. Sometimes the two dreams run in parallel, and sometimes their fulfilment is also interrelated.

The English Premier League has, in terms of dreaming, become a vision closer to Hollywood. Where the generation of my parents admired Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, today's young generation may have similar feelings for David Beckham or Ronaldo. But another transformation has also taken place, and this relates to the stuff that heroism is made of. Bogart and Bergman created dreams through performance and character, supported by hard work. The dreams about Premier League today are not equally virtuous and innocent. A cleavage has emerged between ambitions and the work required to achieve them.

I often ask young footballers what they want to do for a living. "Professional football", they say. "Why?" I ask. And something has changed when it comes to the responses that are given. More is about fame and material well-being, less about performance or the game itself. One may ask, relatedly, how a person like Paris Hilton can become a teenage idol. On the basis of what skills?

After having collected the paper on those Saturdays, I ran back and left it on the kitchen table to get out to play. I dribbled past all the fruit trees in our garden, I struck the ball at our garage (enough to make it fall down in the end), had a sandwich served through the kitchen window by my mum and continued playing till four. At that time, solemnity reigned in our home. The football game, herring and potatoes. Life was pure and simple. I knew nothing about the lives of the players, their wages, cars, houses, wives, lovers, parties, clothes, their latest linkage to a big club in Spain or hardly their haircuts on a windy day.

Has the combination of wealth and modern technology fooled both children and parents into skipping the basic needs as defined by Maslow? Is the need for nutrition, health, love and care no longer valid? Do we jump directly into the summit of his hierarchy, where self-fulfilment and consumption are all there is to it? I merely ask. And when self-fulfilment is obtained mainly through sitting in front of a computer screen we lose something important on the way. The running in the garden, the climbing of trees, and we even lose the important idea of *falling down* from a tree and perhaps even

breaking an arm. Today EU gravel reigns in the carefully arranged playground.

The most important driving force of my development as a footballer, and the one that took me to Liverpool FC, were the pastime activities I did on my own. The never-ending game in my own little world, the fine-tuning of spots to hit with the ball against the garage, and the sheer enjoyment of it all. I am eternally grateful that there was never any cyberspace to side-track my interests as a boy.

Meanwhile, the most essential narrative about David Beckham is one I have never seen referred in the papers, despite the extensive coverage that he gets. Icon, it is said. What is true is that Beckham caught the point in his own silent way. Yes, he was transported by helicopter to the training ground from time to time at Manchester United. Yes, he did pay Milan the odd visit to follow a fashion show rather than to play football. Yes, he is a handsome guy. But he is more than anything a great footballer. Friends and colleagues who have played with him confirm how he was always on time, prepared and focused. And when the training session was over and Sir Alex sent the players to the dressing room you would often find one man left on the pitch, practicing what he already did better than anyone in the world. David Beckham curled his free kicks and corner kicks, refining his skills. Then he went home, by helicopter.

He understood that it was required. He understood, literally speaking, that practice pays off.

"England, the birthplace of giants", Børge Lillelien famously quipped in his legendary commentary on the Norway-England game in 1981. To me, England will always be precisely that. It was where the game has unfolded, on the pitch but also in a much wider context, about the values it is seen to represent. I will also find my own heart in that game, in that country. I want to keep it like it was, pure and simple. Where footballers gave their teeth in every tackle, where a run-down pitch would not stop us passing the ball and where we had baked beans, scrambled eggs and toast before the games. I want to keep the smell of the dressing room – spiced sweets and detergent – just like I remember the smell of my first football boots, Adidas World Cup, which were placed on the bed-side table for two days before I dared besmirch them on the pitch. English football is purer than the way it is portrayed in newspapers and on TV. English football is not simply a dream. It is also a close and intense reality. To me it is the closest I get to myself as a child.

And it is my childhood that is the part of me that I least of all will allow to let go.