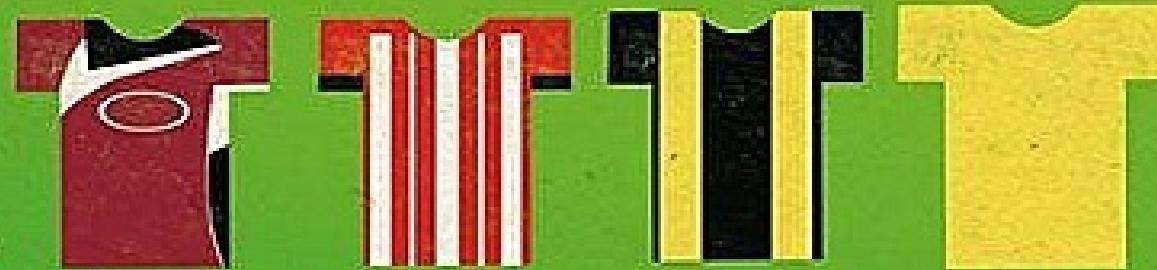


If you want to know exactly what happens in the real football world,

Chris Harcreaves is the man to tell you. Tim Rosenthal



WHERE'S YOUR CARAVAN?



MY LIFE ON FOOTBALL'S B-ROADS



CHRIS HARCREAVES

Chris Hargreaves

Where's Your Caravan?



Dedication

To my beautiful family, Fiona, Cameron, Isabella and Harriet. I am one lucky man.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Where's your caravan?](#)

[Early Days](#)

[1989/90](#)

[1990/91](#)

[1991/92](#)

[1992/93](#)

[1993/94](#)

[1994/95](#)

[1995/96](#)

[1996/97](#)

[1997/98](#)

[1998/99](#)

[1999/2000](#)

[2000/01](#)

[2001/02](#)

[2002/03](#)

[2003/04](#)

[2004/05](#)

[2005/06](#)

[2006/07](#)

[2007/08](#)

[2008/09](#)

[2009/10](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Where's your caravan?

Well, at the moment, metaphorically speaking (and yes, I know I have used a big word in the first sentence but don't judge me yet, I may still confirm your suspicions) my caravan is parked up in the middle of Devon. It has an electricity and water hook up, and is on a nice little pitch. I don't plan on moving it very soon but, if my career path is anything to go by, the chocks could be removed at any time and it could roll on out of town once more.

So why have I titled this book as I have? Well, for starters the nomadic lifestyle of a gypsy travelling around the country, stopping every so often to enjoy the local area and find some work, is very familiar to me. I wouldn't go so far as to say it also gives my trusty old horse a rest as well, as my wife Fiona may not appreciate being likened to an old nag! However, I have played for ten clubs and have moved house fifteen or so times, gradually migrating from north to south, so I can definitely empathise with the uncertain lifestyle of the traveller.

The second reason I have titled the book as I have is that for the vast majority of the seven hundred odd professional games I have played in (or been present at anyway!) the chorus of 'Where's your caravan?' has reverberated around the main stand of the many grounds I have been to (and many times those main stands have been a bit sparsely filled, so you can imagine the quality of the acoustics in these cavernous spaces, and the clarity of the words). OK, so it may have been prompted by a slightly late tackle by yours truly, or a shot into row Z, but it is more likely that my long hair has caused many a punter to assume that I am, in fact, a gypsy traveller. I got used to this form of harmless banter/abuse, and whenever I heard it sung I would usually point to the car park, which would give the away fans a good laugh, and get me off the hook for taking out their number nine.

I'm not the only player who gets this type of stick. While playing for Torquay United a few years ago, we had a pre-season game against Derby, and who should be in their team but a certain Mr Robbie Savage (I think of him as a poor Chris Hargreaves – poor in skill, but perhaps richer in other ways). I had to laugh when the inevitable chant of 'Where's your caravan?' was sung to him and, instead of pointing to the car park as I used to do, he shouted over to the main stand and said, 'It's in Monaco, lads.'

Old Robbie, if ever there was a man who could drive a yellow Ferrari it was him; I would say it matched his teeth, but after his latest Hollywood treatment this is no longer the case. (Give us the number please Robbie, I'm doing a bit of local TV down here in the south-west!)

Sadly, my career is now over, so that particular song will no longer be heard by me, which is a shame. What's more, I recently had my hair cut quite severely, which, to some extent, is also a shame, but you can only get away with hair like that for so long. You either have to be a footballer or be in a band, and although I think my shower singing voice has a major chance of world stardom I am as yet unsigned.

I first started trying to write this book a couple of years ago, and my mood at the time could have been described as, at best, reflective. A recent promotion captaining Torquay United – scoring and lifting the trophy at Wembley no less – changed my mood ever so slightly, to that of mild euphoria. I subsequently left Torquay United, rejoined Oxford United, got promoted, got injured and have now retired.

My mood has obviously changed again. I am no longer a professional footballer, and I have to tell you that it is bloody tough. Not tough in the bigger scheme of things, by that I mean the poor souls who have lived through wars, tsunamis, disease, poverty and famine, or the heroes that fight for their country or who work seventy hour weeks saving lives in hospitals and operating theatres up and down the land. *That* is tough. By 'tough', I mean that football is all I have ever known and I never really imagined the end coming, even though I knew it had to. I would say I am definitely now in the real world. I still don't like to say the word 'retired' (I must get used to saying 'ex-footballer' by the way) and part of me thinks I could still play; it's difficult to know how I feel at the moment, but I will try to tell you during the course of this book.

I suppose what I am trying to get at is that, in the space of a couple of years, my life has been amazing, disappointing, exciting, and many other things ending with the letters 'ING'. My writing style may therefore be a little bit varied, but they say everyone has a book in them, so I thought I would give it a go. Add to this, my life off the field, with my three lovely/demanding children and my lovely/very demanding wife, the many miles of motorway driving I have recently done to and from Devon, and the numerous nights spent in hotels, and you may start to see a picture of the life and mindset of a professional footballer.

I have mild to high OCD, I have got slight neuroses, and I am a practising, but reluctant, insomniac. I also seem to spend my life on the phone or computer trying to keep as many fingers in as many pies as possible, in order to bolster my chances of finding work, and money, after football. I am very lucky, or very

unlucky depending on your viewpoint, to have played for as long as I have, but it is now over. Retirement from football ended my staying in hotels, smuggling in my boxes of Shreddies and M&S dinners, and smuggling out the hotel shampoo, tea and coffee supplies. I didn't predict the ending and although I had tried to make a few plans for the future, towards the latter part of my career, right up until the end, football was totally and utterly my life.

I will intersperse my writing with little gems from my Devon clan, such as Hattie, our four-year-old firecracker who bosses us all about something chronic, tells me her friends have polar bears and lions for pets and has demanded ham, cheese and Toblerone for breakfast. She will break dance on request, loves being naked, and is 'marrying Will next door' who IS her boyfriend (yes, you guessed it, she takes after her mother!). The older two, Cameron and Isabella, consistently squabble over the TV control, are as competitive as gladiators, and are constantly planning which adventure 'we' will go on next. I don't want any of them to grow any older, and I regularly tell the girls to never leave me. In truth, I love those goof balls so much it does actually hurt sometimes.

I will also tell you where I am writing from at any particular time – I started this section while in a hotel reception listening to a supermarket-style loop tape and watching numerous afternoon business lunches escalate into all-day sessions – no wonder those bankers have made such bad decisions recently!

In short, I will try to re-live with you the last twenty or so seasons of my football career. This will include spells at ten clubs, and having seen a good twenty-five managers come and go. It will include tales of fans, players and chairmen alike, it will contain more house moves than a Kirstie Allsopp book, and it will chart some of the seven hundred and fifty or so games that I have played in. At times I have hated this job with a passion, usually after defeats I might add, but I hope this book will give you an insight into why I still love the game that I have been paid to play for over twenty years. I hope that the young professionals starting out can learn from it, I hope that old pros coming to an end of their careers can empathise with it, and I hope that the bloke down the pub can relate to it. It's about being a dad, a husband and, of course, a footballer.

For all you nature lovers out there, this is the story of Tarzan, Jane and our three little cheetahs, and I will even throw in a bald eagle and a mad dog.

Early Days

‘You can be Grimsby’s first million pound player, if you would just realise it’, and, ‘I’m going to be letting you go, Chris.’

Those two comments came from two different managers within the space of four seasons: from a hot-tempered Alan Buckley at Grimsby Town, and a meek and mild Terry Dolan at Hull City. If you ask me, that was, and is, football in a nutshell. The fine line between success and failure, the bizarre twists of fate, and the never ending desire to prove yourself, are what gives this beautiful game its attraction.

Add to that the great wins, frustrating draws, and infuriating losses, as well as the fair few terrible refereeing decisions, and you have all the ingredients for a story of a footballer’s life.

Football was my life from an early age. I played it, watched it, dreamed it, ate it, and slept it. I would kick a ball around for hours on end at the park, do hundreds of kick-ups in the back garden when I got home, and I would polish my boots to a military standard before placing them carefully at the end of my bed. When asked what I wanted to do when I grew up, my answer was unflinchingly sure: ‘I’m going to play football.’

It’s funny really, as my early childhood was certainly not filled with football. My dad didn’t play the game, his passion was with motorbikes – racing, and then later, repairing and selling them in his shop, Martin Hargreaves Motorcycles. He was one of the first to sell Harley Davidsons in the eighties, but the combination of an unforeseen recession and the then need for cheap, local transport meant that he had to switch to selling a more realistic vehicle for the many working on the Humber bank: scooters. Honda 50s and Puch Maxis would be the future.

After a short spell living in a little village called Holton-le-Clay, my parents bought their first shop, in Cleethorpes (if you don’t know where that is, it is next to Grimsby, if you don’t know where Grimsby is, it is near Hull, and if you don’t know where Hull is, just settle for it being up north somewhere). We lived in a flat above the shop. On that same block there was a fish and chip shop, a butcher’s, a Chinese takeaway (housing my first girlfriend, Suzie Wong), and the best sweetshop in town (visited daily, and by around one thousand local kids, to get our ten pence mixes). It was an old-school sweetshop, with rows and rows of

jars, all full to the brim with the most colourful-looking treats you could imagine. It was the nearest thing to Willy Wonka's that I could imagine and, back then, you could easily get ten flying saucers, a couple of refreshers, some sherbet, and a couple of gob stoppers for only ten pence. Looking back now, I remember that there was also a PRIVATE shop on the same row, and that the sweet shop on the row was, in fact, called David Willy's – absolutely no connection whatsoever – but all the same, a very bizarre combination.

Add to that a cinema, a one-minute walk away, showing Saturday morning matinees of Flash Gordon and the Famous Five, a railway at the end of the street where we would watch our ten pence pieces get flattened by approaching trains (not to be recommended, please do not try this at home), a great park round the corner, and a beach ten minutes away. In short, it was a child's dream. We even had a model car and train shop opposite, where I would stare through the window and dream of my next Christmas present – usually a thousand piece, degree level, model warplane, or a Scalextric deluxe rally set. Both products always let you down, but they were still coveted by any self-respecting child.

You could leave the house in the morning and have a mini adventure every day. Nowadays, we are so cautious with our own children that some childhoods are as good as lost, spent indoors playing on consoles and staring at screens. However, with constant stories of abuse and abduction in the media, I'm not exactly telling my own children to nip off to the park.

The place had a real community feel. We had a street party near my school on Elliston Street for the Silver Jubilee. We were given jelly, ice cream, and the obligatory huge coin. Even when the annual floods brought the streets and community to a standstill, it would still amuse the kids no end; we would do ridiculous things, such as play in dinghies in the front room, while the parents would be muttering, 'It's much worse than last year' over numerous cups of tea.

With my parents working every hour God sent trying to keep the business going, my brother and I would inevitably get into a few scrapes. Well, to be honest, my brother Mark was pretty angelic (he has since made up for it), whereas my love of all things naughty seemed to know no bounds. I had an unhealthy obsession with lighting small fires around the apartment. (I would now call that 'chemistry experiments'.) I climbed out of windows for no apparent reason. (I would now call that 'mountaineering'.) I also had a habit of taking money from the till to keep our local gang supplied with crisps, chocolate, and the immortal Panini stickers. (I would definitely call that 'borrowing'.) I even lost my poor brother's new bike on Christmas Day – that was an accident though, as I had completely forgotten to bring it back from the park, though Mark still cites that incident as another case of early psychological torment.

On the whole it was just a bit of harmless fun, and, on the flip side, my sorry letters, posted to my parents under doors after these ‘small’ misdemeanours, really were legendary – ‘No one loves me, but I am still sorry!’

I ended up sliding these apologies under doors to my parents at a pretty alarming rate – a list of my childhood misdemeanours would be massive. A few other examples include the occasion when I lit a fire in the back garden, and threw an aerosol onto it – it flew over the house and onto next-door’s car. One time, I put a lit fire-work into a pocket of my new parka coat; this resulted in me wearing a new coat with one front pocket burnt off. Not all my transgressions involved fire – once I spent a whole day hid up a willow tree, scaring people who came near.

Our back garden was always a hive of activity, it usually being full of bikes, with a workshop at the end of it with even more bikes in it. My dad would spend hours mending his various sidecars, and we would sit in them and pretend to be winning the Grand Prix. My dad was a really good sidecar rider and I spent most weekends in the back of an old orange Commer van going to the many race circuits round the country with my parents and brother.

I ought to clarify what I mean by ‘sidecar’. I mean a low down, twin-passenger racing machine, not as some of you were maybe thinking – a military type bike with a bath welded to it. These racing machines were seriously quick, and, to me, seriously cool. My heroes back then were Jock Taylor and his passenger, Benga Johansson. Jock Taylor was a brilliant rider, and together they had won the sidecar world title and the TT. I was ten when the unthinkable happened – Jock Taylor lost control on a slippery circuit at Imatra during the 1982 Finnish Grand Prix, and crashed fatally. I can always remember seeing that famous number three Yamaha and wanting to be a rider, but the dangers involved back then were huge. Unlike today’s racing, where the run off areas are vast, in both car and bike racing, back then in some cases there were only a few feet, and a few tyres, separating the riders and a fair chunk of concrete, and with speeds of one hundred and seventy miles an hour, it often ended in tragedy. It still does now at the TT (receiving a medal as big as a frying pan, and on a stove, for taking part, should be compulsory for all riders), and one of the major stars of racing back then, Barry Sheene, refused to race there, such was the danger – although smoking, drinking, and partying were also pretty dangerous, and didn’t seem to faze him, but Barry wouldn’t have been Barry without a splash of Brut and a night on the tiles.

(I do realise my mind can spin off at a tangent and I have to apologise about this, but I find it hard to rein it all in. Perhaps my next book can be about racing superstars and war veterans – war is another subject I have a tendency to talk

about. Anyway, back to the story!)

Meeting the superstars of the day, such as Barry Sheene and Kenny Roberts at Silverstone and Donington Park, was brilliant. At the meetings, Mark and I would tear around on our own little bikes, while Mum and Dad sold visors, spark plugs, and a whole menagerie of things to do with bikes, on their stall. I may have torn around a bit much on one occasion, as a slight misjudgement of speed and braking distance left me with a nasty scar and broken leg at a local circuit called Cadwell Park. Strangely enough, that same fall and subsequent injury led me to change the foot I used to kick the ball with, going from right to left. I hear you all say, 'You should use both feet', as I do now to my son!

Another fall, and a heavily stitched up lip this time, and my parents decided that football would be a safer option. Bizarrely enough, when I was rushed to hospital that time, who should I see on arrival but my mum with my granddad, Sidney. He was a big fella with a big personality, and he was in there to have what Victoria Beckham knows all about, his bunions lanced, sliced, or put back into some sort of shape. I was rushed through to the waiting room where my mum and my granddad were sitting, and when my mum saw me, the towel full of blood, and the sliced lip, she certainly got a shock. I was fine though, and after a few uncomfortable minutes with a needle and thread my lip was as good as new – only a small to medium sized scar on my lip for life, but nothing too serious. I was then lovingly given bag after bag of Midget Gems for the next couple of months. My dad, however, was in the dog house; he had been on childcare duties. I have to be honest though, it was entirely my fault; in my wisdom I had decided to take the brakes off my bike. Footballers eh!

I still loved bikes, and I did take part in quite a few races, but a combination of being beaten in a race by a good old tough northern girl – my bike was thrown to the floor in disgust – and my parents fear for my safety meant that football would definitely become the new passion of my life. I cannot quite remember when I was actually given a ball by my parents, or when I caught the 'footy' bug, but a big part of me would have loved to have carried on with the bikes. With football, there are ten other players in a team, a manager, coaches, and many other influencing factors that affect your performance, whereas with racing, barring a bike failure, you are on your own. No excuses, no interference, and I like that idea. I have always been extremely hard on myself throughout my career, but sometimes in this job events are out of your control, and it has taken me a long, long time to realise that. As regards the potential injuries and stitches involved, I may have wished I had persevered with the bikes!

While my parents were very busy with their shop, we did go on a couple of epic holidays when we were young – and I'm not just talking about the trip once

every five years to Devon. This trip took seventeen hours, included one hundred and fifty games of eye spy, took in fourteen toilet stops, and heard three hundred and one childish shouts of, ‘Are we there yet?’

My children think I’m joking (if they ever start to moan about being bored on long journeys) when I say we had no iPods, DSs, PSPs, DVDs, or even RAC! They then think I am trying to make them laugh when I tell them there was no air con either. These trips would end either with me burying my brother’s ball in the sand and losing it, or with the coastguard being scrambled as I headed for France on a dinghy.

Our two trips abroad were in an entirely different league though.

A camping trip to the South of France conjures up a great image of excitement and adventure for a ten-year-old boy, but little did I know that the trip would end up providing enough adventure for Indiana Jones and all his cronies, never mind for a young lad from Cleethorpes. When our parents decided that we were taking the tranny van (Transit van) to France with some friends of ours, Tina, Dave and their children David and Jane, my brother and I were incredibly excited. Back then, it was a massive deal to be going abroad anywhere.

Tina and Dave were close friends of my parents, and my brother Mark and I got on really well with their children, so it was decided that the two families would jump on board the ‘Cleethorpes express’ – a ten-year-old double wheel base Transit van, modified for two families – and drive to France.

I say ‘modified’ quite lightly, as although my dad did do some vital welding in the van the night we actually left – he welded a swivel chair into it so that one of the mums could check on all the children at any one time and no doubt produce endless supplies of food and drink, and, of course, sick bags – the only other modification really came in the form of the layout of the van.

Instead of the usual cavernous space at the back of the van, my dad and Dave put all the supplies and suitcases needed in first, and then they laid a couple of huge double mattresses on top of each other, and on top of all the cases and supplies. The result was a pretty awesome den for the four kids in the back, but this was definitely in the days before health and safety regulations were given top priority. All four of us were sliding about on those mattresses like it was a big game of Twister on a slippery hill. It was brilliant. We could just about see out of the back window (there was a one foot gap between us and the roof) which was great, and although you may think that it could have been quite dangerous climbing the Pyrenees in a Transit van with four kids sliding about in the back, I think my dad had welded the back doors shut as well, so there would be no re-enactment of the Italian job.

We eventually got there safe and sound, and set up base at Camp

Erromardie, in Saint Jean de Luz. We did lots of swimming and playing, and ate a hell of a lot of French bread and cheese. The only variation in our diet was some French bread and jam for dessert. Our day trips took us to some brilliant spots for snorkelling and swimming, although my parents say they still have nightmares now about the distance I would swim out to. On one occasion apparently there was a near full-on coastguard scramble, as a crowd of people that had now gathered on the beach were watching me, worried, as I merrily made my way out towards the headland of one particular bay. I was totally oblivious to it, but you know what it's like when you have the old flippers and snorkel on, and are looking at the scenery and creatures below.

Very recently, on a trip to a lovely little place called Beer, in Devon, my parents showed me the distance I had snorkelled out to on our French adventure. I honestly thought they were joking, as the point they were talking of was about half a mile out – they were adamant that it was at least that distance. I can now see their concern, and God knows what Fiona would think if she saw our son Cameron do something like that now. I honestly think we would be bringing her round with smelling salts (before she could manage to even put down her skinny decaf latte with no chocolate sprinkles, but accompanying slice of Victoria sponge).

Back to my French trip, where worse was to follow, as the parents then decided that it would be a good idea to take us on a day trip to San Sebastián in Spain, home of ... yes, that's right, the notorious Spanish terrorist organisation, Eta. And yes, you've guessed it – we walked right into the middle of some sort of siege. You would think at this point that I am joking, but no, we happened to be on a train that was held up at gunpoint by terrorists. People furiously ran down the track and down the corridors of the panicked train. The mums were having heart attacks, the dads were regretting ever mentioning a trip to San Sebastián, and we were all wedged under seats with our French bread sandwiches, shouting, 'Leave us alone.'

It was a brilliant day out, and to top it all we were then given the choice by the officials, who, to be fair, had somehow managed to ward off a major incident, of walking in relative safety down the track for the remaining ten miles to France, or taking the more dangerous option of trying to locate our van (it would mean hanging around the notoriously bad area till we found it, and the official presence had not deterred the terrorists). As the parents pondered over this delightful decision, I then decided to finish them all off by leaning over the station platform, only to be dragged back in the nick of time by some bloke as a train thundered through the station at full pelt.

I was told off for constantly putting us all on edge with my risky stunts, and

felt slightly aggrieved – it wasn’t as if I’d been the one who’d taken four children to the home of blood-thirsty killers! The dads finally decided, ‘We think we can make it back to the Transit.’

Despite (or, perhaps, because of) the drama, I loved that trip, and it provided the most vivid and brilliant memories out of any holiday I have ever had.

The only other trip abroad we went on was to, of all places, Africa, and, specifically, to the Gambia. We went when Mark and I were still very young, and I can only remember a few things about it. One was that, for some unknown reason, sleeping in a mosquito net scared me half to death, and the other was that there was an armed guard, not just on the complex, but also at each apartment block. It was an educational trip. In a place that was then still very, very primitive and poor, we did see a side of life that had never even occurred to us as existing, a life of extreme poverty and struggle.

The only time I can actually remember laughing on that trip was when Mark became very scared by a snake, one that turned out to be a piece of old rope. But hey! – who can blame him for being a bit sensitive when there was a guy outside your door holding a Uzi. Of course, during this our parents were merrily eating and drinking away, seemingly oblivious. It’s enough to give anyone the frights.

That was sum total of our trips abroad and for that I am grateful, especially after those two offerings. I will echo the words my dad uses now when I quiz him about any future travel plans, ‘Son, there is everything I need in Cleethorpes.’

Like most professional footballers in their youth, I was the best player at school – modesty and honesty are a heady mix. I also scored bucket loads of goals for the local team, Cleethorpes Borough FC (Cleethorpes). It would infuriate the opposing teams and their players (and especially the parents of those players) who always thought that it was ‘their’ year, only for me to score the winner in a cup final or title decider. The manager of my local club was Ernie Dade, and he was exactly what a local league manager should be like; he made you feel like you were invincible, he was fair, and he had everyone’s utmost respect. One of the lad’s mums, Sue Logan (mum of Jamie), always promised me a Mars bar after a game if I had scored. Poor old Sue got through a lot of Mars bars, as I loved chocolate and I loved scoring goals. More often than not, I ended up top scorer at the end of each season. I dread to think how many Mars bars Sue got through – although doing some quick and easy arithmetic it was around fifty a season. (Sue, I will pay you back for all that chocolate!)

At that age, my footballing dream was to play for England, earn five hundred pounds a week, and buy a BMW. I stopped dreaming of the first one at around thirty (I have always been hugely optimistic!) and the second two didn’t

seem as good as I had imagined, probably because the vast majority of players earned twenty times more money than me when I was on five hundred quid a week, and the BMW was leased.

During those early footballing years my will to win, and to play well, was not always appreciated. My secondary school, Lindsey, never really grasped the idea that somebody could want something that badly. In one particular game I went in for a challenge (hard but fair, as they say), won the ball, and ran off towards the opposing goal. The lad I tackled was rolling around as if he had been shot, and I was soon stopped by the ref who immediately motioned for our teacher to come on to the pitch.

They had a quick confab, and I was escorted off the pitch for the rest of the game. It was ridiculous, especially considering that the lad who had been mimicking the amputated leg was now up and smiling and talking to his teammates about his new part in the school drama class. I was even more amazed when the school decided, in their wisdom, that I wouldn't be allowed to attend the forthcoming rounds of England trials, killing off my chances of appearing as a schoolboy international in one fell swoop. There had been no malice meant in my tackle, but for some reason this incident had escalated into a full blown inquiry. The school also phoned Everton, for whom I had recently signed schoolboy forms, to say that I had been in a spot of bother on the football field.

Even my school reports for sport would say things like 'Christian has undoubted ability but must curb his enthusiasm and realise that it is the taking part that is important. He must also pass the ball.' I will never understand how the school couldn't get their heads round my philosophy – I wanted to win and be the best. This is the big difference between football at school level and when you play it for a living – you soon find out that everybody feels as you do at a professional club.

My first link to a proper club was as a schoolboy player at Grimsby Town. Training involved some very long, and dark, lung-busting nights running from Grimsby Town's ground, Blundell Park, to the beach and back. I say 'dark', as when an old mate of mine, Nic Gallagher, fell behind one night, we just thought he was feeling the pace. It wasn't until he stumbled back thirty minutes later that everyone realised what had happened. Nick had accidentally run into one of the old mounting poles for Cleethorpes' ailing and redundant beach rollercoaster, resulting in a huge gash to the mouth and the loss of three front teeth. Imagine the health and safety regulations now – the club would have been sued as soon as you could say 'Cleethorpes rock'.

Seeing how some modern day academies work, what with their state-of-the-

artificial pitches, video analysis, core and balance sessions, and their attention to every detail, it amazes me how we managed back then. Most of the academies try to follow the newfound rule that if a young boy gets in ten thousand hours of football between the ages of, say, nine and seventeen, then he has a major chance of becoming a professional footballer. If I use Exeter City as an example, where I coach, and where my son plays, they train for seven and a half hours a week and have a game on a Saturday. Cameron is only twelve, and I do worry sometimes that he plays too much football, but I suppose this new thinking has replaced the ‘ball and a wall’ that was our academy when we were younger.

We had moved to a lovely new house in Bradford Avenue, and this is where my skills were honed, much to the distraction of my mum, dad, and neighbours. I would trot down the road like a thoroughbred, with the metal studs on my boots noisily making their way to the local park around the corner. I would also consistently bang the ball against the small wall at the back of our house, hour upon hour, until either it was tea time or it was dark, usually the latter. The worst offence was in the garden though, because as well as destroying most of the flowers and bushes that had once made this oasis the envy of all of our neighbours, I decided that the edges of the grass needed trimming. Over the course of a few months, and after many thousands of kick-ups, I managed to reduce the playing surface by about three quarters. My edging technique single-handedly ruined that garden, and also made sure that all my future kick-ups would be done at the local park.

Having to have a designated ‘garden football area’ has definitely carried on with me through to adulthood. When Fiona and I bought our house off-plan in Northampton, I never once stepped inside during the building process. While Fiona was knee deep in swatches, worktop colours, and dream walls, all I was interested in was the garden, and in particular how much square footage I could eke out of the space, for a football area for me and Cam. I am ashamed to admit that I insisted on having it laser levelled so that the ball would roll true, and that I allowed Fiona to have only a couple of pot plants on the patio.

Strangely enough I ended up at Everton after Mike Lyons, who was then the Grimsby Town manager, had got the sack. He had been an Everton favourite in his playing days, and had signed for Grimsby Town later on in his career, becoming the manager soon after. Things hadn’t worked out for him as manager of the club, and he returned to Everton in a coaching or scouting capacity. Shortly after his dismissal from Grimsby Town, he phoned me. I was a young player who hadn’t even previously spoken to him, I didn’t even think he knew my name, but phone me he did, saying, ‘I want you at Everton son, I think you have got a real chance.’

I was so excited. Everton were a huge club and for me to have the chance to play for them was amazing. I had actually dreamt of playing for Liverpool as a young boy; they were the team I supported, but hey, at least now I could still score in front of the Kop!

The news of my move to Everton was even in the *Grimsby Evening Telegraph*, and at fourteen years of age that, to me, was a huge deal – it still is now! (By the way lads, please be kind with the book review.)

Coincidentally, Everton reserves were soon to play Grimsby reserves in a Pontins League fixture. After the game, I jumped on to the Everton team coach and headed back to Liverpool with the rest of the squad. I was young, impressionable, and nervous, and I will always remember that lonely journey back. Adrian Heath, who was an experienced striker, but who was also obviously very pissed off that he had had to travel to Grimsby to play in the ‘stiffs’ (a common name in football circles for the reserve team), called me over. With his feet up on a chair, he said, ‘Get me a coffee. What do you think you’re on the coach for?’

I took an immediate dislike to him and, knowing what I know now, should have just said, ‘Get your own coffee, short arse!’ but I had to respect the fact that he was a high profile player, and I was just a schoolboy. Also, being abandoned by the side of the road on the M62 didn’t really appeal to me at the time. I haven’t met him since, but apparently Adrian Heath is a decent fella, so maybe he WAS almighty pissed off at having to travel to Grimsby, but for me back then, it was well and truly a case of ‘welcome to professional football’.

I spent my school holidays and a lot of weekends at Everton, and in that time I had to stay in quite a few different homes: some good, and some bad. My time with the Spellman family was the most memorable and enjoyable, great local banter, homely food, and a top friend in ‘Spelly’ – another young lad on schoolboy forms at Everton.

It was extremely daunting to be at such a big club and to be away from my family at the same time, but mixing with footballing icons was a great experience. Neville Southall was a decent fella, as was Gordon Banks, the goalkeeping coach, and many of their top players at the time, such as Paul Bracewell, Kevin Sheedy, and Trevor Steven, were all top people and bubbly characters, but one person from that era is far from being on my Christmas list: Pat van den Hauwe.

What a nasty piece of work that bloke was: arrogant, rude, obnoxious, and selfish, and that’s before he had even opened his mouth. He was a decent left-back in his day though, with a celebrity lifestyle off the pitch that sometimes got him into hot, if not boiling, water. I was about fifteen years of age and had

sneaked into one of Liverpool's nightclubs, Coconut Grove, with some of the other schoolboys – slightly naughty, but it was only a bit of adolescent fun, and as the average age in there was only about sixteen anyway, it wasn't a major problem. I remember walking towards some of the lads when van den Hauwe, already having had plenty of pop, shouted, 'Who the fuck's he? He's not with us!'

He looked towards me and said, 'What are you looking at? You're not with us.'

The rest of the lads reassured him that I was at 'his' club, but I was amazed at how much of a tosser someone in his position could be. I wasn't the only one. Later that night, just before we were set to leave, I saw him in the toilet being abused and manhandled by a couple of thick-set Liverpudlian lads. They obviously wanted a 'little chat' with Mr van den Hauwe, and I couldn't help smiling as Pat stumbled into the toilet trough muttering something under his breath. He was the first 'big time' footballer I had come across, but he was certainly not the last. I haven't met Pat since those days, and he may well be a decent fella too, but as yet I have had no one step up to vouch for him!

Apart from buying my first record, Yazz – 'The Only Way Is Up', I don't look back too fondly on those days – to be honest, buying that record is not exactly a highlight is it? Yes, it was vinyl back then, and yes, I am going to say it, those were the days!

I do remember being told off for coming back to the digs 'too early' one night, which must have been a first – I'm not sure they realised that hanging about on the streets wasn't the safest option in Liverpool at the time. Accidentally spraying my dad and the whole inside of the car with my strawberry milkshake when he arrived to pick me up, this after a three hour drive and a ten hour day, was also something I remember with great fondness. His glare could have killed a small animal at twenty paces.

I did miss home and playing for my local team, and I honestly didn't feel like Everton was the club for me. When it came to the decisions about apprenticeships, I had already made my mind up, I didn't want to sign. I hadn't really settled in Liverpool and the knowledge that no apprentice had made it into the first team for ten years hardly filled any of the lads with confidence. The youth set-up was pretty crude, with old-school coaches and old-school attitudes, and I think, in the end, it was a mutual agreement that staying on wasn't the best option for me. Let's not beat about the bush though, one thing is for sure, I should have stayed and given it a right good go, as trying to get back into a top flight club would go on to prove very difficult during my career. I could have easily taken three or four more years of pain in an effort to play in at least one

Premier League game. I know some players that have dined out for years on the fact that they have appeared in the Premiership for thirty-five minutes, but, credit where it is due, it's thirty-five minutes more than I have.

Before my spell at Everton, I had nearly signed schoolboy forms for both Sheffield United and Leeds United, who had shown huge interest in me at the time. Together with my dad and his friend, Guy Allen, who was a respected football figure in the town, we were invited to both clubs and shown around their stadiums. The coaches told us that I was the type of player that they really wanted, and that they had big hopes for me. I think I had actually been pretty close to signing for Leeds, until Everton stepped in with their offer. Everton were the league and cup champions at the time, so it had been an easy choice to make in the end.

But it hadn't worked out for me, and such was my dad's frustration and annoyance at the way things had panned out at Everton that he blankly refused an approach from Man United shortly afterwards. I still rib him about that phone call today, although I understand why he felt the way he did. Still, seeing how those young players at Man United have been nurtured, and how they have developed, they didn't do a bad job did they?

I was 'saved' from my A-levels by Grimsby Town, my hometown club, approaching me and offering to take me back on an apprenticeship. I quickly abandoned my compass, pen and pencil, and joined their ranks. Not telling my then girlfriend (now wife), friends, or any of the teachers at the school that I was leaving for pastures new was perhaps, on reflection, a trifle rash, but I knew what I wanted to do, and that was to play football for a living. I'm sure that if you had offered even the geekiest of students at the sixth form I was attending the chance to play football and earn some decent money, they would have done the same – they may well have finished their game of Dungeons and Dragons first (the Warhammer of the day), but I'm sure they too would have gone. No doubt those same lads are now lawyers, accountants, and architects, who go snowboarding three times a year, and have corporate boxes at Man United – but let's not dwell on that.

It would be a bit naïve to think that staying on to do my A-levels was a possibility after Grimsby Town's offer, it wasn't, but I do hugely regret abandoning all forms of further education. It is always hard to get back into education, especially after a long break. Several years later, and shortly after I had signed for Hull City, I did try to complete an A-level in psychology. I lasted a few months, but the course being on a Tuesday night didn't really help, and when the tutor announced he was stepping down because he was suffering from a particularly bad case of paranoid schizophrenia, I went off the idea.

After a short spell on a YTS, in fact very short, at three months, it was time for business. I was soon signed on professional forms by Grimsby Town's manager Alan Buckley, and his assistant Arthur Mann, and, at seventeen years of age, I was soon reporting for my first pre-season training for the 89/90 season. I was incredibly excited to be at the club, and couldn't wait for the season to start.

At the moment, as I prepare to dig deep and remember my first season in professional football, I am sat 'home alone' in Devon. My wife and children are 'up north' – although everywhere is up north compared to Devon – they are visiting both sets of grandparents on the east coast. The time is 2.50pm and I am digging through dusty old programmes to try to jog my memory concerning dates and games played. You may wonder why 2.50pm is particularly relevant. Well, I am sat at home and am not in a changing room putting my shin pads on, listening to a few last minute instructions (which is always a tough ask, as, at the best of times, it sounds like a nightclub in most changing rooms), and waiting for the bell to sound.

The fact is I am a bit crooked at the moment, slight tears to both my groin and my knee cartilage mean that I am out of action for a few weeks at least. This, and the fact that the lads are playing in Manchester, means that it is a weekend off for yours truly.

Everything had been going so well since I arrived back at my former club Oxford United, apart from my first game back that is, a dramatic last minute loss while leading, at fellow title chasers, Luton Town.

In his wisdom that night, the referee, and his good friend the much maligned fourth official, added on seven minutes of injury time. Yes, you heard right, SEVEN minutes. I think he added time for both teams' warm-ups before the game, never mind the injuries sustained during it. As you can imagine, with the ten thousand home fans seeing the number seven raised aloft on the minutes board for the first time in living memory, they started cheering, and inevitably, in the seventh minute of said injury time, one of our lads lost his man at a corner, and they equalised. Straightaway I asked the referee how long there was to go – after twenty two years in this game I sort of have a sixth sense for doom – to which he replied with surprising cheer, 'I'm adding another minute on for "their" celebrations', to which I replied, with as much sarcasm as was possible for a slightly tired and disgruntled thirty eight year old, 'Why don't you add

another minute on for good luck, you know you want to and I tell you what, why don't you come up for their next corner and head the bloody thing in yourself?’

I escaped the booking, but I didn't escape the second 'extra' minute, or the corner that he gave in the last seconds of the last minute of the added time.

Directly from the corner, with what proved to be the last kick of the game, our keeper Ryan Clarke misjudged the flight of the ball, and we watched on as it sailed into the top corner of the net. The place erupted and I watched in disbelief as their players celebrated as if they had won the World Cup and Champions League, all in one go. I half expected the ref to take his shirt off and start crowd surfing, and I could have sworn I saw him smiling at one point. It was my first game back as captain, and to say I felt robbed is the understatement of the year. At the final whistle, and without the benefit of a sword to fall on, I grabbed the ball and kicked it high into the back row. I lost it in the changing room afterwards, kicking anything that moved, and having a go at some of the lads, no doubt making a great first impression in my first game back at the club.

To make matters worse I had travelled in with Ryan Clarke that night. All 'Clarky' kept saying during that return journey was, 'Fuck me, Chris, how did I let that corner go in?'

I couldn't have agreed more, but Ryan is a really nice lad so I just kept quiet and offered my support (obviously while thinking to myself, 'Fuck me, Clarky, how DID you let that corner go in?').

To prolong the agony, or to give that crushing defeat a bit of humour, whichever way you want to look at it, the following day the local newspaper reporter, Jon Murray, approached me half laughing and said, 'Should I put the claim into the club or give it to you direct?'

He continued, as I was none the wiser, 'That ball you volleyed into the crowd the other night rebounded off the roof of the stand, and smashed into my laptop.'

Come on now, what are the chances of that? You can imagine the write up I got the next day.

The following few games went well, with three consecutive wins, but it was in the final ten minutes of that last win that my season changed. I stretched for a ball and felt something go in my groin. I tried to play the next few games, having injections to help me do so, but it was no good, I was going, or should I say limping, through the motions. I did return for another top of the table clash against Stevenage, a sort of title decider, but I tore my cartilage with only twenty seconds of the game gone. It was a bad neck-high challenge by our number five (me), but I wanted my opposing midfielder to know I was there. He got the message, but after forty-five minutes so did I, I couldn't play on with cartilage damage for much longer, and I ended up hobbling off early in the second half.

I now have three weeks to get ready for what will probably be my sixth end of season play-offs in the last seven seasons, my seventh in all, and another very short summer. Our lead at the top of the table has vanished, and it is now more play-off uncertainty. My body seems to be rebelling against any form of recovery, but I really hope that the miscellany of treatments I am having work. A combination of ice, rehab, and not driving for three hours a day should help.

So, I am sat down beginning to type away; it is now 3.20pm, and I haven't even turned on Sky Sports News to check the results; it is just too stressful. Who would be a fan eh? I will have a look at around 4.45 though – or more likely 4.52pm when the referee will have definitely blown his whistle! I will also check the results of the other nine teams that I have played for at the same time, as I do every week.

I find that to be able to write, especially for a long article, or in this case a book, the house has to be tidy ('that's the OCD,' I hear you say) and it has to be quiet, both of which are a rarity with three children around. I have been writing a daily blog for the local paper for the past couple of years, but having my three-year-old daughter on my knee, trying to help the other two with homework (Cameron's is testing for me at the best of times, never mind for him), and rushing to free up the laptop for my wife, just adds to the madness.

I do miss my children (and wife, of course!) when I'm away, or in this case when they are, and this week has been no exception. Had we all been together it would have been the normal pilgrimage to the beach with surfboards and a picnic, as the sun has been beating down in Devon this week. The first day or so without the gang was bearable, a few hours of decorating (I got paint everywhere), mending a broken ornament (I glued my fingers together), and attempting some gardening (using a lawnmower that has lost a wheel is plain stupid) kept me busy, but after that it was all downhill. I started to do jobs that just immediately put me in a bad mood, but that us blokes all around the country seem to do nonetheless. I tried to tidy the garage yesterday, but ended up coming out two hours later having achieved absolutely nothing; I swore around seventy times, trapped my finger twice, and left having gained no extra space at all. After playing at ten clubs during my career, I still have boxes marked 'kitchen' that have yet to even see a kitchen. Worryingly, there is also a box with 'children's pets' written on it. I dare not even open it!

Then last night, after scrolling down the enormous checklist I had been 'kindly' left with, I attempted to sort the loft out. I cut my hand on an old picture and sustained some sort of allergic reaction to the three tonnes of foam insulation up there. And today, why I don't know, I joined the other crazy lot and went to the dump, or should I say 'recycle' centre. It was crammed with people

driving in with either just one plank of wood to throw away, or a small tree, large sofa, and four mattresses, all rammed into the back of a Ford Fiesta. How anything gets recycled lord only knows, as whenever you ask one of the lads where to put anything they shout, ‘Shove it on the pile, pal’ – TVs, batteries, duvets, asbestos, cyanide go on ‘throw it on, mate.’

The only thing I have actually achieved over the last week is to regularly hammer the gym, and my body with it. This is something you do when you are out of action and injured; it becomes an absolute obsession to get fit and every day seems like a week. It is as if you can’t function in your normal life until your body is one hundred per cent right, and you are back playing. You also feel like a leper in and around the club. Most managers’ philosophy on injured players is the same, ‘you can’t help me at the moment, so make yourself scarce’. If the team is winning you are even more leper-like, whereas if the team is on a losing streak your every movement and strike of a ball is monitored, until you are back fit and able to help the team.

I’ve had to have a quick look at Sky Sports News, and it’s 0–0 so far.

(Before I go back into my first season of football again, I feel the need to interject and officially apologise for the use of any offensive language. I will only use it when it is very, very necessary.)

1989/90

Looking back to 1989 is not so easy – the old memory is not what it used to be and my pyramid filing system of programmes and no DVD footage (it was all video back then!) doesn't help matters. However, I have just found an old newspaper cutting with the headline 'Chris on the mark', referring to my debut for Grimsby Town juniors after my return from Everton. 'Hargreaves scored with a good left foot shot.' Not the best bit of journalism ever, you may think, but it gets better. At the bottom of the piece it says, 'Town dominated until the last ten minutes when Doncaster came with a flurry. The referee and one of his linesmen failed to turn up, so Town's youth coach Arthur Mann ran the line for the last fifteen minutes.'

Brilliant. I can just see Arthur, God rest him, judging any offside decisions or fouls that were made, and can't help but wonder – if the referee and one linesman didn't turn up, and Arthur ran the line for the last fifteen minutes, who did it for the first seventy-five?

Another cutting, this time with a picture next to it, shows me heading the ball out of the keeper's hands and into the net, a sort of 'before and after' picture. Hooray for the Grimsby press. I even found the picture of the youth team's first day's training for season 89/90. Alan Buckley, the first team manager, is running next to us. I have the biggest Rick Astley bouffant, and all of the lads' shorts are ridiculously Simon Cowell-like – we look as if we are going to a PE lesson. The shot was taken at Weelsby Woods, a large park in Grimsby, and we really did do some serious running sessions around that place. At all the clubs I have played for, the local park or nearby forest, usually somewhere to be enjoyed and a place to relax, was a place of torture for a player. Pre-season is a time for parks and pain, and Weelsby Woods was no exception.

I was, as you should be at seventeen, super fit, and I was probably a little bit more aggressive and confident than most boys at my age. This definitely helped me when I was around the first team. You need a large slice of luck to break through and get a professional contract; I had that luck, but I also had a burning desire to get a contract. Many good footballers have failed at the first hurdle and have either drifted out of the game or simply given up. I had eyes on only one thing, and that was to play at Blundell Park as a professional footballer.

This wish came true very quickly.

After joining in with a few of the first team's training sessions I soon got a taste of the action. The difference between training with the first team and the youth team was huge. With the first team, a lot more moaning went on if you gave the ball away, and you would be on the receiving end of quite a few tackles and elbows from seasoned pros. There was certainly no allowance for age. If I was good enough to play, I was good enough to be tackled. The then team captain, Shaun Cunningham, was a prime example. If he had 'gone through' you with a bad tackle, he would just shout at you, 'Get up you fairy!' – which I did many times, and often I set about trying to kick him back.

You had to be careful though; impressing the manager and hurting one of the first team's star players were not compatible. I have been in hundreds of sessions where an eager young lad has been invited over from the youth side to train with the first team, only to be sent back almost immediately after a clumsy challenge. A player missing a first team game because of something like that is unacceptable.

The characters in the Grimsby Town side back then were unique. Young lads like Kevin 'Jobbers' Jobling, a cheeky, chain smoking left-back, Mark 'Plug' Lever, a hilarious centre-half whose legs were totally out of control, but who could defend like a lion, and Paul Reece, a goalkeeper who was simply crazy.

There were plenty of experienced players too, great wingers in Dave Gilbert and Gary Childs, and two tough tackling midfielders in Shaun Cunningham and fellow local lad, John Cockerill. Then we had the strikers, the quiet but explosive Tony Rees, the late, great Keith Alexander, who seemed to defy gravity to keep his balance half the time, and the silent but deadly Neil Woods. Add to that the cool, calm and collected Andy Tillson, a defender with a heart of gold, and Garry Birtles, a striker of legendary status, whose ability on the pitch knew no bounds, and you had one very special group.

Even our experienced goalkeeper, Steve Sherwood (aka Albert Tatlock, named by me in my first week after seeing what a 'grumpy old man' he was), had his moments, namely coming in every morning and saying the same bad pun, 'Gutten more minge.'

The only other thing I ever heard him talk much about was Andy Gray heading the ball out of his hands in the FA Cup final, when he was playing for Watford. Let it go Steve, you dropped it!

Many of us were good friends off the pitch and this really did help the team spirit and morale.

During that first month back in training, the injuries were stacking up for the team, and with an important pre-season cup game against Barnsley coming up, I

felt that I might even make the bench. It was the Yorkshire Electricity Cup, a fiercely contested competition between the local league clubs, and I was hoping to have my first taste of first team action. The day before the game we trained, as usual, on a local Astroturf five-a-side pitch. We all used to pile into the minibus, including the manager, Alan Buckley, and his assistant, Arthur Mann, who would drive. We also carried huge full size portable goals in the van, as well as the balls, cones, and bibs. It was an extremely tight fit, but a great laugh all the same. All the windows would steam up, and the lads would scrawl silly things on the windows, such as, 'Bucko you are gay', and then quickly rub them out if Alan happened to turn around.

At traffic lights someone would inevitably reach through to the front and slip the gear stick out of first, and as Arthur tried to set off the engine would scream like hell when he pressed down on the pedal. He would proceed to lose his temper and turn around shouting, 'Arr you flickin bandits!' in his broad Scottish accent, while car horns were going off around us, and the lights changed back to red. We would be crying with laughter as Arthur fought with that temperamental gear stick, but he always refused to swear, choosing words like 'flickin' and 'feckin' instead, which obviously made it even funnier. I only heard Arthur actually swear once, and that was when I had said something about a training session. I will mention that incident later.

When we finally arrived at the Astroturf, having being half gassed to death by Mark Lever's arse – he used to force the windows shut for maximum agony – it was time for war.

The Astroturf pitch we used was tiny, probably no more than forty yards by twenty, and almost every player was involved in the old versus young game. I cannot imagine that any club in the country would do something like this now, but we really looked forward to our weekly battle. You are talking about thirty or more lads, including the manager and his assistant, absolutely kicking the hell out of each other trying to win and not be voted worst player of the morning.

The routine was that once a session was over, we would then return to the ground, put on a huge pot of tea, and pile into the changing room to cast our votes for the worst player. Being on the losing team you ran the risk, if you had had a stinker of a session, of being handed the dreaded yellow jersey, emblazoned with the date, a few obscenities about your performance, your wife, girlfriend, or mum, and your name. This would be worn for the whole of the next week, and it had never been washed.

At the training sessions themselves, Buckley would pretend he was John Robertson, the old Forest legend, and would inevitably score a fair few goals, as, after his career as a prolific goal scorer, he was still sharp and a very good

finisher. The older pros, including the fiery Tony Rees and Shaun Cunningham, would be throwing elbows everywhere, while the younger lads would be trying desperately to show their elders how good they were. I even took out the gaffer once with an overzealous tackle – he absolutely bollocked me for it.

Still, that wasn't as bad as the time I accidentally volleyed a ball straight into the side of his face as we were messing about before one of our Friday morning games. I caught the ball a peach, but to my horror it was heading straight for 'Bucko'. I tried to shout, but it was too late. Bang. It nearly knocked him out and, hell, was he mad. He turned around to see who was responsible, and immediately looked in my direction. Stood beside me was Kev Jobling, who was doing the old sly finger pointing routine. Kev knew this would make it even funnier, and Buckley even madder, and it worked. He stormed towards me and let me have both barrels for about five minutes. Let's just say I did plenty of running that day – I also make sure that I tell the lads I coach nowadays never to risk hitting me in the face with a stray football.

After the game, which could last for over an hour, especially if the manager hadn't yet scored, we used to set up the goals on grass near the Astroturf to do some shooting practice. It was after one such session, before the Barnsley game, that the manager pulled me to one side and said, 'You're playing tomorrow, young Christian, so we will see you in the changing room at 1.45.'

I was absolutely buzzing. Arthur came up to me and simply said, 'Just show them all, son.'

He was a real gent, was Arthur, and he was a great friend to his manager. He was also very, very loyal to Alan Buckley, almost too loyal in a way, as I wish he had stuck up for me a bit more against Buckley, rather than automatically siding with him.

I told all the other youth team lads that I was going to be making my debut, and, understandably, they were all a little bit disappointed that it wasn't them. In the late eighties, you had to be ready to play at seventeen or eighteen, or you would be discarded, so this was understandable. Despite this, they were very supportive. There was a real closeness between this group of lads, a mixture of local boys and players who had been spotted at other clubs around the country, all trying to make it as professional footballers, but all friends as well. This unity created a really strong team spirit. We even lived close together – some of the apprentices actually had digs in my street.

Mark Clarke, Scott Liversidge, and 'Twebby' Trevor Edwards were really nice lads, and good players. I think it was hard for them, understandably so, seeing me get a contract and go to play in the first team. I had been on their side looking in, now I was on the other side, on the verge of a professional career.

Everybody was striving for the same goal, to play in the first team, and with that came a rivalry, but a friendly one. The stark reality was that, apart from me, not one lad made it through from that set of players, which shows how ruthless professional football can be.

More often than not, the first team at Grimsby Town would all gather together in the morning into the tiny but warm kitchen. The oven already had our sausages sizzling away in it for our lunch, and the Baby Burco tea urn was always on at full pelt, for the endless supply of tea required by the older players and management. Don't forget that back then, the ritual of tea at training and before, during, and after a game was a must. This was also still the time when you could have a nip of whisky before a game, and warm-ups involved no more than a few kick-ups.

If we weren't in the kitchen we would be in the boot room, which was next to the home team dressing room. Here we would sort the boots out or, more likely, chat – the weekend, who pulled, or who had a fight were usually the top topics of conversation. Looking back, it's refreshing to know how innocent the lads were then. Modern technology and communication hadn't kicked off, so there was no Facebook, MSN, text, email, or, in fact, mobile phones. All communication was with your mouth, in person, whether it be chatting up girls, or talking to each other. The same goes for leisure time, we would sit around and chat about football, girls, or cars. We didn't have the money for golf, and the PSP, Game Boy, Wii, PlayStation, Xbox, and laptop generation was not upon us, and for that I'm really thankful. This thought still makes me smile now, on the journeys to and from matches. I sit next to some of the young boys who seem to be conducting relationships through their laptops, spending hours on Facebook or 'Rent-a-mate' as I like to call it. I fear the days of 'Get your coat – you've pulled' are officially gone – not that I would want to, or have ever, used that immortal line.

Don't get me wrong, I know that you have to move with the times. My wife could be having five affairs on Facebook for the amount of time she spends on it, and my children have got the entire contents of PC World in their rooms, but I really would not miss any of it, as I didn't grow up with it. I wasn't even one of those lads who would spend hours in an arcade, bending down into ridiculous positions and shouting, 'Nudge mate, two down, yeah, it's two down.'

I simply wasn't interested, I would rather kick a ball about, or do stunts on an old BMX, which, incidentally, for all you old school BMX fans out there, was a Raleigh Ultra Burner with black 'skyways' and 'mushroom' grips. I later went on to have a lovely Diamond Back, but enough of that.

My family had moved home a few years previously, going from the flat

above the shop to a house further into Cleethorpes. The bonuses of this for me were a great park nearby for football, a garden for kick-ups, a beach on the doorstep, and a new leisure centre being built nearby – it was here that I would stroll to the roller disco on the hunt for girls. I thought I was Don Johnson on the set of *Miami Vice*, all dressed in white, hair slicked back, with a brooding scowl – what a prat I must have looked.

The day I was told by Buckley that I would be playing, I ran all the way home (about two miles) after training. I stopped to say hello to my dad at his workshop, and to break the news, and then sped off home to prepare. I popped round to see Fiona, my girlfriend, and, incredibly, considering my subsequent reputation and unreliability, my future wife. In fact, I think I ran everywhere that day; I was so excited that I would be pulling on the black and white striped ‘Town’ shirt and playing in the first team. I even went to the park and leathered about fifty shots in the goal.

On the morning of the game I carried out a bit of a ritual that really showed my age.

As I write this, I am late for our game against Cambridge tonight, so must go. I fought the traffic for six hours yesterday to go to the gym in Oxford for rehab and to then return home, and am now setting off again to support the lads. My wife is ‘up north’ with the children, so I am borrowing my mate’s Renault Clio to bomb about in. I am like a cross between Jeremy Clarkson, Mr Bean, and Victor Meldrew as I drive. I swear, sweat, and swerve my way up and down the motorway, ranting at the speed limits, the traffic jams, and the other drivers. The one highlight of yesterday’s trip was seeing a van with some writing scrawled into the dirt on the back doors. Instead of the usual statement about his, or someone else’s wife, it simply said ‘GET OUT OF THE FUCKING MIDDLE LANE’. You can’t beat that British sense of humour. My licence points are racking up like a Tesco till receipt with all that driving, my knee is still sore, my back is like glass, and my groin is shredded, otherwise I feel pretty damn good.

So, some days have passed since I was last able to continue with this book. In that time I have been given a few days off to ‘heal’, so I shot up to Cleethorpes with my family for my mum’s birthday (an important one, but one that is not allowed to be revealed!). It was great to get back home and coincidentally, while we were back there, Torquay United played Grimsby Town, both clubs that have played an important part in my life. Torquay United won and survived the drop, but it looks like Grimsby Town will go down. A sad day for Grimsby Town fans, but that is football for you. They had been a decent

Championship side for a few years and now find themselves in the Conference. How long it will take them to get out of that league, only time will tell.

While in Grimsby and Cleethorpes I took in a few interesting sights, most notably a trip around the heritage museum including a tour of an old fishing trawler (hell, was it hard work for those guys), and a visit to Martin Hargreaves Motorcycles (hard work for that man too!). It is like a big, bike jigsaw in there, how he gets sixty bikes back into a workshop that only holds fifty is beyond me and most of his customers. Whenever I go to see my dad at work, and whatever I am up to at the time, he always manages to rope me into a bike pick up or drop off. It's similar to being given a job by the Sicilian mafia, you just can't say no. I truly believe that if David Beckham rolled up at Martin Hargreaves Motorcycles, 'Mart' would have him popping over to 'Dave's Spares' for a new battery and spark plug for a Yamaha 125. This time, I had to pick up a big Honda CBR in Grimsby. I had a nice clean shirt on as it was my mum's birthday and we were due for coffee and cake. An hour later, after some hazy directions and a wobbly bike on board, I returned, covered in oil, to the reply, 'Where have you been son, I need a couple more parts.'

Suffice to say that when I eventually returned home I was black with grease, the cakes had been eaten, and all that was left was a slice of humble pie!

Still it could have been worse, a few years ago now, again during a routine visit, I was asked to pick up a bike. This time I was using my dad's car and trailer combo, with me wheeling the bike up onto the trailer and then gently pulling it back to base. The location of the pick up was very close to that of the village where my wife's parents lived, so Fiona and I thought that we would kill the bird and throw the stones, or whatever the saying is, and visit her parents.

I picked the bike up, which was, predictably, huge, and we detoured off towards the village. The journey was fine but as we entered the village I checked the rear-view mirror and, to my horror, saw that the trailer was heading off in a different direction. It was like a sketch from Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em. Somehow the trailer had sheared off and was now independent of its master. It gathered momentum with the weight of the bike on board and veered off and started cartwheeling towards a garden. To my even greater horror in said garden there was a man tending to his prized perennials, and a woman directing him from the front door. I jumped out of the car and was screaming, 'Move, there's a trailer coming.'

Looking back, it was a bizarre warning, but having never witnessed a runaway trailer before, I had no idea what to say. Anyway at the last minute this poor bloke looked up and literally dived full-length to avert certain mutilation. The trailer and its contents totally obliterated the fence (new), most of the

garden (just planted), and came to rest just in front of the bay window. It would probably constitute decent art nowadays, but for this couple it was a narrowly avoided death, and a garden replanted with metal.

I was, at this point, beating the World and Olympic village green sprinting record to get to the man, trailer, bike and garden, while Fiona was busy having a coronary in the car. The scene on arrival was one of devastation. Man down, bike and trailer wedged in a bush, wife shaking uncontrollably. I then uttered the immortal words ...

'Alright?'

They say that you sometimes find superhuman strength in emergency situations, I certainly did. It was like a scene from World's Strongest Man. Somehow I managed to drag the wreckage out of the garden while constantly saying how sorry I was to the man who had just dived like an international goalkeeper. After a quick dash to the shops to get some apologetic flowers and wine for the couple in question, and then some major grovelling (phone details for compensation etc.), I left the scene of the disaster. On later inspection of the trailer I discovered that the connector had been welded more times than a car on Scrap Heap Challenge. I phoned my dad to explain why I had been so long, about the wrecked garden, the cartwheeling trailer, the man who had survived with his life, and the superhuman trailer pull. I was about to get to the fact that the trailer was a death trap and that I could have really hurt someone, when my dad butted in. The matter of crucial importance?

'How's the bike?!'

So, I returned to Oxford to watch the lads win against Cambridge yesterday – I have been having a blinder up in the stands, my passing has been superb, I haven't given a ball away, and I feel great. The saying 'it's easy up there', mostly referring to people who having never played the game, watch the game from above and hammer those on the pitch, is used very often, but it is true, it does look easy from high up in a stand. Believe me, it is very different at pitch level, particularly as space seems to be at a premium. It's probably why the top players make it look easy, because they do what you can see up in that stand.

Injury wise, my knee is much better, but with the hammering that I have been putting my body through to get fit for the imminent playoff games, I now have a groin that feels as if it is about to tear right open. It is actually difficult to even kick the ball, which is a major problem in my line of work, and crushingly frustrating. I am thoroughly pissed off that I may miss next week's play-off games, and am, at present, sat in a golf club (I don't play golf but it is quiet and has free Wi-Fi) drinking coffee and randomly swearing out loud. As well as the mild to major OCD, I'm beginning to think I also have Tourette's; on top of the

swearing, I must punch the car steering wheel about thirty times a day, and that is not even when in bad traffic. It's all due to football related annoyance, of course.

Back to my pre-game ritual. It was 15th July 1989, the morning of my first senior game of football, in a match against Barnsley. My boots were polished and ready at the end of my bed; I had drawn a picture on my dartboard scoreboard of me scoring a goal (me as a matchstick beating a matchstick goalkeeper complete with matchstick fans!). I then went for a pre-match walk (something I still do now) and then did one of the most bizarre pre-match routines ever seen. I went to the bakery I often visited and bought a gingerbread man. It was initially to eat (odd choice, I accept), but as I passed St Peter's Church, the scene of many a family wedding, funeral, and christening, I walked into the grounds and carried out a strange act. I made a sacrifice to the 'big man' by biting off the gingerbread man's head and 'leaving' it to the 'gods'. Madly bizarre, I accept, but it also came with a massive chunk of humour attached – it was my 'offering' to hopefully give me a bit of luck.

It seemed to work, for the events of the following match changed my young life for ever.

'Watson gets the ball, beats his man and crosses, up jumps Chris Hargreaves and scores. 1–0.'

'Gary Childs runs down the wing and loops up a cross, up jumps Chris Hargreaves to score again, 2–0.'

The final whistle goes, the game is won and I am in the team bath having, on my debut, scored both goals. Ninety minutes earlier, I had been doing kick-ups on my own in the centre circle before the game. No warm-ups back then!

I had been excited in the changing room before the game, mixing with these experienced footballers. In the post-match bath, I was now one of them, and was now excited about the prospect of going out that night. That is where the problems lay, the going out!

In many changing rooms around the country the atmosphere after a win is incredible. It can also be pretty interesting after a loss, but there is always an enormous sense of relief for everyone when the game is over, the music is blasting away, the banter is flying, and, inevitably, the talk is of the Saturday night's activities. It was the same on my debut and it is the same now, although for the old boys like me, now it's a case of a few glasses of wine and a night in with the family!

That night, I ended up in a packed Pier 39 (Cleethorpes' Premier Nightclub,

no less. You know – sticky carpets and sticky drinks) with most of the young lads in the team and with the group of mates I knocked around with. We had done the dreaded ‘footballer’s’ walk past the queue, and gone straight in. At the time, I thought the attention I got in there was really great. I was already a well-known local lad, but this game had made it ridiculous. Drinks all round, and plenty of them, was the order of the day. I was being handed drink after drink, and was lapping it up.

On reflection, I really wish I had kept a low profile that night, had maybe stayed in and had the odd celebratory beer with my girlfriend and family, then settled down to watch *Match of the Day*. It may seem a bit dramatic to say that, but that night out set a precedent for me. Everything became so full on and done to such a massive extent. Going out would mean getting totally wrecked, drinking everything under the sun, and being Jack the lad at all times. Even on that first night, I ended up drinking far too much whisky and other popular (but bizarre) drinks such as Pernod and black. I woke up the next morning with a new found local stardom for my footballing exploits, but also with something off the pitch that I felt I needed to live up to for way too long, a reputation. And a headache.

It was an incredible time for me at that point. I had just turned seventeen, I was in and around the first team, and was quickly signed on a professional contract. After making a few substitute appearances in the first month of the season my first full league debut was next. It was a night game at home against Gillingham, and I performed part of my previous ritual – the polished boots, the same picture drawn on the dartboard, and hopefully the same result. And it was. I leathered a low strike into the bottom corner, the game was won, and I was on cloud nine. I was still playing every reserve game and training in the afternoon, but it didn’t matter. Back then I could play all day and still want more. I still want more now, but the difference is that if I stay out and train all afternoon, or play three games a week, I am also in desperate need of some ice, a dog basket, and an Ibuprofen sandwich.

I wanted to play every game and although I felt ready, Alan Buckley wanted me to learn my trade first, most notably by playing in the Pontins Reserve League. I was burning to get involved in those early years, and I soon became very frustrated that I wasn’t starting every Saturday afternoon. I was a bubbly character, maybe too bubbly and cocky for the manager. It would be a big statement to say that Buckley totally destroyed my confidence; he didn’t, but he definitely took the spark away from me that could and should have propelled me onto a much bigger stage. I don’t think it helped my cause that I was full of it, or that soon after signing my contract I had bought an Audi GT sports car (the same

as Ash drives on *Ashes to Ashes*, which always makes me laugh now).

Late for training one day, I parked my GT in the chairman's spot. It was a genuine mistake, I was going to be late and I hadn't realised, but as we left for training, and when the lads spotted it and had pointed it out to the manager, I knew I was in trouble. Buckley lost it, he really lost it. I have seen many players close to tears after one of his infamous bollockings – including me. He would go from his natural shade of pink to an absolute vivid beetroot red within a few acidic sentences. I think I ran to the training ground that day, as I wasn't allowed to get in the team van!

Maybe I should have just kept my mouth shut and done my job; while I was never offensive, I loved to have a laugh and a joke. I think old Bucko stifled the hell out of me, and it certainly damaged my confidence later on in my time at the club. Incredible that it should have happened, but I get so angry now thinking about it now. On one occasion I happened to be speaking to one of the directors whom I really got on with, in the changing room. He mentioned that one day, if I kept playing well, I could have a go in his Porsche. I said, 'Thanks Gord, I'll hold you to that.'

He smiled, and that was that. One of the lads had laughed when he had heard this, and Buckley strode over shouting to the lads, 'What did he say?'

Dave 'Didi' Gilbert told him, as he was closest, and with that, once again, Buckley totally lost the plot, shouting at the top of his voice, 'Why don't you show some respect? How dare you say that?! He is a director, and you are a young player who should be seen and not heard!'

He went on for about three minutes, ranting away at the top of his voice.

It was embarrassing for Gordon, who had made a genuine offer, but who now felt that it was an issue, and embarrassing for me, because it looked as if I had disrespected the man in front of everyone, but I hadn't, and wouldn't. It was simply that we had always got on really well. The incident was a typical one for Buckley, summing up his attitude rather clearly. He seemed to have short man's syndrome of the highest order, and was very close to being a megalomaniac. Other than that he was quite a decent fella!

For now, though, I was riding the crest of a wave of success, and with injuries mounting for the first team regulars, and with our first round game in the FA Cup against York fast approaching, I was to be given another start. It was a big game for both clubs, with it being a sort of derby, and of great importance financially. It was the first time I had felt nervous before a game, the ground was packed, and the atmosphere was fantastic. It was my FA Cup debut, and I was going to be playing up front with Garry Birtles, a Nottingham Forest legend who earlier in his career had been transferred to Man United for a million pounds – a

vast amount of money in the mid-eighties!

It was a fierce start to the game with tackles flying, biting and pinching at corners, etc. I was being pummelled by York's rabid centre-halves (this being back in the day, when centre-halves could go through the back of your legs ten minutes after the ball had gone, and the referee would wave 'play on' saying 'Fair challenge.') In the twenty-seventh minute, the ball popped out to the edge of the box and I caught it sweetly, drilling the ball into the bottom left corner. The Grimsby Town fans behind the goal were hysterical with happiness, and it was game on.

Ten minutes later, and one of the now snarling central defenders blindly turned a ball back to his goalkeeper – this being back in the day when you could kick a ball back to your goalkeeper, he could hold it in his arms until he felt like letting it go, and the referee would be saying, 'Another minute and let it go, old chap.'

As strikers we were taught by Bucko to wait for any back passes, looking as if you were uninterested, gambling on a mistake. This lad had not given the ball quite enough, and as it bounced back toward the stranded keeper I ran in and joyfully volleyed it over his head, into the vacant net.

We ended up winning the game 2–1 and, after celebrating with the lads in the changing room, I gave my first ever radio interview. I still have a recording of it today. It was horrendous; I think my voice must have just broken. I also say 'I'm ecstatic' seven times, I mention my mum and dad five times, and I also say the second goal was a 'peach' twice.

The rest of the year was spent on a huge high, we were at the top of the league for most of it, and ended up being promoted in my first full season. Although I spent most of the season on the bench, I scored another important goal away at Stockport, a game that meant that we were almost guaranteed promotion, and I finished the campaign celebrating on an open top bus tour, and then on the balcony of the town hall, with the rest of the team.

We all then jumped on a plane for 'trip' to Cala d'Or in Spain, celebrating our promotion. It was my first 'lads' holiday away, and also my eighteenth birthday. As we drank in a bar one afternoon, Archie Gemmill, a great left-back in his day, and the assistant manager of Nottingham Forest, was telling me not to sign a new deal because 'Cloughie' (Brian Clough) was a big fan. Not a bad start to my career, you would think. However, the fact that I had a champagne bottle in my hand, and was three sheets to the wind as he said this, sums up my lifestyle in 1990. That I also signed a contract when I returned, and behaved like an eighties pop star off the pitch, tells you all you need to know about the mistakes that I made. I had it all, and probably blew it all, within a few very

short seasons.

I will have to stop writing for now. It is St George's Day today, the weather outside is scorching hot, and at the local golf club bar I find myself in, the natives, who are dressed in flags, as dragons, and as knights, are enjoying the weather and the beer. My name has cropped up, they are talking 'footy', and I am therefore making an extremely quick getaway. I am playing tomorrow in the last game of the season against Eastbourne. They will be fighting for their lives, being in relegation spot, and I will no doubt need a third lung, having not played for a month, and with a predicted pitch side temperature approaching ninety degrees. Back to the hotel, and back to an M&S dinner it is for me. It is not inconceivable that I will make the play-off games, but I feel shocking at the moment. You tend to feel invincible as a player when you are fit and raring to go but at the moment, for the first time in a long, long, while, I feel the exact opposite. The ice bath is being prepared, and the Ibuprofen smoothie is ready.

Back in the room now and I will have to add a little to explain the degree of my present-day stresses. As I left training I received a text from my wife, 'Don't spend any money. We are over the overdraft, I have fifty pounds left for the week, so you better have a look at the finances.' So, as well as being under pressure to get fit and play a game tomorrow in preparation for the play-offs, I have had to do a bit of phoning around. Out went the iPhone insurance, the Sky package was downgraded to a bare minimum, the silly bank accounts with fancy cards were cancelled, and my emergency tin on top of the cupboard at home was declared open. At the moment I suppose I am wallowing in a massive amount of self pity but I am just a bit tired and pissed off that I am away from home, trying to do a job, when I knew my body is failing me and my career is coming to an end. I suppose I am worried about the future for the first time.

I'm not playing a violin here, because we still have a lovely house in Northamptonshire which was rented out when we moved to Torquay, and I still have a half decent pension (that I hope goes up in value at some point), but the money blown over the years on niceties, such as clothes, parties, meals out, holidays and nice cars, and the ill-advised 'keeping up with the Jones's mentality' we have had at times, mean that our financial situation is tight. My fault, I know.

The myth that all footballers are loaded is definitely just that, a myth, for lower league footballers anyway. I am driving a leased car and living in rented accommodation, and I am hoping something crops up in the summer work wise. My wife is stressed out because money is tight, and I am always away. So, when

people say to me, ‘You must be loaded’, it does make me smile, although sometimes a little bitterly. Despite this, I know I am very lucky to have done a job that I have loved, and I have three great children and a lovely wife. While it would have been nice to have made enough money not to have to worry about future work, I am sure that being ‘retired’ in your late thirties is not healthy. So, as it stands, I have thirteen pounds to get me back home tomorrow night, and will have to sell a few things on eBay this weekend. Life is never dull.

1990/91

With the euphoria at fever pitch after our promotion, and with the next campaign due to start, the feeling in the town was fantastic. I don't think the lads really thought about it at the time but the togetherness and bond that we had, on and off the pitch, was extremely strong, and with that there usually follows success. We faced Preston North End in the first game of the 90/91 season. A tough game on paper, but for a footballing team such as Grimsby Town was at that time, the prospect of playing on an Astroturf pitch was a real bonus. Don't get me wrong, if I were playing on those pitches now, I would probably need a hip replacement, such was the poor quality of the hard surfaces, but at the time keeping the ball on the deck was just the ticket for us.

I'm sure older pros at the clubs with Astroturf surfaces were terribly stiff after most games and training sessions.

The thinking behind Astroturf instead of grass was sensible: no water logging, hence no postponed fixtures; no groundsman, hence lower cost; and a smooth playing surface, hence good football. There was also no need to have a separate training ground or to look for places to train on a daily basis as other clubs, like us, had to.

It wasn't for everybody though. John Beck at Cambridge United was certainly not rushing out to get his pitch relaid. At Cambridge United they really took long ball to a new level, and having a grass pitch helped this style of playing; there was even sand placed in all four corners of the pitch to soften the landing of yet another ball launched up field. To think they nearly got into the top flight!

Back to the game. After a good pre-season I was in the starting line-up on that first day of the 90/91 season. It couldn't have gone any better for me or for the team, a great performance by us saw us win 3–1; I scored the first goal, a left foot curler round the keeper, after being put through from the halfway line – teams didn't half play high offside traps then!

We really carried our form and momentum from the previous season; it's amazing how many times this happens in football. We had a good game plan and good players, and, much as I say it through gritted teeth, a manager who knew how to win games.

Again, we spent most of the season at the top of the league, but once again I was busy playing every reserve game and then being on the bench or playing for the first team as well. At the time I was very frustrated, because I just wanted to play in the first team. The crowds and the pressure surrounding these games gave you such a great buzz, whereas the Pontins League against ‘Scunny’ reserves at Blundell Park on a cold Wednesday night really wound me up. It had a negative effect on me and my performances. Looking back, I should have used those games to show Buckley what I was made of. It was, I think, a classic case of a clash of personalities, with me being a brash, cocky and confident young lad, and him disliking that.

Despite my frustration, I still had a great season. I managed to notch up a few more important goals, including a memorable header against Wigan Athletic at home in a 4–3 win, and a classic strike into the stanchion against Fulham on New Year’s Day – although the circumstances surrounding that particular game and goal really summed up my off the field misdemeanours at the time. You see, I had decided to go out for a few drinks with Fiona and her sister, the night before.

It was sort of accepted back then that going out for a couple of drinks the night before a match was OK, and as it was New Year’s Eve we felt obligated. I have never been a big fan of New Year’s celebrations, and I am even less so now; I can’t think of anything worse than doing the Conga in the street, ‘high fiving’ an absolute muppet, or telling a complete stranger that I love them, just because it’s the start of the New Year. God I’m getting old! But back in 1990, and certainly if you were eighteen years old, going out for a few Pernod and blacks and dancing to Michael Jackson on New Year’s Eve were a must.

We had really been out just to bring in the New Year, and I had wanted to get at least a bit of an early night, so we decided to walk home. On the way back to the apartment my mum and dad owned, a lad shouted some abuse to Fiona’s sister. I took the bait and chased after him. He shot round a wall and did a ‘triple salko’ to lose me, but in the pursuit I bumped my knee on the corner of a wall. I never thought anything of it at the time, but it would later turn out to have caused the classic water on the knee, and would end up sidelining me for several weeks. I cannot believe how stupid and careless I was at the time; I seemed to be on a mission to live up to the reputation I had of being a bit of a lad.

Once back at the apartment and in my room we must have opened the window for a bit of air. Unfortunately, I slipped on the sofa bed, well, more like bounced on the springs like an Olympic trampolinist, and found myself hanging out of the window, with a drop of around a hundred feet staring at me (Croft Baker apartments were the highest point in Cleethorpes!) The fact that my belt

buckle miraculously caught on the window catch, and that Fiona quickly wrapped her hands around my ankles, quite possibly saved my life. That night could have ended in disaster so easily. I can just see the lads now, wearing black arm bands around the centre circle before the game and whispering, ‘He wasn’t a bad lad was he?’, with Jobbers saying, ‘Do you think he would have minded if I had his boots?’ and Paul Reece saying, ‘No, he would have wanted it, and I think Fiona will need some serious “comforting” over the next few months.’

As it was, I scored one of the best goals of my Grimsby career that day, wriggling past three defenders in the box and planting a right foot shot into the top corner, a great victory and a great goal. But how different an outcome it might have been was not lost on me. The near disaster affected me so profoundly that I made the decision to go underground for the next few months. The nights out, the fast cars and the fighting had to stop. And for a while, it did.

The season ended with us being promoted again, unfashionable Grimsby Town mixing with the big boys in the First Division. They say it’s a funny old game and ‘they’ are spot on. I mentioned goals scored against Wigan, Fulham and Preston North End that season. Look at them now, two in the Premiership and one not far off, and look at Grimsby, down in the Blue Square Bet Premier.

The team sang on the balcony of the town hall that year, had another open top bus tour of the town, and we were soon to jet off again on another jolly, but my omission from the squad on the last game of that season had hurt me. All my family and friends were there, I had played an important part in the season, and here I was sat looking up at the boys celebrating. Buckley knew it would hurt me and he was right. He was probably trying to take my ego down a notch. Again, looking back, it shouldn’t have bothered me that much, but at the time it did, and that meant trouble – a year later and I would be off for good.

The team had been promoted twice in two seasons, making it an incredible time for both the football club and the area. This unfashionable club with a dodgy name (people often discussed the brainstorming meeting that ended having selected the easily mocked name GRIMsby) was now in a big league, playing big clubs. With this success came a fierce competition for places. Since Alan Buckley had been a striker himself, at Forest and Walsall, it meant a large influx of front men over the next eighteen months. Clive Mendonca, a great lad from the north-east famed for his goal scoring exploits and his zip wire attempt in Marbella (telegraph pole and near electrocution), had arrived. As well as Clive, over the previous couple of seasons the club had signed Tony Daws, Mark Smith and Murray Jones, and along with Neil Woods, Richard O’Kelly, Tony Rees, Keith Alexander, Roger Willis and myself, there was certainly an abundance of striking options for the manager.

Having been left out of the last game of the 90/91 season and seeing the influx of strikers, essentially in competition with me for a place on the pitch, there was a bitter taste in my mouth, which did not leave. Despite my growing sense of dissatisfaction, the second promotion holiday to Marbella went pretty smoothly, well, as smoothly as a holiday can go with seventeen footballers on the prowl!

A week of no sleep, lots of Pro-Plus, an initiation in Lineker's bar and the obligatory run in with the local constabulary gave the holiday an interesting theme. As we were stumbling back to the hotel one night, Roger 'Harry' Willis, one of our centre-forwards, was singled out by a local policeman (I suspect because he was the only black man in the group) who decided a truncheon to the head would do him no harm at all, then chucked Harry into a waiting van. No crime had been committed, maybe it was just Harry's clothes that were offensive, but it was a shock to us lads who just panicked. I can't remember who shouted 'run' but run we did. Some of us made it back to the hotel but others were less fortunate. Mark Lever, a real joker and a gangly centre-half, decided the beach would be a good escape route. Unfortunately as he was already walking like Parker from Thunderbirds, you can imagine what happened when his drunken body met with sand. He eventually rose from behind a rock with his hands held high, shouting, 'Arrestica ... Arrestica!'

He got his 'wish', and, following an uncomfortable night behind bars, the lads were free again – after an 'unclaimed' bag full of pesetas had been 'handed in', of course.

As with all these summer breaks, we were soon back to pre-season training and ready to run. The summer seems to go very quickly as a player, especially since the introduction of play-offs. Throughout my time at Grimsby Town, and with all the partying and drinking that came with it, my fitness rarely suffered. I was always at the front in the running – the late nights just didn't seem to affect my capabilities as an athlete at all. I wish now that they had, as it might have brought me to my senses sooner. My love for football was huge; nothing gave me more pleasure than scoring in training or for the first team, but my vulnerability off the field was now evident. The lads I was hanging about with were great if you were not a professional footballer, but I was, and somewhere along the line, I had forgotten this. My decisions off the pitch were often misguided because I didn't have the one thing I wanted on it, stability. Before the age of nineteen I had already played in a fair few games, so my progress was good, but the next few seasons saw my first team action limited – a couple of long injuries took their toll on me, as did my relationship with the manager.

1991/92

Throughout the 91/92 season my appearances were very limited, which brought with it disappointment and frustration. The normal routine would be to play in the reserves (usually score) and then turn up on the Saturday hoping to be in the squad. If my name was not mentioned I would be gutted, and would turn to my friends for back up. This would usually take the form of 'Let's get smashed.' – not, with the benefit of hindsight, the sort of help I needed. Back then, a manager could only name two outfield players as subs, so it was a difficult decision for him to make. Nowadays, with five players being allowed, and with many managers choosing not to have a keeper on the bench, fewer players are left out on a match day. As any player will tell you, it is bad enough sitting on the subs' bench, but not being involved at all worsens the situation no end. If you love playing football, and are not selected, match days can be very lonely. How many players have we seen recently sitting on the bench, or in the reserves, and just picking up their money? Perhaps if I'd been happy to do that, and not been so desperate to play, I wouldn't have played at as many clubs as I did.

Off the field, I had forgotten the lesson of my near-death window mishap. The nights out were becoming longer and wilder. Regular Saturday night trips to The Welly club in Hull and Venus in Nottingham were the norm. I usually drove with five mates in the car all ready (some already were!) to go partying, dance the evening away and then drive back for a few hours sleep, or not even that, sometimes. The Welly club, for those who were crazy enough to frequent it, was a melting pot of drugs, sweat and music. As you entered through the double doors, the floor would be bouncing from the volume of the bass. You would see bikini-clad girls and bare-chested lads rubbing Vicks VapoRub on each other (no, it wasn't a gay club), boasting about how much 'gear' they had done and then giving each other a big hug. Around this time was the start of the Acid house era and dance culture. Huge raves, mostly illegal, and lots of pretty hedonistic clubs emerged, including the Hacienda and Conspiracy in Manchester, Back to Basics in Leeds, and Venus in Nottingham, giving rise to some crazy times.

It was the advent of Ecstasy in the UK, and it turned a nation of youngsters into a frenzied bunch of partygoers. One small tablet would let you forget all

your worries, love a complete stranger and dance like a prat. The fact that it could also quite possibly kill you was less talked about. They say (it's 'they' again!) 'you should try everything once' but I'm not sure about 'everything'.

During this season, the fact that my brother Mark had returned abruptly from Liverpool University may have encouraged more nights out than usual. With his return came a new circle of friends, older and wilder than mine. Mark had left for university a quiet and unassuming lad, but hell did he return ready to party. He had morphed into Liam Gallagher, but more aggressive, he was drinking like a fish and was as clued up about gear as Shaun Ryder. I could and should have said no to the endless nights out, but I didn't, I just gave it the large one and went with it. I suppose there was a bit of peer pressure, but it was definitely weakness on my part. Were I to try to psychoanalyse my behaviour, it was probably a replacement for the thing I felt was missing in my life, regular first team football. I am both disappointed and philosophical about that era in my life, and even though I know I was young and impressionable, as we all have been, I still find it hard to recount some of those memories, because I do feel that my lifestyle off the field cost me a fair bit on it. They say that you only learn from your mistakes though, and I certainly bloody well did that!

I know both Mark and I look back with regret, but him more so than me, as it is only now, after a lot of soul searching, broken relationships and unfulfilling jobs, that he is finally living up to his own expectations. He is currently doing a law degree at the tender age of thirty-eight. In that time I have moved fifteen times, played for ten clubs, got married, and had three children, so perhaps moving away from the area did me good after all!

Even with the nights out and the drinking, I still maintained some focus on football. Incredibly, I would get home after a night out, and go for a run around the local streets, more often than not still in my going out clothes. My mentality was that this would then rid my body of the drink. I would also have a huge glass of water, as if the combination of both acts would somehow help cancel out alcohol consumption.

If our group of lads hadn't gone out drinking or clubbing, we would sometimes take a drive out into the country where the lads would take an exotic cocktail of mind-bending substances (this was at a time when LSD would cost a fiver). I was the only one with a car, so I could probably see the madness more clearly as I had to be 'with it', they didn't. It all seems like total and utter madness now. I would wholly discourage dabbling in any of these death-risking, career-wrecking vices, and I'm sure some of my old mates would agree. That is, if they are still *compos mentis*.

Some of our mates spiralled so far out of control that even heroin became a

feature of their lives, which is surely the worst possible sign that they had completely lost the plot. I know drugs are rife in a lot of towns and cities across the country, but at that time, and particularly in our area, drugs seemed to be a huge problem. And I'm not sure if you can justify the lads' behaviour by citing the circumstances they were in – as far as I could tell, they seemed to have decent family upbringings. However, whichever way I look at it now, everybody in our group of lads seemed to be intent on pressing their self-destruct button.

Was it bad luck that led to this? Probably not. Was it bad judgement? Maybe. One of us would manage to get into a fight or do something stupid with almost certain regularity – I lost count of the amount of brand new Ted Baker shirts I ruined after scuffles!

The best example I can give of the lads' behaviour is that of big Sam Capes. He was the 'big man' of the group, to us a gentle giant really, but to everybody else the lad who was always known as the hardest kid around town. Sam loved his motorbikes and, boy, would he push the boundaries. I always had fast cars, and I took some pretty stupid risks at times but Sam was in a different league. He would pull a wheelie at eighty miles an hour and laugh about it; he would fly past us on country roads like Barry Sheene. My brother has had the misfortune of being on the back of Sam's bike at one hundred and sixty miles an hour. That might sound unbelievable, but the bike could go even faster than that, and my brother's testament to the story is enough. My brother said he was actually relieved when the police pulled them over for speeding. Sam just chuckled and asked one of the policemen how much he had left in the car, to which the officer replied, 'Nothing, you were pulling away at a fair rate of knots.'

Sam laughed again and said, 'Bloody hell! I knew I should have carried on.'

Mark, on the other hand, was just delighted that the ordeal was over. Sam got a ban but he was soon back on the bike.

Off the bike, he was also as brave as a lion and would fight anyone. The problem for Sam was that, when you are pushing things to the limit, something usually has to give.

The bike cost him first. He fell off at over a hundred miles an hour, and with another friend of ours, Garry Soper – Gaz – on the back. As Sam lost control of the bike that sunny afternoon, Gaz flew off into the side of the road and into a bush, and although he was pretty smashed up, he was fairly lucky. Sam on the other hand slid across the tarmac for around a hundred yards, slicing his arms and legs up as he went. Gaz crawled out onto the road after the accident, to find that Sam had managed to walk back to check if he was OK, before collapsing. This was no mean feat, considering the injuries he had. Sam ended up having to have his fingers pinned, he had to have a fair amount of skin grafts, and suffered

a pretty horrendous leg injury.

We went to see Sam in hospital afterwards and in his typical fashion he just laughed it off. Six months after that incident, and after a further lads' night out had escalated into a full-on fight with another group of lads, Sam suffered another serious injury. He had been bundled, pretty aggressively, into the back of a riot van (usually used more to calm things down than anything more serious). I escaped the honour of being thrown into the van that night as the main officer in charge was a local police chief who knew me, and knew the consequences of me being in trouble – thanks again, Doug!

In the scuffle, Sam had his finger bent back, and although he had complained to the officers on duty that night about the pain and the swelling nothing was done. To cut a long story short, and to sum up the madness and sadness of that time, Sam got gangrene in his finger and ended up losing it few days later. This was a man mountain of a lad, who ended up pretty much broken, all in the space of six months. It is not what was meant for Sam, that I am sure of. I know we were all young and full of bravado and confidence, but his accidents exemplified the lifestyle everybody was leading.

Nowadays, if I returned to my old haunts and walked into Willy's Wine Bar I would probably see the same old faces. I would almost certainly see my old mate, Gaz. Gaz and I were thick as thieves back then. I had a lot of time on my hands and so did he. He was another fit young lad, also on a mission to drink and party hard. When he was about fourteen, on Christmas Day, his mum had walked out on the family, never to return. I think this had a profound effect on him, as ever since then he too seems to have had one finger on the self-destruct button. However, one incident in particular was severe enough to shock even him. His party piece at Willy's Wine Bar, every New Year's Eve, was to swan dive from the upper floor window down to his adoring public outside. Yes, you have guessed it, on one New Year's Eve, the adoring public forgot to catch him. Gaz fell straight onto the pavement. He survived, but it was a very lucky escape, and Gaz has now stopped doing that particular stunt – I think! As a further indication of the kind of events that occurred around then, one of the other lads in our group was involved in a hit and run which nearly killed him (he was hit), and another's flat nearly burnt down. It was certainly a pretty crazy time.

In those days football clubs did not give advice on or about drugs, nor was there any drug testing. At Grimsby Town, after a home game I had played in, I went to the toilets which were outside the players' bar, only to see one of the opposition's players puffing away on a big old reefer. And he went on to play for England many times – if I'd known that then, I would have joined him.

In the two seasons that followed the club's two promotions, there were

plenty of other incidents that indicated that a change of both scene and friends would be advisable for me. You may laugh, but some of the stunts we pulled were absolutely headless.

Late one night, a few of us were on the hunt for food, all the pubs and restaurants had closed (including the infamous Topkapi Kebab House, and the more salubrious Capri Pizzeria). Why it happened I have no idea, but as we stood there looking through a mammoth glass window displaying a huge Easter egg range, the urge to eat chocolate seemed to override any common sense. And so it was, four size nines later, that we were running through the streets laden with about twenty Easter eggs of various sizes. Alarm bells were ringing; soon there would be police everywhere. Riot vans were a regular presence in the market place in Cleethorpes. The thought of us, sat there stuffing our faces with Easter eggs, and then burning the remaining cardboard evidence, does not fill me with pride. You cannot excuse this sort of behaviour, and my feeble offerings to the charity box each time I subsequently visited that shop did not make it any better.

I do have some great stories and memories of those days though, and they usually involve spending time with my then long-suffering girlfriend and now long-suffering wife, Fiona. One early summer morning, after returning from another rave with some friends, we stopped at a forest with streams and a stretch of water called Croxby Pond. We walked through some beautiful and totally deserted woodland, spending a couple of hours paddling through the streams and lying in the early morning sun. If only it hadn't been private land, and if only we hadn't decided to commandeer a milk float that morning, it would have been the perfect start to the day!

Holidays with Fiona were definitely a welcome break from football and my group of friends, although without knowing how and why I always seemed to bump into someone who knew me. Even to this day, I could be in a desert and happen upon someone who is connected to a mate, knows me from a club, or, more likely, remembers me playing against their club – playing for so many clubs could be an influencing factor, it's certainly not the TV exposure I have had. Nevertheless, it makes, and made, it hard to get away from it all. God knows what it's like for someone famous.

Contract talks over the years have always been stressful and at the end of the 91/92 season talks at Grimsby Town were certainly no exception. When Buckley offered me the measly increase of twenty-five pounds a week, when all the other lads were signing new, much bigger, deals, I said no. I said I would prove to him that I deserved more. I have always been bad with money though, and I should have accepted because, shock, horror, he didn't cave in there and then.

I knew times had to change. With younger mates playing in the Grimsby Town team now, and doing well, I had to do something, as I was embarrassed not to be playing regularly, and confused as to why I wasn't.

1992/93

A trip to Tenerife followed at the end of the 91/92 season. Again not much sleep. In fact, I think the most time I spent sleeping was on the plane journey back, only waking when the wheels touched down. While fun, these trips to Tenerife were wearing a bit thin. As I'm sure anyone who has been to the Las Americas 'strip' will tell you there are only so many times that you can do the nightly pub crawl with pissed up Brits falling on you constantly, being sick while walking or shouting the much maligned holiday chorus of 'Ennngaalaand.'

Sitting around the pool with the lads in the day was a great laugh though. The team spirit we had at Grimsby Town in those days was incredible. We were all great friends, and I'm sure that is why we had such success. Characters like Mark Lever, Kevin Jobling and Paul Reece always had us in stitches, and all the older pros were top lads too. Dave Gilbert, Gary Childs, Tony Rees, Andy Tillson and Garry Birtles not only did the business on the pitch, but also had fun off it. We had a fair old mixture of accents as well; Arthur Mann was Scottish, we had John McDermott a Geordie with Tourette's (or perhaps, just a Geordie!), Paul Agnew, who was Irish, Tommy Watson – a Scouser, Gary Childs, who was a Brummie, and Murray Jones, a Cockney. As a young pro it was a great environment to be in, and I found it hilarious how you just couldn't understand anyone. The banter between the players was great, and the friendships strong, although the affection was generally shown in abusive ways.

When I first returned to Grimsby Town from Everton, I initially took up an apprenticeship. The first team lads would often come in to see us in the tiny boot room and have a bit of banter. If it was one of the apprentices' birthdays the normal bumps or chant of 'Happy Birthday' was definitely not the order of the day. No, these celebrations were replaced by any number of surprises! Sometimes it would be the boot polish treatment – this would involve a tin of polish, a few brushes and a few uncomfortable minutes as the 'meat and two veg' would get the 'cherry blossom' finish. Or it could be either the panda or pylon treatment.

I first witnessed the panda treatment on our young keeper, Paul Reece. He was held down by some of the lads while Kev Jobling and Paul Agnew, two lads in the first team, took turns to suck his eye sockets. This resulted in a couple of

great shiners, hence the ‘panda’. Pylon treatment was a little less abusive, but hurt more. A young apprentice would be asked into the changing room and the questions would start.

‘What are those things in fields called?’

The nervous young lad would struggle to give an answer.

‘You know, the big metal things.’

Again, a blank from the victim in question.

‘Come on, the big metal things with wires on the top, that birds sit on.’

Finally, the words that everybody had been waiting for were uttered: ‘Oh, a pylon!’ and with that the entire twenty-two man squad would ‘pile on’ the poor lad for about five minutes, leaving him a bit battered but safe in the knowledge that he now understood how to answer a trick question.

Occasionally, a walk of shame would be the order of the day. On returning from his shower a birthday boy would find his clothes missing. What followed would be an embarrassing hunt for his kit. You can imagine how funny a sight it was seeing a naked birthday boy, in his birthday suit, running across the pitch to fetch his clothes. They would usually be situated on the halfway line, and all you would hear was the groundsman shouting, ‘Get off my fucking pitch, you weirdo!’

I have even seen a naked apprentice clamber up a floodlight to reclaim his clothes’. Imagine doing that sort of stuff now, the health and safety regulations back then were great: don’t get caught, don’t fall off and don’t moan. Things have certainly changed.

Even the big team baths at clubs around the country have been abolished; still that is probably a good move, as I would not fancy getting into a bath with all my teammates now. I swear to this day I must have caught something from the boys at Grimsby Town, so God knows what it would be like now, with the amount of ‘interaction’ going on. The number of women some footballers pick up – I would want an immediate vaccination as soon as I stepped out of the bath.

At Grimsby Town, in both home and away changing rooms, the big baths would be run, so that after a game all the lads would pile into their respective baths. These were huge and about four feet deep, and similar could be seen at football clubs all around the country. You would relax, chat and mess about in the bath, and many a time the odd bottle of Fairy Liquid came out, filling the changing room with foam, and causing the management and ground staff to fume. It was always a relief after a game to sit in these big old baths and relax.

I remember the first time I sat in the first team bath after my debut. Running the bath would have been started at half time, ready for full time for the lads to jump in. I was elated to have scored, and I was now with the first team having a

laugh, where I wanted to be (not like that!).

One incident on that day reveals some of the pettier side of football, it being the competitive beast that it is. Most of the lads said, ‘Brilliant Chrissy, well done!’ However, after my two goal start, Tommy Watson, one of the younger lads in and out of the team at the time, said, ‘Jesus, you jammy bastard.’

Such was some people’s desire to do well themselves that they almost wanted you to do badly. Perhaps particularly so in my case, I suppose, as I was so cocky. Still, we got our own back on old Tommy; a few of us would leave presents on his kit every day, extra strong mints and chewing gum (slight halitosis issues!).

On my first trip away with Grimsby Town, Reecy and I had snuck up to the top floor of the hotel, and waited. When all the lads had settled, with their many drinks, we let rip. Twenty water bombs flew down with a crash from ten floors up. It was carnage down there, but Reecy and I were in stitches, oblivious to the mess we had created. The lads did see the funny side of it, but, of course, they got their revenge. When we were all dressed up and on the way out that night, Garry Birtles and Shaun Cunningham, our inspirational captain, dragged us to the pool and chucked us in. Revenge is a dish best served cold, eh? Cold and wet! Unfortunately for the big fella, Mark Lever, while laughing his head off, he got too close and also fell in.

On these breaks away the older pros would just sit back and watch, as we would provide the entertainment, performing ridiculous back flips into the pool and equally ridiculous dance moves in the clubs at night.

It must have been hard for any new player signing for and coming into a club like Grimsby Town, the bond between the lads was strong, as was the banter. One player, Ian Knight, a former Sheffield Wednesday starlet, had joined us towards the end of the season, and so came on the club holiday to Tenerife. We were all congregated in the foyer of the hotel, in jeans and T-shirts, ready to go out. Imagine the sight when ‘Knighty’ entered the room in light blue sports trousers, a formal shirt and shoes! It was pure Alan Partridge. He got slaughtered, with shouts of ‘What time’s dinner?’ ‘What’s your dad wearing?’ and ‘Taxi for Knight’ ringing in his ears. He recovered though; a quick change and he was back down to join us.

The banter was ruthless but harmless and before long newcomers were welcomed with open arms, but only as long as they did the business on the pitch! With the ten clubs that I have played for I know firsthand that until you play, and play well, your teammates will remain a little undecided about you. It is about gaining respect on the pitch, and the sooner you can do it, the better.

I look back fondly on those Grimsby Town days, time spent with great

teammates and close friends. Had it just been my teammates that I hung about with, I think my life would have been a lot calmer. As it was, nights out with my non-football mates were always an accident waiting to happen. One of these ended particularly badly for me. It was the night before the 92/93 pre-season team photo and I had decided to take it easy with a quiet night out with Fiona but, as usual, we ended up in Pier 39. We only stayed for a few drinks though, and as we were leaving the premises, a lad came up from behind and, utterly unprovoked, smacked me in the mouth. It was totally unexpected. As he hit me he shouted, 'You're Chris Hargreaves aren't you, you want some?'

I certainly did now! In fact, while I am writing this, my blood is starting to boil again about that incident and its repercussions.

I was fuming and raced after him only to be confronted by about five or six of his mates. For once, I wished I had been out with the lads! As much as I wanted to start windmilling, I knew it would be a bad move, especially as I was with Fiona, who at this point was a tad distressed. I knew most of these lads and they knew me. They knew that their mate was very much in the wrong but, mates being mates, stuck up for him saying, 'Sorry Chris, he is drugged up, he doesn't know what he is doing.'

I left telling them that he had better watch his back, and that I would not forget it.

The result of the following morning's photo shoot was a glum-looking Hargreaves sporting a very fat lip. For the whole season I had to look at that picture, as did my friends and family, and lots of fans! Yes, I'm vain, but that wasn't the issue. This photo, in my and many other people's eyes, would represent me and my lifestyle in a bad light. And it was a lifestyle I wanted to end. To my manager, peers and family it just looked bad, end of story. It was merely a continuation of the reputation that, for the promotion memorabilia of 89/90, had resulted in a caricature of me standing outside the Pier 39 nightclub!

By the way, as I had promised the lad, I had not forgotten! The following week I specifically went to the same club and waited and waited for this group of lads to enter. As luck would have it, while I was speaking to an old school mate, the lad who had punched me strode in with his mates, acting the big hard man, and walked towards me. He said, 'I was a bit out of order last week.'

As he did this he held out his hand. I walked towards him, holding my hand out too, while saying, 'Just a little bit.'

Just as he thought I was going to shake his hand I pulled my arm back and smashed him over a table and into a heap on the floor. I could have carried on and completely battered him, but it wasn't my style. Still, now it had really kicked off, a ten-man brawl started, and we were soon hurled out. He never

bothered me again.

This fighting culture was endemic. Cheap beer and drugs meant that violence often escalated and with that sometimes came dangerous situations. There was still a lot of fighting on the football terraces across the country, and there was also localised violence, especially if you went to the right (or wrong) places. If you put yourself in these situations you are always likely to find trouble.

I remember one incident during the 92/93 season, with a good friend of mine, and a good footballer at Doncaster Rovers, Nick Gallagher. Yet again, at the same nightclub, but this time we had actually defended somebody, even if it was a lad with whom I had a bit of history as a schoolboy. (Let's just say he ended up on the losing side, and never returned to the school after that, much to all of the teachers' delight!)

So we had helped this lad out after a scuffle with a group giving him some hassle. They, in turn, had been thrown out, but we soon realised that they had gathered at the entrance of Pier 39 and were waiting for us. I tried to round up a few mates, as our normal group were at another club, but when it came to chucking-out time we found ourselves walking towards them all alone. Fiona, bless her, was still there, and would probably have tried to jump on one of them, such was her loyalty.

I am still amazed at Fiona's loyalty, particularly over this period in my career, and that is one of the reasons why I still love her so much. Not only was I constantly linked with girls, but I was always out and getting into trouble. The circles I mixed in were shocking. She must have put her parents through hell at that time, as her studies would have suffered. Add to that the fact that I would screech up to the house in my latest car (in three years I had bought three different models of boy racer cars: an Audi GT, a Peugeot 205 GTI – the 1.9 flying machine – and a Ford XR2). I can't have been the flavour of the month with Fiona's parents! As a father now, I know that it would really have wound me up to see some young footballer roll up at the house, particularly in the manner in which I did.

Sorry Iain and Joan (Fiona's parents, and two of the nicest people you could meet), I hope I have turned out OK in the end, and that you think I have looked after your daughter well. I know you still had your doubts up until the wedding! And sorry about the house parties we had when you went away (only winding you up, Iain!).

But, back to the impending fight at Pier 39. Seeing these lads waiting did make me and Nick feel like a bit of a beating could be on the cards. To top it all, some of them were holding glasses, a favourite tool back then and something

that I will freely admit scared (and scares) the hell out of me. Vain of me, I admit it, but the last thing I wanted was to look like the guy who got slashed by the Krays and ended up with a permanent smile. Crazy I know, and again, looking back now as a dedicated football professional, and a devoted family man, I cannot believe it happened, but I even squeezed Fiona's rings onto my fingers, ready for battle. (Fiona and her friends returned home in a taxi, exasperated that I was getting involved in yet another fight.)

The next bit is a bit of a blur, lots of windmills, punching and ducking. All I remember is getting away in the end, and stumbling back home. I had escaped with just a bloody nose and a bad black eye. I saw Nick later on, and he was pretty much the same. We also saw the lads in question a few weeks later and, by the looks of them, I think our efforts at self-defence had been more effective than we realised at the time. It was a lucky escape, though, and one that I didn't want to happen again. The next nine months, and the rest of the 92/93 season, were spent pretty much at home in my room. I was sick of the nights out, sick of the bullshit, and just wanted to get my career back on track. One final night out made my mind up for good.

I was always thought of as a bit of a lad, but I didn't realise to what degree until this night. They say looks can be deceptive and maybe they can, but the perception that I was just like the lads I hung around with was horrendous to me. Yes, I had done stupid things, as most lads my age had, together with a few world leaders, Members of Parliament, royalty, corporate bankers and Premiership footballers, but I wasn't particularly involved with drugs – it was usually just the demon drink. However, as I was dancing away (very badly, I might add) one particular night, someone I knew, and a Grimsby Town fan, came up to me and said, 'Chris, are you all right? People think you have lost it mate.'

I turned to him and said, 'No, I'm OK.'

I looked around and saw my mates all off it on drugs, I saw an awful nightclub littered with people I had nothing in common with, yet I was in the middle of it. I finally saw myself as someone who had gone so far off the rails it was laughable. I knew it was time to stop this lifestyle. Over the last couple of years I had partied way too hard, drunk way too much, and I had veered severely off the career path. Where had that young lad gone, the one with the ball and the world at his feet? The same young lad who only a few years ago had polished his boots and left them at the end of the bed, and carried out a gingerbread man ritual for luck. The lad who did hundreds of kick-ups in the garden and spent hours at the park pretending to be Marco van Basten, and the same lad who had scored on his debut in the league and cup for his hometown club.

If I didn't sort myself out, my career could end, and pretty quickly.

Buckley's harsh rule had, without doubt, destroyed my confidence and stifled my personality, but I have to hold my hands up and say that I certainly did not help myself, and my mates were certainly not going to help, as they knew no better.

As luck would have it, Fiona was about to start her degree at Hull University. Was this the change we both needed?

I was extremely happy at home with Mum and Dad and I loved them both very much; we had a great laugh and hardly ever had cross words. These were tough times for them though. My mum's mum had died when I was very young (only one day old), but now her dad, Sidney, passed away, shortly followed by her beloved sister, Lily, who died of cancer at fifty, after a long battle. Her being a non-smoker, made the cruelty of cancer, if anything, even harder. A few years later my mum was to lose a second sister, Bobby, to a brain haemorrhage, which rocked her and the family to the core; it is something my mum has never really got over.

It must have been a very testing time for my parents. The business suffered badly because of the recession, and they also had a pretty traumatic house move, after taking out an extortionate bridging loan. Despite all this, they rarely let the stress show. Dad would return home from work, initially a bit stressed, but before long we would all be sat down for tea chatting and laughing, usually after Dad had overdone the pepper and was coughing away. Who wouldn't be a bit stressed though after a day at work, especially a day in Neptune Street? As anyone from Cleethorpes knows, that street has a business survival rate of around six months. Over the years and in different premises Dad has kept his business running, and it is now the longest surviving business in Cleethorpes, over thirty years and still going strong. No mean achievement. Or as my dad would say when asked how things are, 'It's steady, son.'

As happy as I was at home, there was only so long I could spend cooped up in my bedroom, trying to avoid getting into any more trouble. With Fiona's degree course starting, and her finding a shared house with some of her university mates, I now started to spend more and more time there.

I would drive over to Hull, and Fiona and I would walk down to the local, The Victoria, or a bit further to The Mainbrace. With ten or fifteen pounds between us, we could buy a few drinks, a packet of Embassy No. 1 cigarettes, and then later on walk home and cosy up back at the house, away from everybody, and away from trouble. It was a quieter, but much less complicated life. In fact, come to think of it, it was normal student behaviour!

The end of the 92/93 season approached at Grimsby Town. Survival in the First Division represented a decent achievement for a club so small, but I hadn't

played anywhere nearly enough first team football, and even a short spell at Scarborough on loan did nothing to help matters. After breaking my ankle pretty badly against Preston North End reserves and spending a fair few months on the sidelines, I needed games and Ray McHale, the Scarborough manager, hoped I could help him out. The ankle injury really halted my progress in the 92/93 season, and harmed my Grimsby career.

The ankle break was the result of an awful challenge by Sam Allardyce's son, who at the time played for Preston North End. It was before the 'tackle from behind' rule had been brought in, and since I had scored four goals against Preston for the reserves, a couple of weeks earlier, on their plastic pitch, Allardyce junior was in no mood for any more humiliation from me. This time, as before, I ran rings round the Preston defence, in particular Allardyce junior, but soon after I had scored an early goal he launched into the back of me with a hefty lunge. I got the classic numb feeling in my ankle but I still played on until half time – remarkably resulting in me scoring another goal broken ankle and all.

This could sound like a great old war tale of bravery and courage, but in reality I should have seen some sense and come off straightaway – I told the physio at half time that I was in real pain. Buckley came down to have a look, at which point I said that I wanted to play on, as I really wanted to impress him. I was really keen to play on, as I was flying at that point, really looking to returning to the first team and staying there. The physio had other ideas though; he took my boot off, and my ankle immediately swelled up. I was told it was broken, and a couple of days later it was put in a pot. To make matters worse, I really struggled with the cast; they had made it too tight, so I returned to the hospital hoping that they could do something about it. At the hospital, the cast was taken off, and I was told to return in twenty-four hours to have it reset. Unfortunately, in those twenty-four hours I managed to slip on the stairs at home, and do even more damage to the ankle. The pain was incredible, and as I reflect now, I wince at the thought.

After a long rehab, and with no first team action forthcoming, I decided to go on loan. I lasted nineteen minutes of a 'memorable' loan to Scarborough; playing a match against Bury, I was sent off in what the manager said was one of the worst decisions he had witnessed in football. I went up for a header against the centre-half Peter Valentine and, on landing, he held his face while kicking me in the bollocks. It looked as though I had elbowed him, I hadn't, but I was off and subsequently banned for the next three games. Loan over! Funnily enough I have never enjoyed Valentine's night since.

Towards the end of the 92/93 season I had a phone call from Terry Dolan, the then Hull City manager, saying that he wanted me at the club. I was excited,

but apprehensive. I told Alan Buckley, and at first he said I should stay, but I could not see any way of getting in the first team and, much as I loved that club, I had to get away. I remember saying to him, 'It is just nice to be wanted by someone' – it was a bit of a dig, but it got no real reaction.

With that chat over, there were just a few emotional farewells to the players and staff, and then I was soon off to Hull City. I think, with a few additions, it turned out to be a fee of around fifty thousand pounds. For someone who was told he might go for a million pounds only a few years earlier, something had gone wrong somewhere.

Probably the toughest part of my transfer was saying goodbye to my parents. I was finally leaving the nest, and as they looked at me, my mum with tears in her eyes, I think we were all thinking the same thing. I was the player they had watched in cup finals, scoring endless amounts of goals, the young man they had watched score at Blundell Park, and the boy who, only a few years ago, in the back garden, had pretended to be on *Match of the Day*. I had realised my dream of becoming a professional footballer and to play for my hometown club, but now, for so many different reasons, I had to leave.

We all knew something had gone pretty wrong but nothing was said. That chapter in my life was now over, and I had to move on.

1993/94

I haven't been able to write recently. I wouldn't call it writer's block exactly, but a combination of trying to get a full-time job, having a bit of part-time work, and being in a household with levels of stress bordering on insanity, has meant that finding the time and the right frame of mind to type away has been tough. I have gone from being the captain of both Torquay United and Oxford United last season, and on decent money, to being sat at home trying to find work. It's 2nd August and my youngest daughter, Harriet, was four yesterday. We had a party on Exmouth beach with family and friends, lots of food and drink, and, mercifully, some sun.

Devon is such a beautiful county, it sort of grabs you in and doesn't let you go, and as much as I feel I can carry on playing, certainly in the Conference or Second Division, uprooting the whole family, changing the children's schools, and making a new life somewhere else is just not realistic – unless, of course, Manchester City phone me and offer me a three-year deal. I suppose I have fully retired now, but I cannot bring myself to say it; it seems to have just happened.

I am currently in the big wide world. After twenty-two years, this Saturday will be (partly out of choice, as I am not prepared to drive halfway around the country for a 'maybe' on a one year deal, and partly due to circumstance as I am now thirty-nine) the first game of the season that I have not started. It does fill me with sadness, and I'm not afraid to admit I am scared at the moment, but I knew this day would come. I miss the day-to-day training, and the banter that you get at a club, and, of course, the money, but I certainly don't miss the bullshit. I am still running everyday keeping fit, in case something changes, but I don't think it will. I think this is it. My immediate football future, tomorrow morning, involves training the Exeter City under-16s, with another ex-pro, Shaun Taylor.

To give you an idea of the strangeness of my new life, in the space of twenty-four hours last week, I was variously kitted out as a gardener, a sports presenter and a coach.

The gardening work has come from Fiona's boss, Carol, who mentioned that she had a bit of a project, if I was interested. When my wife initially told me, she laughed, as I did – imagine, a professional footballer doing some cash-in-hand

work in a garden – but within a week I had swallowed my ridiculous and unrealistic pride, and picked up the phone. I am coaching almost every night at the academy, but I really wanted some hardcore exercise and letting rip in an overgrown garden was just the ticket. It has been brilliant, a real therapy of sorts, a chainsaw and industrial blade strimmer in hand, and I’m off. In fact, such was my keenness to get started when I initially weighed up the job – Carol thought I might back down after seeing the jungle ahead – I waded in with just a pair of shears, wearing only some shorts and no top. After four hours of afternoon sweat, I emerged looking like Jesus of Nazareth. With my long hair and shorts I already had a head start anyway, but after that first day my arms and legs were cut to shreds by the bramble and thorn bushes and I had been bitten to death by insects. My arms were so bad I think people thought I had started to self-harm, but things haven’t come to that just yet!

The scratches and bites didn’t matter though; it was the first time I had done a bit of cash-in-hand labour and it felt good. The following day I turned up looking like a cross between Indiana Jones and a Ghostbuster. I had every conceivable item of garden machinery. Spending six or seven hours just ploughing through this overgrown meadow was fantastic. I would stop after three or four hours dripping with sweat, have a drink of water, a cheese sandwich and just crack on. (I don’t know why, but a cheese sandwich just felt right, a man’s sandwich!) It really brought home to me the fact that being away from the football bubble doesn’t really matter. It’s about providing for your family.

I was sawing my way through a tree one day last week when my phone started to ring. It was an agent asking me to play in a few games for a certain club, and that if I did there might be a contract, might be. I had had twenty years of that kind of uncertainty, and as much as I loved playing, I said, ‘Thanks, but no thanks.’

Besides, the next day I was due to drive a minibus full of Exeter City under-16s to play Everton, and that was far more important than a might be. These lads are at the stage where they just need a bit of guidance, and it’s great to see how keen they are.

The TV work is in the form of the BBC down here in Devon. I was the ‘pundit’ on the sofa during the last season, and they have very kindly asked me if I would do it again this year. I’m like a cross between Gary Lineker and Alan Hansen, but without the colour-coded shirts, international caps or European cups. But we do have a good laugh looking through the weekend’s action and messing about before the producer is ready for the off. By we, I mean myself and Natalie Cornah, the presenter, who is not only up on her football but who can

also take the piss with the best of them – obviously the banter is kept for while the mike is off. Richard Keys and Andy Gray take note.

I was also asked by the BBC if I would interview the local team managers as part of a pre-season preview. I jumped at the chance, and really enjoyed it, although I did have to smile to myself last week as I was interviewing Peter Reid, the Plymouth Argyle manager. An hour earlier, I had been in the thick of a bramble bush, and still had thorns embedded in my hands to prove it.

That same night, after my gardening and TV work, I pulled on the football boots and coached the young boys at Exeter City. Not a normal day, but a thoroughly enjoyable one all the same.

As you can see, at the moment my work is all about survival and these jobs are just part-time really, but I am excited about the future, and certainly not down. I want to work, and if that means managing or coaching at a club, then great, but if it means digging roads for eight hours a day, then bring it on.

The fear of stopping playing drove me on each season, and that fear remains, but after twenty odd years it looks as if I will no longer be pulling a top on and waiting for a bell to ring, come three o'clock on Saturday. For now, it is a case of keeping my head down and streamlining our lives to within an inch of living in a caravan (no comments please), but when people say to me, 'Oh no! What are you going to do, how are you feeling?' I answer, 'I'm feeling great thanks, I haven't got a flesh-eating disease (although my leg is still very itchy after my gardening work) and I'm not going to become an alcoholic.'

I say that as my wife tops up my glass of red wine.

With the Hull City deal all done and dusted, I was soon driving the short journey across the Humber bank. I had been the first signing Hull City had paid for in quite a few years, and although it wasn't a huge amount, the supporters had provided it, and to the club it was a lot – the fact that the supporters' group had raised the money proved how hard up the club was at that time. The lads at Hull City were a good bunch, a mix of locals and pros who had spent most of their careers up north.

The manager, Terry Dolan, seemed OK, as did his sidekick, Jeff Lee. On the pitch, the pre-season went very well, including a victory at home against my former club Grimsby Town, followed up by a couple more impressive team and individual performances. All was looking good as we went into our last pre-season game, away to Halifax.

Then disaster struck.

Defenders have always got stuck in, but before the rule to stop tackles from

behind was brought in and enforced, things were particularly bad. Usually, I would sidestep bad tackles, especially after my last ankle-breaking incident, but this time I failed to get out of the way of a two-footed challenge. Result: broken ankle, damaged ankle ligaments, and three months out. I was going to miss the start of the season with my new club.

It was Sod's Law that the person they brought in to replace me, Linton Brown, a local lad from the local leagues, went on to form a great partnership with Dean Windass, who was already a big favourite at the club.

Off the field things were pretty good and, at first, living in Hull was great. A few of us had rented a place on Victoria Dock, where lots of the players, including Dean, and Alan Fettis, our goalkeeper, had houses. Like most keepers, as clichéd as it might be, Alan Fettis was slightly mad. With the move to Victoria Dock, my ties to Cleethorpes had been almost severed. Now it was much more about the football than the nights out.

My nickname at Hull City was 'Sniffer'. No, I didn't smell, nor did I smell other people. One day, when I was out of the house, the lads ransacked my gear, and found an old tape of mine. On it was my first interview, after I had scored two goals at York in my FA Cup debut for Grimsby Town. The presenter, Dave Gibbons, who is now on the BBC team down in Devon, said to me that I reminded him of Alan 'Sniffer' Clark, the old Everton centre-forward, and there it was, the nickname stuck. To be honest though, it couldn't have been further from the truth because, for two years, I wasn't able to hit a barn door at Hull City. At Grimsby Town, Arthur Mann had said I was the best natural finisher he had ever seen. Well, at Hull City, I honestly think that if there had been a net erected covering one whole stand, I would somehow have managed to miss the target. The saying 'cow's arse with a banjo' is very appropriate for my fortunes in front of goal. I would go as far as to say that, if there had been an open goal the size of an aircraft hangar on offer, with no keeper in it, and with a ball that had a magnet on it that attracted it to the net, I would still have somehow contrived to miss the target, something – a small earthquake, a sudden bout of Delhi belly, or some sort of random floodlight failure – would have stopped me from hitting the onion bag.

Obviously, I did eventually return from the ankle injury and made my first appearance. It was a tough game and I was a bit ring rusty, but I felt as if it was going OK. I was maybe trying a bit too hard, and I dragged a few shots wide, but on the whole I was getting back into the swing of it. However, in his wisdom, Jeff Lee dragged me off with twenty-five minutes to go. I say Jeff Lee because although Terry Dolan was the manager, it was really Jeff, the 'blow dart' specialist, who ran the show. I call him a blow dart specialist as, like a tribesman

in the jungle, he was an expert at stealthily taking down ‘enemies’, one at a time.

I only ever showed fleeting glimpses of what I could do at Hull City. A couple of decent performances do spring to mind – in particular, away at Bradford and then Birmingham. I gave Eddie Youds, another ex-Evertonian, and now playing for Bradford City, a torrid afternoon, running him all over the place in what was a great win for Hull City that day. The fact it was against one of our local rivals made it all the more sweet. The Birmingham game also sticks in my memory and not just because there was a big crowd there. I remember walking off the pitch at St Andrews, the home of Birmingham City, to the chant of ‘There’s only one Chrissy Hargreaves’, which was great.

Even Barry Fry, the Birmingham manager, said that if he’d had eleven Chris Hargreaves that day, he would have been a happy man. But, as I said, these moments of form were fleeting. The fans were brilliant to me really, considering I should have done a lot better; they could see I was trying, but the constant cycle of being in and out of position, and in and out of the team, meant for a pretty frustrating and disappointing time at Hull City.

Needing my own space, I had decided to purchase a house in Beverley, a small market town about ten miles from Hull. It was a bad move financially, as I couldn’t really afford the place, but it was where I struck up some great friendships, some that I still have to this day, and none better than with Michael ‘Chatty’ Chapman.

Other than the odd polite ‘Hello’ for the first six months of us being neighbours, Chatty and I never spoke to each other. I can’t even remember when or how we got chatting, but somehow we did, and over the next eighteen months we had some great laughs.

As well as Mick, I also met his group of friends, top people with totally non-football backgrounds. This was great for me, as on the field I was having a right royal nightmare. The last thing I wanted to do was yap on about it outside of the club. Mick’s mates were an eclectic bunch. There was Lee Watson, aka Bernard G. Shaw – his middle name was Bernard so we embellished it a bit – who was Chatty’s best mate and was obsessed with his spiders and his old Scirocco; Caroline Bradley, who was Lee’s on/off girlfriend and a one woman party; ‘Bonga’, who only spoke on a need to know basis; Julie, who was brought up on a farm and could drink more than most blokes; and ‘dopey’ Dave, Julie’s on/off boyfriend, who sounded like he was constantly drunk. They were the type of people you could not only have a great night with, but who could talk about football without prejudice, because apart from Mick, who was both a Leeds United and Hull City fan, no one really gave a shit.

These laughs would continue for the next fifteen years. Michael Chapman

was not your typical lad's lad: he worked in trading standards, was the son of a vicar, and had a great upbringing behind him; he was a real gentle giant who also happened to love music, partying and footy. He did morph into more of a Hull City fan, as Leeds United were going the other way though, shallow or what? We used to frequent the watering holes of Beverley, most notably 'Nellies', and also the non-ritzy side of Hull, such as the Blue Lamp club, which was a bit like a jazz club, where you went if you were recovering from a few years of the rave culture. We also knocked about in The Mainbrace – a pub in which Paul Heaton, of the Housemartins and later The Beautiful South, would regularly drink. It was a very welcome change to the normal football.

After training I would go over to Chatty's and listen to his woes about finding a good woman or, in fact, any woman. To be fair, I didn't really help him too much on that front. Don't get me wrong, if we were out I would approach the ladies (at Mick's request!) and get 'Chatty' involved, 'bigging' him up and then leaving him to it. But more often than not, Chatty's instincts would not lean towards the bedroom – he was far more likely to form friendships, or even, on a couple of occasions, create a pen pal. Such was his way.

As much as we all tried to hook Chatty up while we were on a night out, I admit to stitching him up on several occasions, rather than helping him with potential girlfriends. He came up to me in a club one night absolutely buzzing, saying, 'Greavsie, I am on fire tonight, there are about four darlings over there, and they are there really loving me, giving me the nod and allsorts.'

I said, 'Well played mate, get yourself over there and say hello.'

He did, and after a couple of uncomfortable minutes, he came back fuming. 'You tit, no wonder they were giggling away at me, I've got a fucking two-foot Dave's Taxi's sticker on my back, haven't I?'

After we had all stopped laughing, I apologised, and as usual I gave him a big hug, which usually did the trick.

He did actually manage to get a date in the end, and for some bizarre reason had decided a game of tennis would be a good idea. Seizing on an opportunity we (Bernard G. Shaw was my willing accomplice) set up surveillance in some bushes near the tennis court. This was the court where, on numerous occasions, I had had the normally mild-mannered Chatty at breaking point with my ground shots and constant banter. Many a time there would be a racket sailing over the fence in anger after a bad shot, and many times it was that of the upstanding Michael Chapman.

Anyway, back to the bush, and just before the first shot was played Bernie let out a subtle 'Miaow.'

Both Chatty and his lady-friend looked up, but suspected nothing. A few

shots later, and on Chatty's serve, I let out a, 'Baaaaaaaaa'. Again both looked up, but didn't investigate. They must have thought it was normal, somehow. Meanwhile we were in that bush, shaking with laughter, trying to keep silent. We were like little school kids playing a prank, laughing so much it hurt, especially when, after Bernie's attempt at some sort of bird noise, old 'Slipmat' (one of the many nicknames Chatty acquired) walked over to his lady-friend and said, 'I think it's a squirrel nest, they're real pests.'

Poor Chatty, over the next thirty minutes that court heard the sounds of an elephant, a donkey, a monkey and, the last straw for both players, two fighting pigs. Chatty said later that he suspected we were involved, but he couldn't see us, and had really thought his date was a secret. Little did he know a footballer and an unemployed labourer have plenty of time on their hands to stalk potential victims. We laughed so much that day, even more so when Chatty returned and said, 'You tossers, thanks for that. It was going badly before the noises anyway.'

'Why?' we asked, pictures of innocence.

'You know why, you pair of muppets. The ten condoms that fell to the floor when I took the racket out of the cover didn't go down too well.'

Chatty did try to get his revenge a few weeks later, but again it ended badly for the big fella.

The normal ritual for the morning after a night out is: as the hangover sets in, you search the fridge and cupboards for stodgy food. On this occasion, I had recently purchased a big block of cheese, so was looking forward to large amounts of cheese on toast. Strangely enough, on opening the fridge, I discovered just small fragments of cheese left in the bag. The bread was also gone as were a few bottles of beer. I was a bit confused – had I got the munchies the night before and forgotten? Had I already consumed the stuff a day earlier?

Then, as my brain started recovering, I remembered I heard a bit of noise during the night – a banging sound, then some giggling. Now, I was no Columbo or Ironside, but my suspicions were quickly confirmed after nipping around to Chatty's to ask him if he wanted to go for a big fry up.

Incredibly, he said no. Now, Chatty was a big lad, so for him to say no was bizarre. Once I added to that the immense look of guilt on his face, I knew what had gone on. Bernie and Chatty had taken the key from under the only rock in the garden (security was not on the top of my list of priorities), sneaked in the back door, and had a feast of twelve slices of cheese on toast and eight 'nightcap' beers. After their weak efforts at some sort of apology, I said nothing. Instead, I waited until Chatty had gone to work the next day, and set to work myself. On his return, the close we lived in was a hive of activity (well around Mick's house it was). His face was a picture as he saw the crowds taking photos of his house. I

had covered the entire front of Mick's house in paper, and on it was written in massive letters: 'Keep all women and children away from Michael Chapman, Michael Chapman is a cheese thief, Do not approach this man, Lock all your doors and fridges.' And to cap it all, 'Michael Chapman is GAY and proud.'

The whole thing had taken me about eight hours to do, but it was definitely worth it. When Chatty got out of the car, he burst into laughter, finally stopping for just long enough to concede defeat.

'Sorry mate. It was Bernie's idea – you know I've never got anything in.'

He was right about that, his house resembled the set of *The Young Ones* at the best of times.

That incident, along with you being locked naked in a bedroom on New Year's Eve, having a dead fish planted behind your sofa for three months, and him being abandoned, again naked, in Gran Canaria, must bring back great memories, Mick. They certainly do for me.

The laughs we had in my time at Hull City really kept me going and I am forever indebted to Chatty and the Beverley crew for just being great people, not judging me as a footballer – just as a person and a mate.

I went on some epic trips back then. On one occasion we went camping in the Yorkshire Dales with ten of us in two tents – there were supposed to be three tents, but Julie hadn't thought of bringing a tent, so she borrowed mine. I had borrowed it from one of my dad's friends, Dave Carrat. Dave had a body shop (not the bath products sort, more the 'give me a weekend and it will look like new, forget the health implications, those fumes wouldn't hurt a fly' sort). Dave the spray man was into fishing, and had lent me his special bivvy tent. After Julie had finished with it, it looked more like a tea bag. I apologised to Dave, and said that Julie might have one or two smoking issues that needing sorting.

Another time, I went to Amsterdam with Bernie, where he took such advantage of the local activities it was as if he were on death row and had one last day. The group's trip to the Canaries was epic. It involved us lads returning home at about seven in the morning, just when the girls (Fiona and her sister Becky), who had preferred an earlier night and a bit of morning sun, were getting up.

It was a recipe for disaster. Saying we were only staying out for one more drink was never going to wash. One night, as we snuck back in through the patio doors of the place we had rented, I heard a noise, so, quickly, I told the boys to whip on some swimming shorts, and pretend we were just getting up, ready for the day. Fiona walked in, and I said, 'Hi babe, we couldn't sleep, so we just thought we would get up with you and Becky.'

She replied, 'Oh thanks darling, that's nice of you guys.'

At the time, we thought we had pulled off a real coup, and although it was agony keeping up the act, we were as pleased as punch. On the flight back to the UK, Fiona turned to me and said, ‘Do you think I am a complete idiot, you silly, silly boy? I am going to make you pay for that little escapade, you total prat.’

OK, so it hadn’t been a total success, but we tried.

I also went to Glastonbury with Chatty, which was good fun – top bands, and a few days of peace and love. These are just some of the adventures we had, and a much-needed break from the madness of ‘footballers’ parties’. Those guys are still my good friends, and as my career took me to different cities and towns, the Beverley crew seemed to come with me, from Birmingham to Plymouth, from Hereford to Northampton.

My Beverley friends had seen a similar rise in the dance culture as my mates had in Cleethorpes, and they had definitely experienced the things that came with it. The difference was that, unlike for those in Cleethorpes, it was a just a stage they had gone through, and grown out of. They had decent jobs, and now wanted to earn money for cars and houses, not to waste on drink and drugs at the weekend. As my habits changed from those I’d had back in Cleethorpes, to the more relaxed lifestyle I’d discovered in Hull, the ties between me and my old friends became weaker. The final cut of these ties happened at a party Fiona and I had organised to get all my friends, old and new, together. It ended with the Cleethorpes lot segregating themselves upstairs, watching *Match of the Day* – which in itself was bizarre considering the house was full of beer. I just don’t think the old Meggies lot seemed able to socialise with me or my new friends back then. It was too difficult for them, and I had moved on.

Even at this stage in my career, the money issue was becoming a problem. I remember surviving for three weeks on just beans on toast, every day (and they were cheap beans at that. I was in agony I can tell you!). I didn’t want to bother my folks about money, as I always saw asking for help as a sign of weakness, especially as I had now officially left home.

I was running a Citroën BX at the time, the one that rose as you started the engine. That car was garaged for insurance reasons – I couldn’t afford it. I went in my garage a month later, and the floor was soaking wet – the hydraulics had gone and the fluid had leaked all over the floor. That motor had never brought me much luck. I remember being woken very early one morning, and very hung over after a night out with the lads, by a policeman and a police-woman. She was smiling, he was grimacing – I had nothing on. They informed me it was a Saturday morning, Beverley’s market day, and my car was in the middle of where the traders would normally be setting up their stalls. The team had gone out after a pre-season game on a Friday night. I had (finally) scored a goal,

believe it or not, for Hull City, and had then got sucked into a bit of a night out (if I remember rightly, it was the flat cap worn backwards phase, pure Boyzone – we must have looked ridiculous). I had hurriedly abandoned my car in the market place, a cardinal sin for any Beverley resident, and had cracked on with the lads.

So, I rushed to the car, arriving sweating and in expectation of a very icy reception from the market traders. What I saw certainly shocked me. The traders had obviously got fed up with waiting, and had carried on setting up, regardless. My car, when I found it, was sandwiched between an art stall and a fruit and veg stall – the bonnet was literally covered with boxes of bananas.

It went down well with everyone I knew because of the comedy value, but for the market traders I can't say the same – those early morning rises would make you massively irritable anyway, and having some plonker's car get in the way of your plot is a dead cert for a case of chronic humour bypass. As I tried to apologise to the man whose plot it obviously was, he leaned towards me and said, 'Wanker.'

I couldn't have put it better myself.

On the drinking front, we certainly made the most of our club sponsor at the time, 'Pepi's Bar and Restaurant', situated on the Marina. They would provide us with free beer all day on a Wednesday if we won an away game the previous weekend, or the day before. This was like a red rag to a bull for the lads, who cracked on at full pace. This offer was only stopped when two of them decided to jump into the docks one day after consuming far too many bottles of fruit flavoured beverages.

1994/95

The second season at Hull City promised much, but yet again it didn't happen for me. The first game of the 94/95 season saw us play Oxford United, away. I missed an easy early chance, we got beaten 4–0, and I got sent off. I felt as if I must have had a curse put on me while at Hull City; I could hit a bar or post with the best of them, I had them cleared off the line and disallowed, but I could not hit the net. The Monday morning following this particular match against Oxford, I stayed out on the training ground for about two hours after the first team had trained. I got one of the apprentices to do the same free-kick routine that had seen me get in past the Oxford City defence the previous Saturday, but had resulted in a miss. This time, I put the ball in the top corner, the bottom corner, and I smashed it down the middle. In fact, I didn't stop smashing balls in the net until this poor young lad said, 'Chris, I'm sorry, but I have to get my bus in fifteen minutes!'

I know it doesn't count in training, but I had to get it out of my system.

Still, I would go on to do this type of extra training time and time again over the course of my career, and many pros do the same. I would go in on an afternoon on my own, or after training when the boys had left, and just practise for an hour or two. It could be anything, just as long as I felt I was doing something productive. I suppose it goes back to being in the park when I was a kid and just enjoying football. One thing is for sure, I tell the younger pros starting out now to do the same, as going to the pub when you've been playing off form is, without doubt, not the answer – well, not every night, anyway!

From the beginning of this season, Dean continued to bang them in, and he was building a great partnership with Linton Brown. As much as many people criticise Dean Windass for some of his behaviour on and off the pitch, it isn't possible to argue with his achievements on it, not only for himself, but also for Hull City. Many years later, when I had signed for Brentford, I was chatting to a few of the lads there, including Jamie Lawrence, Isaiah Rankin and Andy Myers, and Dean's name cropped up. Let's just say, his name got a very frosty reception from the lads from his Bradford City days, for many different reasons.

Dean is what he is though, and he was always OK with me. His will to win could not be in doubt, but it did sometimes boil over. In one warm-up, the lads

had organised a circle – this is where there would be a circle of lads, and two players would be in the middle trying to get the ball off the lads on the outside. During the circle Dean had laid a pass a bit short towards our centre-half, Gary Hobson, and it was won by one of the lads in the middle. Everyone waited for Dean to go in, but instead he piped up with, ‘Any fucking danger of you going to the ball, Hobbo?’

Hobbo stuck up for himself, and said it was a poor pass and Dean should get in the middle and deal with it. Dean walked towards him, but the rest of us thought nothing of it, as both players were just sticking up for themselves with the typical banter, until Dean said, ‘I’ll fucking smash you! It was a shit ball.’

Hobbo’s reply was, ‘Do it then, I’m here mate.’

It should have been done and dusted there and then, and just put down to a ‘handbag’ moment, but as he got near Hobbo, Dean decided to throw a head butt. It was mayhem: blood everywhere, Hobbo in shock with a suspected broken nose, and the lads dragging Dean off him. Terry Dolan just stood there shitting himself, knowing he had to make some sort of a decision.

He certainly did that. Knowing that Dean was our prized possession, Terry swept the whole thing under the carpet. Dean had been well out of order, but a short time later he was off to Aberdeen for a fee that saved Hull City. That was the way with Dean, he could drive you mad, but put him on a football pitch and he would do the business for you.

There was a spell at Hull City when the lads thought Dean was getting a bit big for his boots, and so a plan was put in place to knock him down a peg or two. We got one of the girls in reception to phone his house saying that the manager wanted to see him urgently, as Aberdeen wanted to sign him the next day. At this stage there were only just rumours about Aberdeen. As we hid behind one of the stands, Dean’s little Vauxhall Nova came into view, hurtling into the club car park. He got out and shot into Terry Dolan’s office. Five minutes later he came out again, with his tail well and truly between his legs, looking around, knowing the lads were involved. Terry had apparently said, ‘Sorry Dean, we have had no enquiries from Aberdeen whatsoever.’

He was fuming, and in typical Dean fashion the next day he had revenge, by putting Linton Brown’s car on bricks. A few months later he did go to Aberdeen for six hundred thousand pounds. Last laugh there, then!

My relationship with the manager and his assistant, Jeff Lee, was becoming strained. Jeff had rapidly shown himself to be a bit of a psycho. At half time in one game, we were drawing 0–0, the manager said a few words, and then Jeff let rip big time. He looked around the changing room shouting, ‘You’re all fucking having one, no desire, no fuck all.’

He then turned to me and said, ‘And it’s all your fucking fault you cunt, it’s all your fault!’

Jesus, don’t hold back Jeff, honestly just say what you think – had I have known then what I do now about football, and the characters in it, I would have got up, dragged him out of the changing room, and beaten him up, while shouting, ‘Why have you got a job in football you little weasel?’ – but I was young, and very low on confidence, so just took it. It was no surprise to see my number held up five minutes after the second half had kicked off.

On another occasion, I didn’t wait to give Jeff Lee the pleasure of hammering me. Again I was dragged off, but this time it was ten minutes before the break. He must have been shocked upon entering the changing room at half time to see it empty. I’m sure he was ready to explode with anger, as he normally did towards every player, and especially me. The only exception was his son Chris, not a bad lad, to be fair, but played by Jeff week in week out, much to the amusement of the fans. Chris was never the target of Jeff’s offensive tantrums. Jeff’s face used to go so red during his rants that I swear he was one burst blood vessel away from a heart attack.

Anyway, as I say, I wasn’t prepared to be called a ‘cunt’ again, not on top of the embarrassment of being dragged off before half time, and by someone who had not exactly been a world class player or coach himself. No, this time I pre-empted any mad rants; I got showered, got in my car, and drove to Birmingham where Fiona had a placement, and where I knew I would be far away from football. That night I bought a bottle of wine and just chilled with Fiona, and it was pure bliss.

My absence certainly got the message across to Lee that I wasn’t going to be treated like shit any more. I am, and have always been, my own worst critic. I know if I have had a good or bad game. I can tell when criticism is deserved, and could tell that Jeff always went over the top. Leaving the ground at half time that day was me sending a signal that I wouldn’t tolerate an inappropriate outburst again. However, it was also probably the stage when they decided I would be gone at the end of the season.

The day that did eventually happen was a strange one. We had won away at Blackpool on the Saturday before, it was the last game of the season and the Hull City faithful had sung my name after a decent performance as left wing-back. This was a rare good performance, rare because it is not a position I play most comfortably in. I reckon that if I had played in midfield at Hull City, I could have had a decent future there, but for now I was still seen as a striker, and as such, hadn’t done the business. End of story.

I entered the office and the manager gave me the news of my transfer.

Considering my performance over the season, I couldn't argue with the decision, but I was nevertheless still shocked. In those days, being given a free transfer had a bit of a stigma attached to it. Dolan was laughing nervously, and the words that came out of his mouth didn't match his demeanour.

'I'm going to be letting you go, Chris.'

I said it was no problem and that I understood I hadn't done it for him. I then got up and said, 'All the best then.'

However, he carried on, obviously feeling he had to justify his decision, 'It's just the lack of goals, and the money you're on.'

Again, I said, 'No problem.'

I just wanted to get out of there. I was actually very upset and embarrassed, but didn't want to show it, especially as I still had to face the lads and say my goodbyes. Jeff mumbled something like, 'If there is anything I can do, just let me know.'

There was – fuck off mate. If he'd tried treating me like that again in a few years, the outcome would have been very different.

Despite my anger at Jeff, I felt guilty that the faith and money the club had invested in me had not been rewarded. Because of this, I wrote a letter to the then chairman, saying that very thing. He was a good man who knew I had given one hundred per cent, but had had the luck of a blind, one-legged dog. I got a great letter back from him saying not to worry about it, and wishing me all the best.

I returned to my house in Beverley that day, thoroughly pissed off for having failed to do myself justice. Pretty much everyone agreed with this assessment – the next day's papers basically said 'Hargreaves has been crap; it was a fiasco signing him, and now he is off' or words to that effect – the sports writer was a guy called Colin Young, who now writes for the *Daily Mail*. Although he wasn't a bad lad, and his assessment of my time at Hull City was spot on, it still hurt to see it in print. I just hope he thinks more of my writing than my football.

That afternoon it got even worse. My phone rang. (It went to answer phone as I was in no mood for picking it up.) I picked up the message and it was the North Ferriby United manager saying that he had spoken to Terry Dolan, who had said that I might be in need of a club. I bet he had. Thanks for that, Terry. Yes, I would love to play for a team in the non-league, thanks for that glowing recommendation. While you're at it, why don't you put your name forward for the manager's job at the same time?

I phoned my mum and dad to break the news about Hull City; they were obviously gutted for me, as was Fiona. I was more upset for them though, once again feeling as if I had let them all down. The next day, as I was returning from

a therapeutic thrashing of Chatty on the tennis court, the phone was ringing again. Who was it going to be this time? The Beverley Arms FC manager? The Dog and Duck chairman? I left it to go to the answer phone, unwilling to receive the news first hand. I picked up the message, and what a message it was!

For all the problems I had had with Alan Buckley, this phone call couldn't have come at a better time for me. The message was left by Arthur Mann, still Buckley's loyal friend and assistant, now at West Bromwich Albion. Buckley's successful exploits at Grimsby Town had not gone unnoticed either by other clubs or their chairmen, and West Bromwich Albion had secured his services. The message went something like this, 'Chrissy boy, it's Arthur. The gaffer spotted that you had been released and could not believe it, and neither could I, son. Give me or the gaffer a ring as soon as you can, as we are interested.'

I felt like crying.

Arthur was a proper gentleman; he had always treated me really well. As I have said, I sometimes thought he could have stuck up for me a bit more with old Bucko, but he was extremely loyal to his mate, who was also his boss, so that was fair enough. Arthur taught me a lot, not only about football but about life, and about being a good person. On Buckley's second return to Grimsby, Arthur politely rejected the role as Buckley's assistant. I honestly think he was fed up with the constant pressures of football, so instead he took up a job as a forklift driver. Soon after taking up his new post he had a terrible accident, resulting in his death. He left behind his lovely wife Sandra, two sons, including Neil, a good footballer and great lad whom I played with at both Hull City and Grimsby Town, and his daughter, Georgina. A terrible end for such a great man, and a tragic loss.

1995/96

I didn't need a second invitation to drive to West Bromwich Albion football club. The *Hull Daily Mail*, the same paper that had given me a bit of a battering on the back of my release from Hull City, was now reporting the news that I was signing for the Baggies, a big club in the league above Hull City, and with a huge ambition to return to the top flight as quickly as possible.

I know Jeff Lee, for one, would have definitely choked on his Coco Pops while reading the paper that morning. I should have phoned him and told him to pick his chin up off the table and take another couple of Valium, or whatever he was on at the time.

I got another call from the manager of North Ferriby asking me if I was interested in signing for them. This time I had no need to let the answer phone filter my calls.

'Hi, yes, thanks for the interest and the "kind" recommendation from Terry, but I think I'm going to be signing for West Brom.'

His reply: 'Oh Chris! I think that would be a good decision.'

It was an amazing twist of fate; once again, by sheer coincidence, I would be following my childhood sweetheart Fiona, this time to Birmingham.

For all the grief that Buckley had previously put me through, he had now given me an escape route for which I was extremely grateful. If I played for Alan now, or, in fact, anytime after 1996, I'm sure he would be delighted to have me. I would run through brick walls for most of my managers, and vice versa, but while I still had that rebellious streak in me, Buckley and I just clashed, and would again at West Bromwich Albion.

I'm not sure whether he felt sorry for me, seeing that I had been released, felt guilty about the harsh way he had treated me at Grimsby Town, or did, in fact, think I had talent. Whatever his reason for signing me, his Hargreaves bashing tendencies would return. But for now, I was driving to a big city delighted that I might be signing for a massive club, West Bromwich Albion.

To sum up my time at the Baggies is easy: it was short.

The journey down to Birmingham was filled with both excitement and apprehension – excitement that I might be on the verge of joining a big club, and apprehension that I would be reunited with Mr Buckley. Still, I was just happy to

be getting away from Hull.

Fiona and I drove through Handsworth on our way to meet Alan and Arthur, and West Bromwich Albion's imposing ground was soon upon us. My reaction was, 'Wow, this *is* a big club!'

We entered the ground and soon were both sat down in Alan's office. Fiona came with me as she knew Alan from my Grimsby Town days, but it didn't stop me feeling like I did back at Grimsby Town, nervously sat in the headmaster's office! ...

Buckley began: 'Young Christian! How are you, and what went on earth went on at Hull? Me and Arthur thought that you would set that place on fire!'

So did I, was my reply. He went on to say that I would be the replacement for a striker he was letting go, and that this was a chance to start learning the game again. There was no doubt the second statement was the truth.

I signed a two-year deal that day, and I was absolutely bloody delighted. With the benefit of hindsight, the move down to Birmingham should have been made easier for me, but at that stage I was just happy to be at such a big club. You see, the only thing that the club, or Alan Buckley, did to help me with accommodation was to provide one night in a hotel. Really, we should have had a little bit of relocation money, or at least have been given a couple of weeks in a hotel to look around and get ourselves sorted. However, at this stage I just accepted anything. Luckily for us, a friend of Fiona's from back home, Deborah Thompson, was also studying in Birmingham, and had a house in Retreat Road, so we gladly accepted her offer of crashing there for a few nights/weeks.

It was also through Debs that I met a group of lads who would really show me the ropes in Birmingham. Paul Lawes, Wayne Gidden and Andy Boo were certainly well versed on the finer parts of the social scene; they seemed to be on the guest list of every bar and club in town. Wayne was a fantastic singer, first with the band 'And Why Not?' and then as a solo artist, and Paul was his manager. Andy was a roadie for bands such as UB40, the Bootleg Beatles and Joe Strummer. We had a great time in Birmingham, seeing it grow into a real cultural city, enjoying many balmy nights sat outside the famous Ronnie Scott's or the Rep bar along the way. Once again, the nights out would become too frequent. They say 'never go into business with friends', and that sentiment rings true from my days in Birmingham. I was later to invest in Wayne's career, a move that saw our friendship, as well as our finances, strained.

Fiona and I eventually found a place to rent, a small terrace house in Smethwick, which was close enough to the city centre, an OK area, and also a stone's throw from the football ground. We should have bought a house at this point, as over the years we have spent far too long in, and wasted far too much

money on, rented accommodation.

On the field, first team opportunities were very limited, but I was training day in, day out, with good players. As I was still a striker, the competition for places was tremendous. I always find it frustrating looking back, as I'm sure that if I had played in midfield then, as I have for most of my subsequent career, there would have been a lot more appearances for me in a West Bromwich Albion shirt. As a player on the sidelines at a big club there are two choices, stay on your decent wage and contract but never play, or sacrifice the level you're at, to play week in week out at a smaller club. Again, there is no right or wrong answer. If you have a desire to play football every Saturday afternoon you will make the move, if you don't, and we see lots of players doing it, you will warm the bench for a few years.

Personally, I found it almost impossible to train all week and then have to watch the lads on a Saturday afternoon.

While writing this book, I have looked through lots of snippets and programmes, and one set of programme notes from West Bromwich Albion was very interesting. It was the stats page of the club's reserve team. In the space of eight weeks, I had scored against six Premier League clubs, including Liverpool and Man United. Some of these games would be attended by a few thousand fans, and it was a good way of showing you could do well, in order to get into the first team. Despite my efforts and successes in training and in the reserve team, my experiences at Grimsby Town would soon be revisited. I couldn't buy a game in the first team for love nor money.

I would go in to the changing room the morning after these reserve team games and the lads who were in the first team at the time would just laugh. Kevin Donovan, a talented right-winger, used to shake his head and say, 'You scored again! Chris, you are on fire, any danger of him playing you or what?'

Even a fan, watching at a reserve game with his son, came up to me afterwards and asked, 'Are you ever going to play in the first team, son? Have you shagged the manager's wife or something?'

The answers were no and no. Apart from a few substitute appearances, and a trip to play in the Anglo-Italian Cup in Brescia, I was seriously on the sidelines at the 'Baggies', and as for Mrs Buckley ... no.

Again, my rashness and impatience cost me dearly. I could have stayed there on decent enough wages and sat it out, but that just wasn't me. Ironically enough, Alan Buckley got the sack soon after I left, so maybe I would have played in the end. At the time, however, I felt that I was never going to get a look in. The club had some great strikers, Bob Taylor, Andy Hunt and former Grimsby striker Tony Rees, to name but a few, so it was always going to be

tough. When I added to this that once again the manager seemed to be on a mission to break me, playing anywhere was more important than not playing at all.

There were a few classic instances of old Bucko's temper tantrums. One such flare-up happened at Millwall. I was on the bench, we were well in the game and it looked as though it would end a draw but Paul 'Eddie' Edwards, a Scouser who could dig himself a hole with the best of them, made a mistake at the death and Millwall nicked the game 1–0. Buckley came in and started his trademark rant, screaming at the top of his voice, with his face changing colour from red to very, very red, within seconds. Eddie came in for some hellish abuse, as did a few of the lads. He just made things worse by continually saying in his Scouse accent, 'Err sorry boss, I thought ...' to which Bucko would shout, 'I don't pay you to fucking think.'

After about twenty-five minutes of ranting he paused and turned to me, an unused sub, and shouted, 'And when are you going to get your fucking hair cut?'

It was a random shout and I think it was just a show of dominance to the rest of the lads, but it was totally uncalled for, unnecessary and very bizarre. My answer (which I chose, very wisely, to keep to myself) was, 'I'm not; it's going to be like this for the next fifteen years, mate, now get off your high horse and put your dummy back in.'

You swiftly learnt to stay out of his way after defeats. Unfortunately, after one such game, the West Bromwich Albion physio tried too hard to stay out of the way. Again, it was a late defeat, and again, there was a whirlwind waiting to happen, so the physio hid behind the door hoping to avoid any backlash. Buckley came charging into the changing room and nearly kicked the door off its hinges. Behind it was our physio in a heap, with a bleeding head. A couple of stitches and a lesson learnt there.

As a coach, Buckley could put on great sessions, and did improve lots of players but, unfortunately, he also destroyed lots of players over the years, by wrecking their confidence.

That may sound a bit defeatist, in that you have to show a bit of character as a player and dig in. Anyone who has known me over the years, on and off the pitch, will know that as a player and as a person, I have done my fair share of digging in. The problem with Bucko was that once he had 'lost' a player, he had truly lost him; his management skills did not stretch so far as building bridges. Ultimately, as the game and players' attitudes moved on, I don't think his did. Maybe if he had been able to change the way he handled players, he would still be a successful manager.

As a player, Alan Buckley knew where the goal was, but he was also a player

who had never quite made it to the top. As a striker for Walsall he was prolific, breaking a few records in the process, but at Nottingham Forest he didn't quite reach those heights. I don't know if that is what gave him his fire, but his most furious outbursts were always directed towards front players. It was often the case with managers who had played in a certain position when younger – they focused on players in that position now. For him, strikers always came in for the most scrutiny.

Petty as it may seem, the hair issue had clearly become a problem. It became a symbol of the conflict between Buckley and me. Maybe I should have got it cut, but at that stage in my life it felt right for me. It was as if I had given myself a new identity along with my move to West Bromwich Albion, and it had no effect on my performance either, which was the main point. I was staying behind after every session to do extra training, whether it was shooting practice or fitness work, and I was at the gym every afternoon lifting weights. I had my own little routine and I grew my hair to give myself a new angle – I don't know, I suppose it was me wanting to be different. At one point, Buckley even shouted at me in the club corridor after training. He was belittling me in front of the lads.

‘If you don't get your hair cut that's it, I'm fining you a week's wages.’

I did get it cut, but only a few centimetres off the length mind you. My hair would remain.

I got on really well with all of the players at the club, players like Daryl Burgess, who was later to became a close friend, Andy Hunt, a prolific striker with a student's attitude to life (I mean no offence, just that he appreciated chilling out, having the odd cigarette, and nipping down to the student union), Kevin Donovan, a tricky winger and a really funny lad, and Stacy Coldicott, a local boy made good, fitness fanatic and, again, a great character.

As with most squads we also had an older set, players such as Bob Taylor, Mike Phelan, Paul Peschisolido and Richard Sneekes; players who had seen it, done it and got the T-shirt. Bob was, and is, a Baggies legend, but that guy could walk under a black cloud with the best of them. If he hadn't scored for forty-five minutes he would suffer from mild depression. I could have tried reminding him, ‘Come on Bob, you have a lovely house, the fans love you, and you're on the most money at the club.’ But it would have been to no avail; he would have found a reason to remain down.

We also had an influx of the Grimsby Town old boys. Former captain Shaun Cunningham signed from Sunderland, along with Paul Agnew, Dave Gilbert, my old mucker Paul Reece and the Welsh wizard Tony Rees, to name but a few. In the end there were fourteen ex-Grimsby Town players or staff there. Understandably, Buckley wanted people he could trust, he knew and who had

done well for him, hence bringing in almost the entire Grimsby Town squad. However, ultimately the Baggies fans tired of this, and in the end it was a hugely influential factor in Alan's undoing. More on this, later.

Training at the football club was similar to that at Grimsby Town; Buckley had his way and it had, over the years and in the main, been very successful. The difference at West Bromwich Albion was that players such as Bob Taylor, Andy Hunt, Richard Sneekes and Mike Phelan were not going to take the same sort of shit that the lads at Grimsby Town had. These players had been successful at a good level, and, although they still showed the respect and professionalism required, were not going to be screamed at face to face, or do back-to-back twelve minute runs on a Sunday.

For anyone who hasn't done or heard of a twelve-minute run, it is basically a classic football fitness run – a case of running as fast as you can, usually around a pitch, for twelve minutes. It doesn't exactly sound hard, but believe me, with a squad of twenty-two very fit players, the pace is fast. Add to that Buckley's demanding all players get in nine laps, and it wasn't a jog.

I am fortunate to have been a pretty fit lad throughout my career but, of course, it still hurt like hell. While setting off on a running session at Northampton Town, John Hodge, a skilful, if a trifle overweight (sorry Hodgie, I couldn't resist it) winger, said to me, 'It's easy for you, you're always at the front.'

I laughed and said, while still panting away myself, 'It fucking hurts twice as bad at the front mate, you should try it sometime.'

Back to the 95/96 season, and Alan Buckley. The worst days were when we were made to do back-to-back twelve minute runs, either as a punishment for a recent loss, or for someone not going fast enough on the first one. Even Arthur Mann sent us on a run one day, but this time it was my fault. He had put on a session for the apprentices, where the defending players would line up on the eighteen-yard box and clear balls sent in by players on the halfway line. It was a very windy day, and the balls had gone absolutely everywhere. At the end of the session I joked to Arthur, 'Good idea that, Arthur – we will have to collect the balls for the rest of the day!'

I didn't expect that reaction at all. To say he exploded would actually be an understatement. I had utterly unintentionally put this normally mild mannered Scotsman in a total rage. Put it this way, we were all soon heading away from the training ground in the van, destination unknown. Someone asked Arthur why training had finished, and where we were going. His answer still makes me laugh today, and I'm sure it would him, God rest his soul. Arthur shouted at the top of his voice, 'You're all going to run your bollocks off, 'cos of that cunt in

the back of the van.'

Boy, he was mad. All the lads stayed quiet, no more questions asked.

We got out of the van and Arthur shouted, 'Right, now get running back to the ground, and you had better feckin get there in twenty minutes.'

We were near the Fitties, a local caravan site for holidaymakers, and it was a twenty-five minute run at a sprint.

I just said sorry to the lads, then set off at full pelt, after telling them I'd explain back at the ground. I got back in nineteen minutes flat, and Arthur was there waiting. I walked up to him and said, 'I'm sorry Arthur. I honestly didn't mean to—'

He stopped me talking mid-sentence, put his arm on my shoulder and said, 'You did that run in nineteen minutes, and that's why you're going to make it in the game, my son, because you've got heart.'

Nothing else was said.

As I type these words I am actually welling up (which is rare as my wife says I have an iron heart and never show any emotion). Thinking about that time in my life and of Arthur has certainly stirred up plenty of emotion for me. When the rest of the lads arrived back I apologised to them as well, but they didn't really mind. They found Arthur's reaction hilarious when I told them what I had said to him to prompt it. He was a great man. I had made a harmless comment, but I can see now how it might have hit a raw nerve, especially coming from a cocky sod like me. If you are up there Arthur, sorry again, but it *was* a very windy day.

So while the manager's old school ways were becoming a problem for some of the players, the second issue at the club was of bigger concern, certainly for the fans anyway. In the end it would go on to be a huge contributing factor in his dismissal. With his success at Grimsby Town had come a reliance on the players that were there then, ones that had done the business for him. To get them all at West Bromwich Albion was impossible, but to get a few of them was more than achievable. As I have said, fourteen players ended up making the move to West Bromwich Albion from Grimsby. Unfortunately, many of these players, whom I'm sure were delighted to be joining West Bromwich Albion, were either coming to the end of their careers, had suffered bad injuries, or just couldn't manage to find their previous form. This meant problems lay ahead. Our old captain at Grimsby Town, Shaun Cunnington, was the prime example. Brought in for a decent fee, and on a bloody good wage, he had suffered some bad injuries to his ankle, and as much as he tried would always break down. He couldn't go more than a game or so without suffering a recurrence of his ankle injury, or getting a new injury altogether. Along with Shaun came the likes of

Dave Gilbert, Paul Agnew and Tony Rees, all good players, whom I don't blame Buckley for getting. But for the Baggies faithful these relatively unknown players neither satisfied the club's ambition, nor calmed their impatience for Buckley to achieve. Success just didn't happen quickly enough.

The bollockings from Buckley were getting more regular, but less effective. I'm not saying that this meant a lack of respect. I, like all the lads, respected the gaffer and, of course, still valued his opinions and advice on football, but it was just the manner of his rants. We started to ignore them.

Aside from a good trip to Italy, for the game against Brescia, my time spent with the first team was minimal. This trip was also the first time I had encountered the word 'core', at least when it came to fitness training.

My roommate was a lad called Stacy Coldicott, a young combative midfielder who was as fit as a fiddle. After the game against Brescia we had nipped out for a beer, albeit a quick one, as the locals were far from accommodating. I was woken very early the next morning to some sort of grunting noises (and no it's not what you might think, Stacy hadn't had the fortune of meeting a signorina the night before). I turned over expecting to see Stacy in the opposite bed, but there was no sign of him. I shouted to him, thinking he might be in the bathroom, and I heard, 'I'm down here mate.'

I looked down, and saw him on the floor between the two beds. He was balancing on his elbows doing the 'plank', at six in the morning.

'What the fuck are you doing down there, you weirdo?' I asked.

'Core mate, core yeah.'

When he signed for Grimsby Town on Buckley's return to that club a few years later (there is a theme emerging here), rumour has it Stacy went swimming for two hours every morning before training – in the swimming pool that is, as takes thirty minutes to walk to the sea in Cleethorpes, and, if you did happen to brave the waters, you would be advised to take some antibiotics afterward.

Still in 95/96, and remaining at West Bromwich Albion, there were a few more bollockings for me. These were after reserve team games, or sometimes after first team games in which I had not even played.

He was mumbling something to himself after a practice game. I hadn't heard him, and as it was an incredibly hot day I was quickly walking over with some of the lads to get a drink before the next session. Over he strode screaming at me, not any of the others with me, 'Who the hell told you to get a drink? Who do you think you are?'

I had no reply. I don't think I had any fight in me with him any more, but someone else did, and he was not about to back down. Richard Sneekes, a popular Baggies midfielder and Dutch international replied for me.

‘He is getting a fucking drink, the same as me, we are not animals, we need to eat and drink.’

Total silence followed; all the lads knew he was right and Bucko was not about to challenge a character like Rich, so he let it go. Rich had been at Ajax, and had seen some great training facilities and fitness set-ups, so he clearly wouldn’t stand for any shit. However, Buckley was probably seething inside, and undoubtedly annoyed at my involvement.

As at many clubs, the lads got on really well. At every club great friendships are made and close bonds created. In some cases bonds form between lads who aren’t playing and who are disgruntled with the manager, as well as those between lads who are playing and are more than happy.

While I got on well with all the lads on the team, it is worth mentioning a couple in particular. Mike Phelan, who had previously played at Man United, was on good money, was also not playing, and was certainly not prepared to take any abuse from Buckley. I always enjoyed our early morning chats. We had an arrangement that I would bring in a paper in the morning, in return for a few stories from his time at Man United. He had some great tales from those days, from both on and off the field. To be fair to old Mickey Phelan, he hasn’t done too badly since has he? Please feel free to call me Mickey, or have you lost my number?

Another lad out of the team, Tony O’Brien, was a natural comic; in fact, if he isn’t a stand up comedian by now, I would be both very surprised, and very disappointed, as the public really need to see him in action. A few of us had our own Christmas party, as the club’s official party had been cancelled because of recent results being poor. As the likes of Tony, Mickey and I hadn’t even played, it seemed wrong not to get into the Christmas spirit. We were joined by Paul Reece, who had become the official club comic at the Baggies. He started every day rushing into the changing room toilet and shouting, ‘Exorcism!’

‘Leave me, leave me nowwww’ could be heard ringing around the ground. I’ll leave the rest to your imagination.

With my situation at the club worsening, and with my newfound friends in Birmingham constantly on the phone asking me if I wanted to pop out, the temptation to join them was always there. As well as my ‘Birmingham three’ (Paul, Wayne and Andy), my old mate Paul Reece was around. He wasn’t exactly shy of a good time, although he now lived in Nottingham, making regular nights out difficult. The times we did go out were always full on, to say the least.

I sometimes make it sound like I was out every other night – I wasn’t. Believe me, you cannot sustain a football career for long if you are out drinking

constantly; I highlight the nights out and mistakes as a lesson of how not to do it. The majority of the time I was sat at home relaxing on the sofa watching *Emmerdale*, and then retiring early for the next morning's training.

Fiona and her sister had gone to Ibiza for a week and so, with the house being free, Reecy and I decided to go out on a few occasions for old times' sake. Unfortunately, one of the nights out we chose was a Friday.

We were both in the squad for Saturday's game, and although we both knew we wouldn't actually play in the game, going out was definitely a bad move. In fact, it was a bloody stupid move.

The night progressed quickly and before long we had both had far too much to drink. We had ended up at a nightclub. Reecy had sloped off somewhere and I was heading back to a party with an old mate called Sam, whom I had bumped into that night. There were about six others, none of them friends of mine, and we ended up at a hotel on Broad Street. The drink was flying, and so were the drugs.

The next thing I remember is a girl in some sort of cat suit saying, 'Come on, it's your turn now', while pointing at an industrial size line of cocaine on top of the TV. I had never touched cocaine, so I just gave it the big one saying, 'No thanks, I've had enough already tonight. I'll have this instead, and then I'm off.'

With that, I picked up a random bottle of vodka and pretty much slugged half of it down. Why, I don't know, but I think it was the combination of wanting to act it up a bit, and to get the hell out of there. Before long the room started to spin, and it was time for me to exit the premises.

The rest of the night is hazy. I stumbled down the corridor and out onto the street, then nothing. The sound of a train whizzing past woke me in the end. Unbelievably, I was laid on a grass bank, in broad daylight. It was the morning and I had been lying there like a bloody tramp. I was in shock, I was on an embankment with one of the worst hangovers I have ever endured, and that was not the worst of it. I looked down and to my surprise, and horror, I had no shoes on, just a pair of socks that had been worn through on each toe, with ten little piggies looking up at me. I had either not been able to flag a taxi down due to my inebriated state, or, more likely, had stubbornly refused to admit defeat and had just started running home – something I had done many times to restore a balance when well and truly pissed. When I think about the route I took that night though, my body must have finally given up and stopped.

Worst of all I had no idea where I was, I had no money on me, and I had to be on the team coach in an hour.

Looking back, this was the last time, and only time, I have ever been so drunk as to be totally out of control. Suffice to say, I eventually got home,

although it's very difficult trying to flag a taxi down with no shoes and hardly any socks on. I rang Arthur, and as it mercifully clicked to answer phone I thought some sort of sorry excuse – the cat was ill (I didn't have one) or that there had been an earthquake in Smethwick (that one did happen a few years later!). However, I just said I was really sick and that I couldn't make it. I was completely disgusted with myself. I knew I would not have played, and I knew I wasn't even going to be named as a substitute, but to go out on a Friday was bad enough. To go out, get utterly smashed, and to miss the coach was crazy.

I collapsed on the bed and slept for the rest of the day. On the Sunday, Fiona returned to a house of destruction. I had let everyone I knew crash there and party for a week! Beer bottles everywhere, and, unforgivably, used condoms (not mine I hasten to add) left in bedrooms – imagine trying to explain that one to your girl-friend. I might as well have had a loaded gun in my hand and no alibi and had Lieutenant Columbo looking at me saying, 'Just one more thing.'

Fiona was absolutely livid, and I don't blame her.

I did get my shoes back in the end, if you are wondering where they got to. A week or so later I popped out for a meal at a restaurant-cum-nightclub with Fiona and a couple of friends. The same guy who had been at the party manned the door at this place, and my shoes were pride of place on top of the reception desk. This amused one of our friends, who knew that I had well and truly scarpered the week before. Again a tough one to explain to Fiona who just looked at me and said, 'Tell me they are not your shoes.'

I squirmed – 'Erm ... well it's a long story but yes, they are.'

One pastime that didn't involve drinking or football and was, later on, to improve me as a footballer and as a person, was my daily pilgrimage to Fitness First in Bearwood. It was a release to go there on an afternoon after training, either to run a few miles, or just to lift weights. It was something that I could control and see a benefit from. It became a mental thing, my daily thought would be 'fitter and stronger and bigger'. From those first few days of going to the gym, thirteen or fourteen years ago to now, I can honestly say I have benefited in a huge way, both physically and mentally, from lifting weights. I know it's not for everybody and I don't recommend young players under twenty-one going and straining themselves doing bench press routines, because their bodies are still growing, but for me at that time it gave me a huge focus and the belief that I would get my career on track. Meeting Tony Ford a few months later would only reinforce that belief.

The final straw at West Bromwich Albion came when the team went on a trip to Ireland for a few games and a bit of team bonding. I was omitted, and told that I would be staying and training with the youth team lads. It was a bit

heartless of the manager to leave just one player at home, and I don't know why he did it. I was giving it my all while training and during games for the reserves. For me, it signalled the end. Strangely enough though, in his and the first team's absence, I had a brilliant week. I rolled up to training, helped to coach the young lads, offering a few words of advice and encouragement, and really enjoyed my football. And I was able to tie my hair back without fear of a monumental verbal assault.

When the team returned, I knocked on the manager's door and asked him if I could go on loan somewhere to get some games. I knew a few clubs were interested in taking me on, and with Buckley's agreement it was decided that I would go out to Hereford United, a side currently struggling fourth from bottom of the lowest division. I had been hounded by their chief scout for ages, and had spoken to the manager, the ex-boss of Wolverhampton Wanderers (Wolves), Graham Turner. He had done extremely well for Wolves on a tight budget, and had now ended up taking over at cash-strapped Hereford United. The thought of just playing a game of football was driving me on, and playing at Hereford United did not bother me at all. They had some decent players and characters there at the time, people like Keith Downing, ex-Wolves, Dave Norton, ex-Northampton, Steve White, a Hereford United legend and current top scorer, and Dean Smith. They were all still plying their trade at the club.

I arrived at Edgar Street and immediately thought, 'Right, you had better roll your sleeves up here, sunshine.'

After a shaky start, I found my feet and started to make an impact. We rose up the league, I managed to bag a few important goals and, amazingly, we made the play-offs, an unbelievable feat considering where we were when I had joined at Christmas. Steve 'Chalky' White's goals and our will to win were big factors in our push for promotion. The likes of Smith, Downing and Norton were experienced pros, and mixed with keen young players like Murray Fishlock, John Brough, Gareth Stoker and myself, we had a decent side.

It was incredible really, in a very short space of time we made up an unbelievable amount of ground on the leaders. We played a couple of teams near home towards the end of the season, sunny 'Scunny' being one of them. It was nice to be back near my old stomping ground, with my parents and friends in the crowd. It was 9th March and although we were still a fair way off the top on thirty-six points (Wigan Athletic held the last play-off spot, on forty-six points), I scored the winner against 'Scunny' that day, and, in the changing room after the game, we suddenly had the feeling that it could be done.

We seemed to be winning every game, with Chalky White banging the goals in at an unbelievable rate. I managed to net another winner, this time at

Mansfield, which propelled us into a play-off position. We stayed there until the end of the season and were joined by Plymouth Argyle, Darlington and Colchester United. Notable teams to miss out that year were Wigan Athletic, who finished tenth, and Fulham, who finished in seventeenth place. The team relegated from the division above was Hull City. Funny old game eh? Preston North End won the league, celebrated by a final game attendance of nearly twenty thousand fans, and were joined by Bury and Gillingham, who were also promoted. The league's top scorer was our own Steve White on thirty-three goals, fifty in all competitions. In the same season, Man United had done the league and European double – a nice little taster of info for all you statisticians out there.

So, the excitement of the play-offs was upon us and we were drawn to play Darlington. They say 'a minute is a long time in football'. They also say 'a year is a long time in football' and 'they' are right. Within fifteen minutes of a very promising start in the home leg of the first play-off game, I went over on my ankle. I tried to run it off for about ten minutes, but I had clearly torn my ankle ligaments and I had to come off. I ended up missing the rest of the game and the following away game. We lost both.

I remember walking into the dressing room at Darlington after the second leg of the play-offs. The lads had been beaten and were low, some knew that their time at the club was up, others knew it would be their last chance for a bit of success. Being injured was hard, but I tried to speak positively to the lads, saying that promotion could be had next season. How wrong could I have been?

Hereford United contacted me constantly that summer, asking me to sign and saying that it would be the right decision for me to leave the Baggies. I suppose I was caught up with the emotion of the club, our near miss with promotion, and with the hopes for the next season. A holiday to Magaluf with the squad did nothing to dampen the spirits. They were a great bunch of lads, and they, like me, were genuinely excited at the prospect of next season.

It was one funny holiday. I bumped into two of my old mates from my Grimsby Town days, Gary Croft, who, believe it or not, had been my boot boy years ago, and Mark Lever, one of the funniest blokes you could ever meet in your life, never mind in football. Incredibly (well, maybe not so incredible considering how many players migrate out there each year), I spotted them walking along the beach on the first afternoon we were there, and after finding out that they were on their own (I know, losers!), I suggested that they join the 'Bulls on tour' squad. That afternoon, as is the norm on a lads' break, we sat down for a few drinks in the sun. I hadn't had time to tell the Hereford United lads much about the Grimsby Town duo, which made the next conversation even

better. We were all in high spirits and, after having several frosted glasses of beer in the baking sun, Murray Fishlock, our hunchback, bow-legged, left-back (these boys are all thick skinned so please do not think they will be offended by these crude, but accurate descriptions) began telling the Grimsby Town boys about his ‘lucrative’ new deal. Bear in mind it’s Hereford United we are talking about here. He began, ‘Yeah, it’s a two year deal, you know, decent money, they had to sort me out. I have had a pretty good season and they didn’t want to lose me.’

After wallowing in his own glory he then casually asked the lads how they were doing. Looking at Gary Croft – ‘Anyway, how about you mate? Are you sorted for the summer then, or do you need a club?’

Crofty replied, completely deadpan, ‘No, I have actually just signed for Blackburn for 1.6 million pounds, not bad money, and it is a decent move, but yeah that Hereford United deal you got sounds good.’

Murray tried to get some words out, but he was incapable of forming the right type of sentence. While all the other lads were laughing I shouted over, ‘Pick your chin up, Muzza!’

He looked at me.

‘You could have told me.’

To which I replied, ‘You didn’t ask me, you were too busy living your own little dream.’

The short loan spell at Hereford United had been good for me, despite the play-off defeat, but I was now unsure what to do. I was at a big club but not playing, and Graham Turner was telling me that joining Hereford United was the right move for me. I ended up accepting a small amount of money to leave West Bromwich Albion. If I had stayed at the Baggies, chances are, I may have made the team, as Buckley was sacked three months after I left. I regret leaving such a big club so hastily, but my desire to play every week clouded my decision. I would have to say that leaving West Bromwich Albion was the worst decision that I have made in my career. It may have been naïve, but it was also very, very rash. I didn’t give myself enough time to deliberate over the move, and as much as I thought I was leaving a club for the right reasons, I wasn’t. I was just trying to get away from Buckley again, and boy did I pay for it.

It pains me to write about the next season and the troubles it brought for me, but I guess it has to be done. But before I do I will have to unplug the laptop. I will carry on upstairs later on. My office (which is a desk in the dining room, which is open to the living room) is becoming impossible to work in. As I write, Top Gear is turned on full volume, and Cameron is winding Harriet up by telling her

she can't watch Peppa Pig. She in turn has been running around with nothing on, shouting, 'You can see my boobies.' She also looks as if she has had a fight with a chocolate muffin but has assured me that she only 'borrowed' it. Isabella has been cleaning out her new hamsters and one has just escaped. Added to this, Fiona has just returned home from work and I have completely forgotten to do the washing, the tea or the tidying. The next couple of hours will be tense.

1996/97

I dabbled in two businesses while living and working in Birmingham, two crazy ones at that: the music industry and photography. I had lost out on a car that I had been interested in buying, and within minutes of being told the car had already been sold, Paul phoned up explaining how Wayne was struggling to get a record deal, and that they needed money desperately to get him launched.

It is at this point that the ridiculous words came out of my mouth, 'How much do you need?'

I ended up giving Paul six thousand pounds – with a promise of getting double back in six months. A year and a half later, Wayne did give me a cheque for six thousand, but by that time I had also given Paul another three and a half grand that I haven't seen since. It did affect our relationships, and although Wayne sang at my wedding, and Paul was there, I do think that mixing business and friendship is a big no-no. The fact that we have not seen each other for nearly ten years speaks for itself.

The other business was a spin-off from a bit of modelling I did (no not for gloves or balaclavas, thank you very much). I was asked by a friend to do a few modelling shots, you know the sort – tense up, smile and point to the sky, or stand in a field holding a piece of straw in your mouth sort of stuff. The same friend then recommended me to a few local modelling agencies, and they started to get me work. One agency asked me if I would take part in *The Clothes Show*, to do a before and after shoot. They wanted me in football kit, walking down the runway while keeping the ball up, first with longer hair, and then with a new fresh style. I wasn't sure, although it wasn't the fact that I would have to get my hair chopped that was worrying me. It was more that I might have dropped the ball halfway down the cat walk, wiping out the editor of *Vogue* or *Horse and Hounds*, or whoever turns up at these things. Perhaps I should have just accepted, but the fact that we were in a relegation dogfight meant that I chose not to participate in any of these extracurricular activities. I should have just relaxed and done it really, but at the time, I worried it would be detrimental to my football.

Funnily enough, I was also down to the final two for *The Price is Right* man, you know, the one where the guy and girl put on a bit of lycra, and smile at the

camera while pedalling on the exercise bike on offer. They were extremely keen for me to do it, and told me that if I really wanted it, I would get it. I remember joking to Dave Norton at the club, ‘Do you think I should I ask Graham for a few Saturdays off?’

His reaction said it all, and I had to let that one go as well. I am mightily relieved now that I chose not to go for the ‘cheesy smile’ role, although I would have been able to meet Bruce Forsyth, of whom I am a huge fan G-g-g-g-good game.

I started a photographic business instead, working with the same friend who took those early modelling shots. We decided to form a photography company, renting a studio and kitting it out with some good lighting and equipment. It was aimed at aspiring models wanting to have their shots taken – predominately to get contact sheets to look at and put in their modelling portfolio. The friendship became strained almost straightaway, as I was training everyday and he was in the studio twiddling his thumbs. It wasn’t ideal. Neither was the direction that he wanted the business to go in – let’s just say it involved fewer clothes and more cameras. In saying that, it hasn’t exactly done Katie Price, or the photographers who have shot her, any harm, but had Fiona walked into the studio while I was holding a light reflector and saying, ‘Good, good, just a little bit lower with the towel’, it could have been a problem.

That disastrous venture was another few quid down the drain, and although I look back and laugh now, I must have been mad at the time to get involved in something I knew absolutely nothing about. We disbanded the business and parted company, pretty amicably though, it has to be said. And I did have the chance to go down another career path before long. All the equipment and props we had were sold to try to recoup some funds, and one guy, who had bought a load of lighting equipment from me, suggested I come over to his pad in the country to do some ‘special’ filming. He said I looked a nice, fit, young lad, and that the work would involve some lovely ladies and that I could earn some ‘real’ money. My career could have really taken a turn there, although I am not totally sure Fiona would have given that one her consent (she might now, however, you know – needs must and all that!).

Graham Turner told me that we would really be going for it next season. After much persuasion I had agreed to my contract being taken over by Hereford United. Unwittingly, I had joined a club in financial turmoil off the field, and in a crisis on it.

The 96/97 season began, and before long we were struggling in the league. Not enough players, and not enough good players, meant that instead of challenging for promotion, we were soon in a relegation fight. The only plus

point was that I finally found my best position, changing from a striker to a left-winger. I scored a few goals, played in most of the games, and enjoyed my new role, but the constant problems within the club spilled out onto the pitch. The training was also a major problem. If Graham had taken most of it, I honestly believe we would have been a lot better off. Unfortunately for us, but importantly for the fans, Graham had to divert much of his attention to keeping the club alive, which he did succeed in doing.

However, as a result, and much to our annoyance, most sessions, and all afternoon sessions, were taken by Mr Dick Bate, a head of coaching at the FA both at the time and still now. His afternoon sessions were so old school it was incredible. Spending hours going over and over corner routines was a bit of a drag for a team already low on confidence, and in such a precarious position in the league. In one session, we had been standing for so long that when I attempted to run for a ball, my back completely seized up. I was in agony. At that time, because of my back, standing around for a two-hour session was not ideal. We should have been inspired to fight and to play good attacking football, but he was determined to get his point across, even if it meant spending two hours too long to do it. This had a very negative influence on our team. I know he meant well, but it wasn't the answer.

Thinking back, the only thing that I can remember taking in from those sessions was that he had a bug ring on his forefinger with his initials, DB, emblazoned on it – not who I should be marking, or where I should be stood at defensive corners. Graham announced that Dick had some important work to do at the FA in the final weeks of the season and that he wouldn't be at training or games. We, on the other hand, were all still left shitting ourselves at the bottom of the league. I am probably being a bit harsh on Dick, because he is a very respected FA coach even now, and, as a coach myself, I too respect him, but at that time, and in the position we were in, we really did not need his type of dictatorial approach to our training sessions.

I can recall the precise moment I knew we were doomed that season. It was after a game against Cambridge United in which I had scored the winner in a 2–1 victory. I was buzzing, and said to the lads that we could have an outside chance of the play-offs if we were to go on a run, as there was still two months of the season to go. They all laughed at me, and the look that everyone gave me showed that they had already accepted defeat; they were expecting a relegation battle. With that sort of attitude we were bound to be in trouble.

There were a few memorable moments that season; playing at my old club Hull City was great. After the game, Tony Agana, who himself had been a big success in the top flight at Sheffield United, said to me, 'Chris, you have to

believe you can get to the top, because you can, that was a magnificent performance!'

I smiled and said thanks but whether I really did believe it would happen was another thing.

At the end of every season, for about ten years, Fiona and I would stay at her parents out in the country, sometimes for a couple of weeks, sometimes for a whole month. While there, I would always start my fitness regime for the coming pre-season. It revolved around running to the sea and back as fast as I could, doing a distance of about six miles. It was a long country road and I used to sing aloud like a marine, 'I'm going to make it to the prem-i-er-ship.'

I know it sounds crazy, and I am a bit embarrassed to say it, but that thought drove me on for years. It was only when I reached thirty-five that I eventually stopped singing it. As I said earlier, I have always been blindly optimistic.

The daily journey to the training ground, made with a few other players who also still lived in the Birmingham area, was a long one. Winding roads all the way to Hereford didn't do much for the soul, and knowing we were in for a 'Bate' session in that first season really fuelled the misery! By this time I was also getting really bad back problems. I had given up sitting on the sofa at home, much to the amusement of my friends and family. It was just too painful.

I could never relax at the best of times, but this was ridiculous. I had, at great expense, bought every back device or gadget known to man, ranging from special gravity chairs and space mattresses, to an inversion rack. This would involve me putting a pair of boots on and then hooking myself onto a bar fitted in a doorway – I would then hang upside down like a bat for ten minutes or so, while my back joints would open out. I was like a modern day Thora Hird, but none of the above worked. I was popping pain-killing pills like Bez in his Happy Mondays heyday.

I even had my 'rocket launcher' which claimed to extend my body by about four inches (no doubt endorsed by Ronnie Corbett). I would lie down and strap myself into this medieval-looking contraption, and when I was ready I would push down on the lever by each side, stretching my body and back out. It was hilarious really, and while I was sweating away on this rack everyone would be shouting, '5-4-3-2-1 we have lift off!'

Despite the humorous side to these gadgets, the pain was a nightmare. It was constant, and nothing would make it go away. Backache costs the country billions, and it really can be a most annoying and frustrating complaint. I had been to see so many people about my back, chiropractors, physios – I even went to 'Dr Herb' one afternoon and allowed them to cover me in needles, all to no avail. I just looked like a hedgehog for a few hours and nodded when the lady

shouted, ‘You better now.’

I thought I had solved it once, when I saw an article about a bio-cranial professor, no less, who was working in Belfast and had been getting rave reviews for his revolutionary back treatment. I was on the next plane. (This was all at my own cost, I might add, because back in those days, if the club’s physiotherapist couldn’t fix it, you were a hypochondriac, a shithouse, or just plain lazy. I have seen plenty fitting all of those descriptions in treatment rooms across the country.)

After two days of treatment at his surgery in Bangor, I thanked the professor, who was a very articulate guy and who obviously knew his stuff. I told him that I felt great, which I did. During the taxi ride back to the airport my good mood stayed intact, despite the driver talking about dispiriting events such as how often certain hotels had been bombed. I had a bit of banter with the air stewardesses before the flight, pleased that I had been ‘cured’ – and happy that I hadn’t stayed at the hotels the taxi driver had mentioned. Unfortunately, after what must have been only ten minutes after take-off, my back seized up and returned me to my previous pain-ridden state. I felt like I was being stabbed in the back – a feeling I have had, in one way or another, many times in my career. All in all, it had been a wasted trip to Northern Island and one that cost me six hundred pounds for the pleasure. I have, however, since returned to Belfast to complete my UEFA A licence (a football coaching certificate) and I must say what a fantastic city it is.

To make financial matters worse, for two years I had insisted on us buying only organic produce. It cost us a fortune, and it makes me laugh now as I throw in the Tesco Value shopping. We must have stayed in hotels twice a week in Birmingham, just because we could. We ate out three or four times a week, and our clothes budget knew no bounds. Now who’s a silly boy then?

Back on the field of play the ‘doomers’ were rapidly proven right. The team behind us, Brighton and Hove Albion (Brighton), were picking up points and clawing back the ten-point deficit. Before long, and after a penultimate game lost at Leyton Orient, we knew that our fate would be decided on the last game of the season, against, of all teams, Brighton. The stigma attached to relegation back then was huge, especially relegation to the Conference. The media was obviously on the side of Brighton, their history and glamour, against lowly Hereford United. The week leading up to that game was pure agony. It was a media frenzy and, with the public’s affection for Brighton growing daily, by the time the game kicked off every single TV company was there. Police horses and dogs separated the fans, helicopters circled overhead, and the ground was packed to the rafters.

The team we had out that day should have won, even with a few players missing. I would never blame anyone for not playing in that last game, such was the fear and pressure upon them, but some didn't and that was their choice. A few of the lads were physically sick before the game, but with sun shining and helicopter noises above, the game soon kicked off. We started well, and after about twenty minutes we took the lead, a cross in to the box was cleared, I went up for a header and the ball dropped down to Tony Agana. He controlled it and fired us into the lead. The dream was on. But then came the moment that would stay with Hereford United and Brighton fans for years to come. Our keeper, Andy De Bont, struck a goal kick badly and in the space of a few seconds Robbie Reinelt was clear on goal. He dispatched the chance, and the Brighton supporters went crazy. The fairytale had happened, but for Brighton.

Brighton have certainly made the most of their survival since then though, what with Gus Poyet now in charge, another promotion on the horizon, and with a new stadium developed. That last day desperation for a victory is now a million miles away.

Minutes before the end, I played a ball over the top for Adrian Foster. I honestly thought he was going to smash it in and give us the victory, but the keeper saved his shot, the whistle was blown and we were down. Fans on the pitch, police dogs everywhere, and cries of 'staying up' from the Brighton supporters marked the end of the game.

The changing room was silent but for the sound of a few tears. Andy De Bont was inconsolable, Dave Norton, an experienced pro and good friend, was crying as were a fair few of the lads, and the manager was stood there motionless. I locked myself in the toilet and dropped my head in my hands. This was certainly not the outcome I had expected when I had signed.

We were relegated on goal difference, tied with Brighton on forty-six points. It was a surreal experience. I had never felt so much pressure on a football field and I never wanted to do so again. It was the worst thing I had ever experienced – even worse than being beaten biking by that tough northern girl all those years ago!

Football being football though, I would have to go through it one more time.

That night my family, who had travelled down to see the game, and that of Dean Smith, a central defender who was injured on the day of the game, went out to a restaurant in Birmingham. It was one of the quietest meals I have ever had.

The next season would be spent in the Vauxhall Conference, something I could never have contemplated as a footballer. I spoke to Graham many times over the course of the summer, each time saying that I didn't think I could play

in the Conference. To me, it was a league of part-timers who spent most of the match kicking you up in the air (several players preferred kicking other players rather than the football), and back then I was probably right. It is very different now. Many Conference clubs have bigger ambitions and larger budgets than teams in League Two or even League One. You still get kicked up in the air plenty of times though.

Graham was adamant I was staying at the club, citing the need for him to keep his best players to help get Hereford United back in the league. Obviously I wanted that to happen, and that, combined with the fact that no one would pay the amount of money Hereford United were asking for me at the time, meant I would be staying at the club.

I was going to be a non-league player.

1997/98

So, here I was, playing the 97/98 season in the Conference. I'll be honest, I felt pretty low about it. It was only a couple of seasons ago that I was in the Championship, albeit hardly ever getting a game.

Hereford United started out with an OK squad, but not one good enough to take the title. The fact that we wore 'On Loan to the Conference' T-shirts in the warm-ups meant that opposing teams were already 'up for it' before a whistle had even been blown.

The team began how it had finished the previous season – averagely. There was no real cohesion, and it was clear that the year ahead would be tough. I had found my position, though, and was enjoying my left wing role, but the nights out off the field were still too frequent. The seminal moment in my career, as far as my future attitude and commitment was concerned, came unexpectedly one sunny afternoon. Graham had brought in an old mate of his, a fitness trainer by the name of Tony Ford. He had worked with the likes of Peter Withe and Gordon Cowans, both previous Aston Villa favourites.

Tony came onto the pitch like one of those American life coaches, with music blaring and a pretty full-on motivational speech. Most of the players were having none of it. The way they saw it, this old man (Tony was over sixty) couldn't help them. How wrong they were. I knew straightaway that Tony was great for the club, and for me. Tony went on to play a massive part in the club's two recent promotions, but at that moment some of the boys just thought it was a waste of time.

The first day he arrived he gave us a weights circuit on the pitch, told us about power gains, the importance of weights and fuelling the body, and how he could help us. I had a quick chat with Tony after the session, mentioning that I was into my weights, nutrition and so forth, but nothing much more. Over the next few weeks Tony came to all the games we played, and after one in particular he said to me, 'Chris, I have been told about your career path, and I think you have got something, son, and I can help you get to the top.'

Because of Tony's help I have been a gnat's cock hair away from just that, the top, on a couple of occasions. Bad agents, bad decisions and bad timing (and, maybe, a lack of talent) stopped me from taking that extra step, but nevertheless

his help has been incredible in my career and in my life. As a player and a person, the discipline and drive that I developed were because of Tony, and, for that, I am forever grateful to him. I have no doubt at all that if I had met Tony at seventeen, I certainly wouldn't have to work now, I'd have probably retired a wealthy young man – the only problem with that though, is that proper retirement at thirty-five would be no fun, would it? Surely it would be boring trying to fill the day (what with holidays abroad, time spent on the yacht and wining and dining!)?

I am getting philosophical here, but don't they say that you spend most of your life rushing around, only to spend the remainder wondering what to do with the time you have on your hands. Well, imagine if you had to fill even more time, having retired at thirty-five.

Tony suggested that the next Sunday morning I meet him in Birmingham at Temple Street Gym, the home of the then 'Mr Universe', Dorian Yates – you may laugh at his name, but you wouldn't if you met him – this is the guy who equalled Arnie's record of six straight Mr Universe titles, and could bench press half of Birmingham. It was a real spit and sawdust gym, lots of sweat, grunting and protein drinks. The first morning I met Tony there I had, of course, been out the night before. Tony must have known this, but he said nothing; getting me there was the main thing at this stage. I can honestly say that that first workout we had knocked me for six. I was probably the fittest lad at the football club at the time, but that first blast at Temple Street taught me a couple of lessons: one, that it's gonna hurt like hell if you have had a late night; two, that it's gonna hurt like hell even if you haven't. It was the only time I have ever had to sit down during a weights session. As Tony would put it over the course of the next five years, 'That workout was bone deep, son, bone deep.'

That season I really ripped it up on the pitch, scoring quite a few goals, and much to the amusement of the lads, receiving far too many 'man of the match' bottles of champers. Initially, the Birmingham night scene was abused to its maximum by our group of friends, and with Fiona working for Bass breweries at the time, and being rewarded each month with plenty of beers or wine, we certainly didn't need an excuse to have a party.

Meeting Tony on those first few Sunday mornings was tough. I had usually been out until very late the night before, but while everyone else was still in bed I crawled out, after only a couple of hours' sleep, and met Tony for a workout.

The scenes in that house in Bearwood were really a sight to behold sometimes, especially the 'morning after'. It was a challenge to workout who was in which bedroom and how many were in each bed. Fiona and our friends thought I was completely mad to go off and lift weights but, even after only a

couple of hours' sleep, I knew it was right. The back pain had subsided enough for me to blast weights with Tony, and the high standard of the workout and the equipment used meant that it was safe.

Another huge change in my life was also on the horizon. I had returned home after a Saturday game, and, as normal, the house was full of people ready to go out and party. I nipped upstairs to get changed myself, and there was Fiona on the landing holding a ClearBlue testing kit.

'Oh my God!' I said, wondering whose of our many friends in the house it was.

'Whose is it?' I asked. A short pause and then Fiona whispered, 'It's mine. I'm pregnant.'

We looked at each other in shock, smiled, and then went downstairs to let the others know that we weren't heading out straightaway – we would meet everyone later on, as Fiona and I needed a chat. I think they all thought it was the old 'need a break' chestnut, and so before long it was just us in the house. We drove around to Debbie's house and told her the news; we all just stood in her kitchen in complete shock. Were the original party animals eventually going to be tamed? The answer was yes. The three of us stayed in that night, had fish and chips, and just sat there in silence with only the occasional 'I just can't believe it', coming out from one of our mouths. It was, as I am sure many people would agree, the single most important moment of our lives. Nowadays, my family really are my life, and this was the start of one of the most amazing gifts, a child. Sorry if that sounds a bit trite, but my little beauties really are everything to me.

I still find it incredible looking back to that weekend. At the time Fiona and I had not been getting on very well. I had already decided that on the Sunday it would be time for 'one of those chats', one of those make or break ones. The combination of our social lives (constantly out with the same group of friends, but never together), my football and Fiona's work meant that we had drifted apart somewhat. I was thinking of suggesting a bit of breathing space to work out how, or if, we could sort the relationship. I'm sure it was fate, Fiona telling me that night, because if we had parted I would have lost the most important person in my life, my best friend, wife, and mother to our three amazing children.

Tony and I used to chat after the workouts we had, about me obtaining a move, and in the days before he was properly employed by Hereford, about getting Tony into a club full time. As it was, he already ran a successful body tune workout, but he wanted to work at a football club. I knew that he could make any club more successful, getting the players fitter and mentally stronger, but breaking down preconceptions has always been difficult in football. I have

been at clubs where the coaching staff have thought I was crazy doing weights, yet if you walk into any Premiership club now the weights room and fitness equipment would rival any David Lloyd. Tony had recognised the importance of weight training to footballers years earlier, but trying to persuade old school managers to employ a fitness instructor was like banging your head against a brick wall.

It is no surprise that AC Milan have enjoyed such success in recent years, having spent money employing several fitness trainers, chiropractors and even club dentists. A friend of mine, Richard Carr-Hyde, is a chiropractor. I have seen him several times (well, about seventy times in two years!) while at Torquay United. He works for AC Milan a few days a month. I have labelled him 'the guru' after his constant and brilliant work in keeping the old body out on the pitch. While working for AC Milan, he has seen that club reduce its playing squad to around twenty, saving countless millions. They have also, over the same period, employed lots of older players (my type of club!), all of whom have benefited from this type of care. David Beckham is just the latest golden oldie signed by the club.

That season in the Conference was tough, but, with Tony's help and my desire to do well, I did enjoy it. We had a half-decent cup run, but ran out of steam in the league, in the end finishing just outside the play-offs. This was a major disappointment for everyone, players and staff, as well as the fans, who deserved so much more. Financially, the club was never going to be able to challenge for promotion that season.

On evaluating my decision to leave West Bromwich Albion and join Hereford United, I had conflicting thoughts. On one side, the fact that I was playing week in, week out was great. Another good point was that I had found a new role, and loved it. However, I suppose the overriding feeling regarding the whole thing was that I must have had a screw loose to leave a First Division club where I was on a decent contract. Buckley had been sacked a few weeks after I left; I had played in one of the most stressful football games ever, had been relegated to the non-league, effectively dropping four divisions in a season, and was now on the lookout for a league club, as a non-league player. I curse the day that the old Hereford United scout persuaded me to join the club. Other than that tiny niggle, I think it was a decent move.

Joking aside, Hereford United has a brilliant following and should never have been subjected to that relegation. The fact is, like most relegations, they are more often than not the result of a club run badly off the field.

After the season had finished I met Graham Turner at the Belfry in Birmingham. He asked me to stay with the club, but knew really that I had to

move on. I have only got the utmost respect for that man, reinforced by the work he did turning the club around. He has pretty much single-handedly rescued the club and subsequently steered it to two promotions.

Once the season was over, and my decision to leave Hereford United had been made, I contacted the PFA (Professional Footballers' Association). They are a great body for current and ex-professionals, but at this point they weren't able to be much help. I have benefited from the PFA financially, which, in times of dire need, has really helped me, and the pension fund they set up for all players is very good. The money and education is there if you want to search for it; I was able to get my coaching badges sorted through the PFA. The only negative is that though the money and education are available, equally needed advice and guidance is harder to come by – what little there is around it not being given properly.

Of course, some ex-pros do come to the clubs every so often to tell you that there are courses available etc., but these brief talks happen irregularly, and are not particularly persuasive or informative. What they need to do is throw a bit of reality into the mix for players young and old. I'm talking about someone going into a club, speaking to the lads and saying, 'Listen, if this all goes tits up, you *will* be struggling, you *will* go from good money to no money, you *will* have no form of higher education, and life *will* be very, very tough.'

The message has to be simple, and the advice has to be realistic. Put this amount of money away now, every week. Do this qualification. If you don't, or can't, go back into education, then here are the trades you can learn. Here is where to do it, and here are the numbers you need. It is not patronising to speak to footballers this way – it is simply that when football is your life, it is impossible to conceive of a realistic end to it, to an existence beyond it.

As I say, the PFA is truly a great organisation; I don't want to suggest otherwise. Educational course fees are paid for, as are non-contributory pension payouts for each year you are in the game. I have definitely benefited from their help and am really grateful for that. However, the fact that no one knows about the information they have available, and that the situation commonly arises where, if you are left without a club, as many players are in the summer, you are pretty much on your own, shows that there is a major problem. Lads are not given the skills or tools to find employment, and that is why so many footballers struggle when their playing careers come to an end. They need to find work but can't get it. Whether a player is on a hundred grand a week, or one hundred pounds the information needs to be given.

The target audience for the PFA complimentary magazine highlights the problem. If you want to purchase a yacht, a Rolex or just a decent Ferrari, then

yes, it could be very handy. But for the normal footballer, most of the information is irrelevant, as it is really focusing on the big boys. I am delighted for the boys who are on a hundred grand a week. I honestly couldn't care less if they earn double or treble that, because, come on, none of us would refuse it were it offered. However, for the poor young lad trying to make it in the game at Barnet on a few hundred quid a week, what does he actually do if he can't get a club or a contract? He is usually up the Swannee without a paddle. You may say that it is his own fault for not getting an education, but don't forget that these clubs have spent a long time persuading lads to sign for them, only to let them go, sometimes a few years', or sometimes a few months', later. The solution is out there somewhere and I hope that I can use my experience to help other, younger, lads, get it.

While on the subject of organisations, let's talk about the FA. For all the millions in the vaults there, it's run by people who couldn't organise a piss up in a brewery. Millions are spent on salaries for sub-standard managers, but the FA insist on making it as difficult as possible for ex-players to get qualified for coaching badges, and have a really fucking arrogant attitude to boot. I have been on some of their courses, and it amazes me how many ex-pros, many of whom have played at the highest level, are made to feel inadequate, and are pushed into scenarios they would never normally find themselves in. More often than not they fail, leave the course, or, sadly, are put off coaching for life. I still find it incredible that a player, who clearly knows the game inside out, and who has played around five hundred games, fails.

I know coaching is not always about having played the game; it is about teaching in the right way, but in my opinion this is not where ex-pros are failing. The FA prides itself on training the best coaches possible, but they make the courses unnecessarily difficult, pompous and long-winded. France, for example, has won a World Cup and a European Championship since we have been messing about and, hello, they have around thirty thousand qualified coaches and a French manager in place. We have two and a half thousand coaches, an Italian manager with broken English, and have had no major trophy to celebrate in over forty years. You call that progress? Get off your backsides, stop eating your way through countless business lunches and prancing around as if you were superstars, and make some decent fucking decisions.

‘And breathe Mr Hargreaves, you can relax now, think of your childhood, think happy thoughts.’

Within a few weeks I had been contacted by six or seven clubs. I, along with probably a few thousand others, had also written letters to almost every Premier League and Championship club around, asking for a chance to prove myself in

the form of a trial (as I have said, I was always an optimist). I knew that I could do well if I spent a week or two somewhere, but at this stage I had no real bargaining power. With the Premiership and Championship clubs' postal services obviously not working – sending a letter is about as much use as a chocolate teapot – I began to return the calls I had received, starting with that of the Plymouth Argyle manager, Kevin Hodges. He had left a message saying that he would love me to come down to Devon for a chat.

Over the years I have, rightly or wrongly, held the firm belief that the first club to contact you usually wants you the most. I suppose it's an old 'heart ruling your head' notion, and it has backfired on me a few times, but on the whole it has worked well for me. So, before long I was taking the journey down to Devon.

As at the time of writing, 3.20pm on Thursday 12th August, I now have a few options available. Last week, an old mate of mine, Mike Spearpoint, owner of Exeter and Somerset speedway, building magnate, Torquay United fan and general top bloke, phoned me and offered me a labouring job if I needed it. I have been his official guest of honour at the speedway on a few occasions, and he sort of thought I was joking when I first asked him if there was any work going, but it's as good a job as any, as far as I am concerned at the moment. So, I could soon be donning a pair of boots and carrying a hod. (It didn't do Vinny Jones any harm, although he did do it the other way round.) Another call came in shortly after that from Steve Massey; he used to play professional football years ago, earned his fortune in the tourism industry, and has now taken over a local club, Buckland Athletic. (Funnily enough I presented the awards there last season.) He has asked me to come out of 'retirement' and play for him on Saturday in the FA Cup. He also said that he would give me five thousand pounds in instalments, as a signing on fee, to play until the end of the season. The problem is that I would have to give up my coaching at Exeter City, which, although part-time, is still a job at a decent club, and I reckon it would be like wheeling out the oldest swinger in town if I stepped out in the league they play. Saying that, for the money alone, I am very, very tempted.

1998/99

The journey down to Plymouth Argyle to meet Kevin Hodges was a long one. I had decided to use public transport instead of driving, as I thought it would make a pleasant change, but after a couple of delays, three or four modes of transport and around five hours travelling, I was regretting my decision. My mindset was to go in, listen, hopefully accept their contract offer, get to the hotel, and start preparing for life back in the league.

I walked in and was shown around, as is the norm. After a brief introductory chat, we came to their offer.

‘OK Chrissy, we like you as a player and are prepared to offer you three months for starters.’

‘I have just been on a five hour journey for that?’ I replied, with as much humour as I could, as I didn’t want to seem too egotistical. ‘I could have stayed at Hereford United on a two year deal, I have a baby on the way, and I was a couple of minutes away from having to get a rickshaw for the last mile of the journey down.’

I knew they wanted me, and I knew money was tight at the club at that stage, but I couldn’t accept such an insecure offer. The next bit was a gamble, but I was mentally and physically prepared to do it.

‘I tell you what, I am going back to Birmingham to discuss it with my girlfriend; I’m going to bring my boots back with me and I’ll give you two weeks. If at the end of the two week trial you are happy and I am happy, then we can agree a deal I’ll sign.’

A week later, after a pretty good few days of training and a fine match, I signed a two year deal and was ready for the season to start. Well worth the risk, I felt.

I was given some accommodation with the young apprentices at the club, at a place called ‘the Lodge’. It was a big house a mile from the ground, and each player got his own bedroom and shared a lounge and kitchen. It was not exactly a luxury hotel, but was good enough for the time. Another lad, nicknamed ‘Flashy’, who was still on trial, was also in the house. This was great as it gave me some company. He had been at Man United as a kid, and was also trying to get his career back on track. We ate out at the Barbican most nights, and talked

about football, the amount of crisps he had eaten that day (usually four or five bags), and his latest girl troubles (again, usually four or five a day). Flashy didn't end up getting a proper deal with the club, which was sad; he had consistent knee trouble, got no real care, and, as is also the norm at clubs, he basically got shat upon. There is a saying about those unfortunate souls who just seem to have a nightmare whatever they try to do – 'It's job night in the paper this Thursday.' No, it's not that really; it is 'A player is often like a mushroom, kept in the dark for most of the time, picked every so often, and shat on twice a week.' I think that applied to Flashy.

We did make some good memories together, though, especially the one of him trying to break the land speed record in his little Vauxhall Corsa on a Monday morning when we were late for training, and coming all the way from Birmingham! On another occasion, I nearly didn't make it to a game one day, and it wasn't the traffic, car trouble, or even girlfriend trouble. No, it was just simple plain old electrocution! I was attempting to make a milkshake, but we didn't often use the kitchen at the Lodge, and I soon realised why. The sink was full, and as I put the metal whisk into the water I suffered one hell of a bolt and was thrown back against the cupboard. Flashy was in stitches laughing (not worried at all); I was in shock, had hair like Sylvester the Cat, and had thrown the milkshake all over the kitchen. It turned out the lead to the kettle had dropped into the sink, but was still turned on at the wall. (I swear it was Flashy and he, obviously, swears it was me.) After recovering I thought I would leave the milkshake alone. It was a good job I had rubber flip flops on, eh?

The pre-season went really well and I was massively up for the year ahead. I still had slight back problems though, and they returned with a vengeance leading up to the first game of the season. I had trained in real agony the morning before the game, and I returned to my room that afternoon angry and frustrated about the pain and the persistent back trouble that I had. I wouldn't recommend anyone try this at home, but the next thing I did could have been described as a bit unconventional – and very reckless. A few months earlier I had watched a great programme about a guy in Russia who had been paralysed, but who had fought through terrible back problems to walk again. In his view this was all done through will power and determination. Now not for one minute am I saying that I nipped down to the local baths, put my trunks on, and walked on water while the blue rinse brigade complained that I was in their lane, but what I did say to myself was that I had to beat it.

I couldn't really bend at all that day, but I was so annoyed and angry that I jumped up as high as I could, and sort of landed in a ball, gripping my ankles, and nearly ploughing through into the room below at the same time. And guess

what, I could now bend. Fair enough, I could have displaced a disc and been on a hospital ward for the next month, but I hadn't, I wasn't, and it had worked. I don't know if it was tension, muscle spasms, or what, but I do know that the pain had gone, and pretty much ever since then I have been OK. Don't get me wrong, I have still seen plenty of chiropractors over the years, and I have taken more happy pills than Shaun Ryder and Bez put together, but at least I have been able to sit on the sofa. By 'happy pills' I mean legal drugs taken by most players (old ones anyway!), and given out by physios at clubs across the country to keep players going. We are talking Ibuprofen or Voltorol or Tramadol. (I actually took three one morning after a game and felt like I was at a rave – I was, in fact, in the garden centre with the family!) The usual scenario is the physio walking down the team coach on the way to a game giving out tablets to anyone who has a nagging injury, or, on any given day, a player walking into the physio room before training and saying, 'I'm in bits; I need some drugs.'

Anyway, the next day I made my debut, had a blinder, got the champagne, and drove home a happy man. I remember commenting to the young lads at the Lodge that morning what a beautiful day it was, and what a great job it was to be doing, and that I intended to have a blinder. The power of thought, eh?

My new teammates at Plymouth Argyle were a real bunch of characters, such as Ronnie Mauge, who had been in prison for nothing particularly serious – just taking someone hostage on Dartmoor and holding a gun to their head for a couple of hours! Despite this, Ronnie wasn't really a bad lad, and I got on really well with him. Lee Power (or the 'Face' as he liked to call himself) was another funny character, although not as extreme; he was totally broke when he left Plymouth Argyle, but, incredibly, he turned up at a game when I was playing for Northampton Town a few seasons later, as the club's new chairman! We also had Micky Heathcote, a hard-core centre-half who spent forty-five minutes rubbing Deep Heat into his back before every game, and who also once, on the dance floor at Paul Wotton's wedding, spent a whole hour doing exactly the same dance move over and over again; Martin 'Chopsy' Barlow, a great little midfielder who had an acid tongue and drank like a fish; and John Sheffield, a goalkeeper who hated football and, more worryingly, hated goalkeeping.

That first season I also became great friends with Paul Gibbs, a bleached blond-haired, big-chinned (my words), big-nosed (my words) legend (definitely his word). 'Gibbo' was, and still is, a brilliant lad. We shared a few passions, football being an obvious one, the other two being lifting weights and spending money. At this time, Gibbo was seeing Helen Chamberlain, who had just started her rise to fame on *Soccer AM*. Helen eventually saw the light and dumped the loser (only joking, mate) but they, and we, all remained good friends. Helen is a

bloke's dream, she loves football, loves cars, loves a gamble, and is a good laugh, and the last time I spoke to her she was single. Hurry up lads – it won't last long. Helen had a house in Torquay and supported Torquay United, a club where I would end up many years later; it was good to have a friend already in the area.

The first few months I had a great time; I was playing well and enjoying life in Plymouth. I got on with the boys and really liked the manager, Kevin Hodges, and his assistant Steve McCall. Kevin had taken Plymouth Argyle on as his first job in management, and as with all managers I have come across, he had a massive amount of nervous tension before a game. One particular game away against Darlington was a prime example of this. His mind must have been absolutely racing at the time, because as he was standing at the side of the pitch he clapped his hands and shouted, 'Come on Darlington!'

You can imagine the look on the Darlington players' faces, and what chance did we have if he was shouting for the other team?

Fiona soon moved down and we rented a lovely place on the water in a village called Oreston. Stupidly, again, we didn't buy (those properties went up in value about a hundred grand in the two years we were there but, you know, let's not dwell on that). Instead, we rented. The footballer's mentality of 'something may change in the summer' always sets alarm bells ringing about settling down, which is foolish.

In that first season, an old mate of mine, Tony Ford (same name as the fitness trainer I met at Hereford United, but a different fella; this Tony Ford had been a fellow player at Grimsby Town), was due to be given an award, as this game against us was going to be his one thousandth game. It was a magnificent achievement, and one that naturally had required massive dedication, an iron will, and, I'm sure, plenty of ice – that much football would have earned him a lot of aching muscles. Tony was presented with the award before the game, and, after I had set about destroying him at right-back, with a nutmeg, a goal and a smile, I think Tony was just happy to have got the one thousandth game out of the way.

The December of that season we had an early Christmas present, as our son Cameron was born. Fiona always ribs me about the day of the birth – she had complained of a few pains in her stomach in the afternoon while shopping and asked if we could get home, but, as I really wanted to see a car I was keen to buy, I asked her if we could just nip by and take a look before going. Her 'death stare' and answer, 'Get me FUCKING home, NOW!' quickly spurred me on to drive back and ring the nurse. When I talked to the nurse about Fiona's contraction times, she just told me to make Fiona a cup of tea and to let her relax

at home for a few more hours. I walked through to explain this to Fiona but decided very quickly that I was taking her in immediately, without waiting. Within an hour and a half of being in the shops, Fiona had given birth to our first child, with no pain relief, and no long labour (now that's a good old northern lass for you). However, the big girl's blouse with her (that being me) had to have a few paracetamol, as, much to Fiona's disbelief, my back wasn't half playing up while she was on that bed.

There was another aspect of that birth that Fiona likes to remind me about. I had forgotten to tell her that the local paper was turning up with a scarf and a shirt for a 'say cheese' shot. The *Herald* sports reporter (Chris Errington) had phoned to congratulate me about the birth, and had asked if the paper could come over to the hospital to take a picture of mother and father with child. Fiona was in a ward called the Argyle ward – so there was even more of a connection with Plymouth Argyle. I had agreed to the photo, but neglected to mention it to Fiona. When we were leaving the hospital, and she was in her 'I've just had a baby, I'm tired and I'm in my dressing gown' mode, 'Smile please' did not exactly go down well. The picture was on the back of the paper the next day, and I was in the doghouse for a good week. Anyway, we took our little parcel home and laid him on the bed. We turned to each other, laughed, and said, 'What do we do now?'

Fiona had really gone through the mill at the hospital but not, as you might expect, during the birth. Instead, it was the after care and the breast-feeding that was the problem. The nurse 'helping' Fiona was a real Hattie Jacques type, a Dickensian matron who demanded that the ladies get their breasts out whenever she said, and that they 'pumped' at regular intervals. Hell, it was like being in a dairy. Fiona wasn't exactly a Friesian (I'm tempted to add all sorts of insults about that nurse, but it's just not the time or the place). All that Fiona really gained from the unnecessary length of time she had stayed in, and the forceful care she had received, was a bad case of mastitis, and the knowledge that any future children would be spending their first night at home on the bottle.

Our family were five hours away, so the first few months were tough but nonetheless very enjoyable. I couldn't wait to get home from training and pick my little man up; I used to put him on my chest and we would go to sleep for an hour while we sat listening to the water outside. (The house was by a tidal lake, Hooe Lake, which meant you could always listen to relaxing water sounds.) It was bliss. Twelve years later and he is still my little 'man bear' and I will still be hugging him for as long as he will allow it. (I probably have around a year left.) It was a lovely place for us to bring a child up and as Cam grew a little older we would all explore the beaches of Devon and Cornwall together. Cam often

wondered what I was getting up to, and would just look up and say, ‘Daddy, doing?’

Many people watching me play football also wondered that, but that’s another story entirely.

Although he was a little beauty, the night-time routine was hell; we basically didn’t sleep for two years. In fact, after four or five months without decent sleep, my parents rescued us, and told us to get away for a break. We did, went abroad for a few days, missed him like hell, and ended up making sure that very soon there would be another member of the Hargreaves family arriving – that bloody sangria! I always say that the first child was an accident, the second was just irresponsible, and the third was just showing off, but as none our children has actually been planned (well, not to my knowledge anyway) each one has been an incredible surprise. They are far and away the best things ever to have happened to Fiona and me. I am saying all of this without Fiona’s consent or agreement by the way – the births were a piece of cake really!

With Cameron newly born, and with the busy Christmas fixtures about to start, it was a very hectic time. The club’s Christmas ‘do’ went without a hitch – that is until the morning after the night before. I had eaten with the lads at a restaurant in town, but my order was a bit late and I had to remind them about it before it arrived. My *chicken* dish (alarm bells ringing already?) appeared far too quickly, but we were all in a rush so, without a second thought, it was scoffed and off we went. In the morning, however, I had the start of stomach ache. My parents were staying over for Christmas and I was just sent back to bed with a ‘suspect’ hangover. The thing is, I didn’t really suffer from hangovers (a bad fault, I feel – it took stupid amounts of drinking to make me feel it the next day) and still don’t, and before long I was in no doubt that a hangover it was not. I spent the next week in absolute hell. Cam was three weeks old, my parents had come to visit us with a twenty pound turkey, and I had a horrendous case of salmonella. I should really have been in hospital; I didn’t know that the phrase ‘shitting through the eye of a needle’ could actually be true, but it was. I was violently sick, had an arse that was in danger of setting fire, and honestly had tears in my eyes for a week. It was definitely cold comfort on Christmas Day; all anyone could hear were my moans from the upstairs bedroom as my parents and Fiona tried to tuck into their dinner.

To make matters worse, Kevin Hodges, our manager, who was paranoid at the best of times, didn’t actually believe I was ill. Instead, I think he thought I was just trying to buy a few days off over Christmas to spend with our new arrival. Even the club’s physiotherapist, Norman ‘I’m not sure what injury you have, but get yourself to the café for a breakfast, and ice it when you get back’

Medhurst, was sent round to ‘visit’ the patient. When Detective Inspector Medhurst arrived, I was still able to walk about, believing that it was just a bad tummy bug and would eventually get better. I don’t think he reported back that I was very ill, but when eventually the agony of the next six days was over and I was physically able to visit a doctor, I think they got the message. Salmonella poisoning, and a stone lost in weight.

That poor old doctor must have wondered what had hit him that day. I was still a bit delirious when I saw him – I hadn’t eaten for a week and was feeling dizzy. He asked me to go into the toilet and give a sample, in the form of a scoop into a bottle. The combination of having never done it before and not being entirely with it was probably the reason why I decided to fill the whole sample bottle up. I actually held it under my arse and such was the consistency of you know what, I topped it right up. I hadn’t even noticed the delicate little scoop inside the bottle, designed to take a tiny little drop of what they needed. Here I was, in the middle of a busy reception saying, ‘Could you give that to the doctor please?’

The receptionist just looked at me in shock as I trudged off unable to walk normally without fear of another movement. There was just a big bottle of shit resting on the counter for all and sundry to view. God knows what they said when it arrived at the lab.

I could have thrown a brick through that restaurant window for what they had put me through, but there was no point; I would probably have been prosecuted for criminal damage or, worse still, been made to eat there again.

Apart from that Yuletide disaster, things on the pitch were good – I was enjoying my football and playing every week. The season ended badly though, a few annoying injuries curtailing my progress, and with the team not really fulfilling its potential. It is amazing how often a player gets injured while kicking the last ball of the session, lashing out while in a bad mood, or just over-egging it in training. My first injury at Plymouth Argyle was a combination of the last two. The weather had been poor, so we were training indoors in a sort of five-a-side gym. I was really buzzing, with a game the next day but, as with most five-a-sides, it got a bit tasty.

As I was going full on into a shot, one of the lads tugged me back and I felt my groin pull and start burning. It turned out I had ripped my adductor muscle, and would be out for about six weeks. Shocking timing to say the least. I was doing well, and had a few clubs interested, but would now be sidelined for a while. I got back playing within a month, but was then sent up for testing at Lilleshall as Kevin didn’t think that I was as fit as I normally was. OK, maybe I wasn’t running like a gazelle in every game, but I wasn’t that bad.

The testing basically involved me doing an eight hour round trip to Lilleshall, running my bollocks off on a treadmill until I nearly passed out, and then being told that I was probably a bit jaded with the effects of the injury, having no sleep, and having had a bad case of salmonella. No shit, Sherlock. I tore the same muscle again towards the end of the season, so it was a frustrating finish to a really promising start at Plymouth Argyle. That season also ended with Paul Gibbs getting a badly broken leg in the last game. Carlisle United won that game, with their keeper, Jimmy Glass, famously scoring the winner. It was a tremendous day for them, but for poor old 'Gibbo' it would mean a long road to recovery.

Life down in Devon was brilliant, and I couldn't wait for the new season to start. Fiona and I did have our fair share of problems, and with us having just had our first child, me being away most weekends, and with neither of us having family close by, Fiona did feel a bit isolated. Nevertheless, it was still worth being in Devon. The lifestyle was great and it was a fantastic place for us to bring up our little family; it just happened to be a marathon to get anywhere else. Incredibly, considering how busy and tired I was, I was still driving back to see Tony for a workout in Birmingham on Sundays, which also stacked the pressure on Fiona. I was so keen to do well that I thought it worth the six hour round trip.

I had to get to the top and, for me, seeing Tony and working hard on a Sunday morning when everyone else was in bed was part of it. I managed to carry on seeing 'Fordy' for about twelve months, but with the games coming thick and fast and with the team only getting home at 2 or 3am some Sunday mornings, something had to give. I was beginning to feel shattered on a Monday morning, having had no day off, so the additional workout was having the reverse effect to that desired. The mental side of what I had learnt from Tony still remained though, as it does today.

My routine, after, in my eyes, having blown it as a youngster, was to give myself just a week off at the end of every season. A week of doing nothing, and then I would start my pre-season training. That particular season though, I was so pissed off that I had got injured that I just carried on. I ran almost every day of that summer, and was soon ready for the new season. Absolute madness really, and a banker for a Christmas burnout, but it didn't seem to register with me then. It does now, I can tell you that much.

This morning I went for a run and for the first mile or so I was actually running like Steptoe. It must have looked as if I was running for a bus, and I had to really dig in at one point when an old boy on his mobility scooter seemed to want a

race. After a couple of miles I actually managed to run upright, and then felt pretty good for the rest of the route. I still have to run at a pace which hurts – unless I feel the onset of a heart attack coming on I just don't feel like I am fit. Like many, I also sprint the last section as if I am Usain Bolt. Perhaps this training is pushing myself a little too hard, but that is what I have been used to, the pressure to keep fit, keep playing and keep going. Still, going outside and doing a few kick-ups with my son, or joining in with the young lads I coach, still gives me a great buzz. It is good to be enjoying football again, and I mean that in the nicest possible sense!

1999/2000

Well I haven't been at my 'desk' for a few weeks. I will try to pick up where I left off. Once again, Cameron is arguing with my daughter Harriet about what's on the TV. Once again, Harriet wants Peppa Pig on, and Cameron wants Top Gear. Both programmes are on a loop in this house, but this time Harriet will win. Her age (four) and the fact that I have just told Cameron to let her watch what she wants are the deciders.

The fact that if Harriet doesn't get her own way World War III will start, and my writing will therefore have to stop, was the clincher in my ruling on this battle.

My wife has just gone to work, begrudgingly, and I can see the neighbours drifting off to work themselves, one by one. I do feel a tad of self-pity sat here drinking tea, eating my porridge (credit crunch), and listening to the children batter each other with balloons (somehow Top Gear is now on), but as it stands, I think I have finally accepted that my playing days are over. I had imagined that I would know the exact game and time that I would make the decision to finish, but it has just sort of happened – there was no one deciding moment.

I did have quite a few niggling injuries last season, and when I wake up every morning I do struggle to bend for the first twenty minutes or so, but generally I am still as fit as a fiddle and feel like I could play. The reality is though that I can't justify signing for a club three hundred miles away with no certainty of getting a proper contract. Oh, and the phone hasn't exactly been ringing off the hook. I suspect people do think I have retired, as towards the end of last season I did mention to a few reporters that it would be my last year, but even while you say that, you still have that thought in the back of your mind that you could play on, that you could still do a job for someone.

That said, and even with all the money worries that stopping playing has brought – that is, going from decent monthly money to no monthly money – I am as happy and relaxed as I have ever been. The fact that we are ten minutes from a beach may help; after all, sea air does do funny things to you. Don't get me wrong, having an irate wife and three children looking up at me expectantly for provisions, treats, school shoes and mortgage payments (well, perhaps the children don't worry about that last one), does slightly put the pressure on.

Despite this, on the whole, it hasn't been as bad as I thought it would be. Perhaps it's because it has only been a month of not earning any money; I'll get back to you after three!

I miss the day-to-day training, and the banter that goes with it, and I miss the buzz of a match day, but I don't miss some sides of the game. From the chairman, to the manager, to the players, the selfishness can be extreme, and you only really realise how bad it is when you are out of that bubble. To succeed in football you do have to be a little bit selfish, and very single-minded. I am not naïve enough to think that it should all smell of roses, or that Nobel peace prizes should be given out, but dealing with people outside of the football world does give you a bit of clarity.

As far as money is concerned, with the combination of coaching at Exeter City, some local TV 'punditry' work, and my on-off gardening project, we are surviving. With Fiona having just started a full-time job as well, the wolves are at bay for the moment.

Oh God! Harriet has found the boxing gloves and pads, Isabella has now woken up and is distraught that her hamster is hardly moving, and Cameron has just remembered that the tooth fairy should have been. Shit, give me ten minutes ...

OK, I'm back – the hamster isn't dead, I have given Cameron some money and told him that the tooth fairy stops coming when you are eleven, and I have sparred with Harriet for five minutes (she has a decent left hook!).

Being at home with the children (it's the school holiday) is great, but trying to get stuff done (by that I mean writing) is almost impossible. We have always been an outdoors type of family, but trying to entertain the troops, write this book, provide constant snacks, take calls, send emails, and do the chores is tough. Housewives all around the country, you have my utmost respect. I now fully understand the term 'multi-tasking'.

I have also come to understand the word 'budget', as our weekly shopping bill is now being scrutinised to the last baked bean (still Heinz, but that may soon change). As far as long term work is concerned my CV is waiting in the wings to go out to clubs whose unfortunate managers have just been given the boot. I have also applied for a couple of broadcast journalist roles at the BBC, and written to most of the daily papers asking for work. I am doing a bit of personal training, which is great; I passed a course a few years back and hadn't really made the most of it. I am now putting fifty-three-year-old ladies through intensive military style training which will make or break them! I have also offered my gardening skills (chopping, strimming, sawing, raking and regularly cutting myself) on a cash-in-hand basis to anyone who will listen. Did I mention

the coffee shop idea? Stop it ‘Greavsie’, just stop it, back to the football.

Two momentous things happened during the '99–'00 season: one was the total eclipse of the sun and the second was the birth of our first daughter, Isabella. My football also happened to be very good that year too. Apart from my younger days at Grimsby Town, my second year at Plymouth Argyle was probably the time when I got the closest to making it to the top.

Before the season had kicked off, I had become good friends with a lad the club had just signed from Nottingham Forest, Paul McGregor. He had played several times for Nottingham Forest, but after having had a really promising start things had soon gone a bit pear-shaped for him. Partly due to having a bit of a reputation, partly due to him wanting to be in a band, and partly due to the amount of decent strikers on their books, he was released and had found himself in Plymouth Argyle, and in our kitchen – the club always asked the players if they would take in new signings for a few days, cost cutting and all that.

Paul McGregor, Macca, is the least bothered person I have ever met, regarding football that is. He could take it or leave it; win or lose, play well or play badly, he would still carry on as normal. If I ever lost a game, or had a stinker (no comments please from those fans that have seen both happen to me on a regular basis), I would be in a coma of depression for a week – unless there was a Tuesday game, of course. I would not go out after the game as I felt embarrassed and disappointed. I also felt that fans would think, and rightly so in my opinion, ‘What the hell is he doing out? – They were crap today.’

Of course, it depends on the circumstance, club, and player. At Northampton Town, I could have had an absolute blinder, or I could have been sat with the St John’s Ambulance men and women for the entire second half, the fans would still have had a chat and a laugh with me if my wife and I had popped out for a meal or a drink on a Saturday night. It is a sort of mutual respect that is formed between a player and a club, and players and fans.

Fortunately, I have had that rapport at quite a few clubs I have played for, but I fully understand why fans can get so angry at players. If I had paid at the turnstile to watch my team play and subsequently seen them lose, then fair enough, I could take it on the chin and look forward to the next game. But if I saw a few of the players laughing away in a bar that very night, ‘giving it the large one’, then it would no doubt piss me off too.

I would even get wound up on the coach after a game if we had lost, and the lads were laughing or messing about, but each person is different, and Paul McGregor certainly was that. Nevertheless, he wasn’t the sort to go out publicly

after defeats, as he had a bit of a complex about crowds, or ‘the general public’ as he put it, but he would still want to party and have a good laugh. The difference being it would probably be at a house party, a student union or some sort of fetish club.

McGregor was unique in the fact that he was so anti-football and anti-establishment, and yet he was very funny and likeable at the same time. We both started the season playing every single game, playing on either wing, and playing well. It still amazes me to think that during that season Macca scored sixteen times, predominantly from the right wing, won the player of the year award (I was robbed!) and was lauded by several clubs, and yet only two seasons later he was out of football for good.

More of that later, but by the Christmas of that season we were still near the top of the league. Had we bought a couple of the loan players who were at the club at the time, and doing very well, or had we been able to purchase a few more players to bolster the squad, I really think we would have been promoted that year. As it was though the season petered out, the team had injuries, form dropped, and we were just too thin on the ground to mount a serious challenge. At the club’s Christmas ‘do’ the manager said a few words and then Micky Heathcote, our captain and centre-half, stood up and, in his broad Wearside accent, said, ‘Listen lads, I’ve never won fuck all in my career, and now is my time and our chance to do something.’

He was dead right, but the ambition of the club, or the money to make the ambition a reality, simply wasn’t there. There were, however, some great moments from that season, both on and off the pitch, moments worthy of remembering.

One such memory came from a cup game against Reading, a match that affected our chairman in such a way that he too wanted the big stadium he had seen, and the success that he had spotted before him. In a roundabout way he got it. The club did go on to build a new stadium, and had back-to-back promotions. It’s just a shame that neither of us were able to see both processes through.

It was the FA Cup and we had been drawn to play Brighton in the second round. As it was a night game, we had travelled down on the day, which, as always from Plymouth, was a real trek. It was also very hot that day, so by the time we got there, the lads were a bit subdued, to say the least. Brighton’s stadium was loaned from the council at the time, with a running track around it and temporary grandstands in place, but it still held six or seven thousand, and there was a decent atmosphere on the night. This was bolstered by the fifteen hundred or so Plymouth Argyle fans present. By the time kick-off approached we had eradicated any pre-match – or post-coach journey – blues, and were

ready for battle to commence.

We played really well that night, but by half time it was still level. I had missed a great chance just before the whistle, heading the ball wide from a cross. During the interval I couldn't hear any of the team talk at all, I was just allowing myself gargantuan levels of self-pity while piercing a hole in the floor with my eyes and repeating, 'For fuck's sake, how did I miss that chance?' a few hundred times.

A changing room can sometimes be a very cold environment to be in; it can also be full of joy, heartache, laughter and tears, but more often than not, it is a place where your thoughts are your own, and where you have to find strength. Steve McCall patted me on the head and said, 'Come on Chris, don't worry about the chance.'

I don't know why, but at this point I could honestly have cried, such was my disappointment. I didn't normally feel emotional at this point in a game, as I was usually too busy getting myself ready for the second half. The bell rang and we were soon out again. You can't always remember how goals are scored, it is sometimes just a blur, and, having only scored sixty or so times in my career, in around seven hundred and fifty games, it is typical that that is my main recollection of goals. However, what you do always remember is joy, pure unbridled joy. I know many players say that scoring is better than sex; I'd say it is different, not better – but it does give you a massive rush that you cannot get in any other way.

I highlight the difference between goal scoring and sex, because sex comes to you a lot easier than scoring a goal. (My wife will honestly kill me if she reads this, and if she doesn't, someone is bound to tell her, so I could be in for one almighty barren spell.) Scoring is a moment that simply cannot be planned – I'm not saying that with sex it's a case of 'Right, it's Tuesday love – you know the positions we're after, now up you go.'

But when that ball hits the back of the net it is unpredictable, and both a joy and a relief; joy that it is you who scored the goal, and relief that your team may win the game because of it. Add to this that with sex thousands of people don't go wild when you do it, unless you're into that type of thing, of course.

Back to the night in question and, as you may have guessed from my above tangent, I scored and we won the game – a nutmeg on the edge of the box and a curler round the keeper, if you want the 'technical' terms. Plymouth Argyle always took a good following of fans to away games, and that night was no exception. We all drove home to Devon very happy that night, speculating about whom we would be pitted against in the next round. The answer was Reading, and we'd be playing away, in their brand new twenty-five thousand seat stadium.

Having won against Brighton we were all really excited to be playing at Reading, and none more so than I. Unfortunately, during a league game shortly after the win against Brighton, I landed really awkwardly, hurting my shoulder. Our ‘Fizz’ at the time, Paul Maxwell, sort of manipulated it and I was able to play on, and score, in that match, but for the next few games I was in absolute agony. ‘Maxi’ had tried his best to put it back in place on the day, but with neither of us having had experience with a dislocated shoulder, it was a case of ice it, grin and bear it, strap it up, and play on.

‘Maxi’ was brilliant, an absolute diamond of a lad, but, at the time I was there, he hadn’t completed his physiotherapy qualification, so wasn’t allowed to run onto the pitch to help any of the players. Until he was fully qualified the club had to get a local physio in on match days in case someone got injured on the pitch and a physio needed to run on.

Maxi was more like a player than a physiotherapist; he wore the brightest boots, had the biggest tan, and dressed in the tightest spray-on T-shirts. He also thought he was better at playing than most of the lads. He had been on the books at Plymouth Argyle as a young lad, but injuries (and maybe a lack of talent, sorry Maxi) meant that his career took a different turn. What a great lad though. He was constantly pouring his heart out over girl troubles; he came out with us on all nights out; was convinced that he was, in fact, the real Elvis Presley, and did more weights workouts than all the lads put together – in short, the best physiotherapist in the country (his words!). He is now plying his trade with Tony Pulis at Stoke; check the boots out on *Match of the Day*.

With the Reading game closing in, Maxi was creating more and more complex strapping for my shoulder. He was weaving masterpieces just to keep it in place. It was the same routine as the Brighton match on the day that we played Reading. An army of Plymouth Argyle fans had made the trip down to the Madejski stadium to watch us, and after Maxi had rigged my shoulder up to play, I had a quick look outside at the crowd. It was a great sight. Just then was also the first time I had come across Martin Allen. ‘Mad Dog’ was Alan Pardew’s number two at Reading, and he just stared at me as I walked past the changing room, with no top on and my shoulder strapped up like Tutankhamen. Our paths would cross much later in my career, but on that day he certainly made an impression on me, as he does with most people.

The first half of the game was a real bombardment of attacks from the home side. Reading took the lead and could easily have made the game safe, but we hung on in there and, with about ten minutes to go, were still in the game. I was in real trouble though, even in the first half I had nearly put up my hand to say ‘enough is enough’, but I didn’t – the bench just kept shouting to keep going,

and, somehow, you get through it. Adrenaline is a very powerful persuader, as are several thousand fans, but it was fair to say that I was having an absolute and utter stinker that day. My brother had come to watch, along with around four thousand Plymouth Argyle fans, and here I was having a crap match – brilliant.

As the minutes ticked away we were getting desperate, and really had to have a go. With a couple of minutes to go Paul McGregor hung up a deep cross which was headed down on the angle of the edge of the box by Martin Gritton (a top lad who had a penchant for student clubs and Marlboro Lights). The ball took an eternity to land, but the next moment was one of ‘those’ moments when as soon as you have struck the ball, you know it’s in. I caught the ball on the half volley and it thundered into the top corner. Never have I seen a set of fans go as crazy as the Plymouth Argyle fans did that day. Maybe it was the brand new stadium, maybe it was because it was so late in the game, or maybe it was because it was a twenty-five yard screamer. It was a moment I will never forget

...

I'll think I'll just stop reminiscing soon, as my wife has just stormed out in a huff, and I have to pick the children up in half an hour ...

... I’m back. As that ball hit the roof of the net I just ripped off my shirt and ran around the back of the goal to the fans to celebrate, waving my shirt above my head. I looked like a crazed Neanderthal man, with my long hair, newly grown beard, psychotic eyes and half strapped-up shoulder. My brother said it was the best game he had ever been to. He said to see his brother smash one in in the dying minutes of the game, and to be jumped on in the process by a Plymouth Argyle fan wearing a Hargreaves shirt, was a pretty good feeling. I agreed, and at least one Hargreaves shirt had been sold that season!

I had scored a very special goal. It wasn’t a goal in a cup final, it wasn’t in the top flight, or for England, but it was a career goal that I could look back on and say, ‘That’s the best goal I have ever scored.’

Not the most important, just the best.

Winning that game gave us a feeling of total and utter relief. That was also the day that Dan McCauley, our chairman, decided that he too wanted a bit of that atmosphere for his club.

The replay was at Home Park and was won convincingly, a double by the lad on the other side of the wing, Paul McGregor, seeing off Reading and putting us

through to the fourth round. We eventually ran out of steam against Derby County. Seventeen thousand Argyle fans turned up to cheer us on, but a combination of too many of their players being better than too many of ours, and a bad day in front of goal, meant that our cup run was over. We had certainly caused a bit of a stir during that cup run though, and a few of us were now making links with other clubs.

We had such a laugh that season. Me, Gibbo, Macca and our Elvis impersonating physio, Maxi, were thick as thieves on and off the pitch. We even had a few Saturday night trips to London that year. Admittedly, it was a bit of a trek but it was always a very lively night once there! The first time we ventured into the capital together pretty much summed up how things were going at that time. As we approached a notoriously hard to get into club, I decided to go for the confident approach. I walked past the queue (please believe me in saying that this is not something I would normally do, but you know while in Rome and all that) and headed towards the bouncer, not having uttered a single word. Incredibly, he summoned me over, saying, ‘Come straight in mate, your table is ready.’

It was hilarious really. I waved the lads through, and we were soon sat down at our roped-off private table, complete with a bottle of bubbly.

I have absolutely no idea who he thought we were, or, more to the point, where the lads had got to who were supposed to be at the table that night, but I do know one thing – the many genuinely famous footballers preening themselves in the club were mightily pissed off that a group of lads dressed like Oasis and laughing their heads off had the best table in the place.

One of the more famous football lads recognised me, and he must have been scratching his head wondering how the hell a group of Second Division footballers could possibly blag a table like that. What made it all the more galling for him was the rest of the people in the club keeping on asking what band we were in, which made it even funnier. Our group just replied that it wasn’t about the fame, and that we just wanted a quiet night. If I remember right, Maxi even pretended not to speak English – which, to be fair, wasn’t hard for him anyway. With Macca and I having uncomfortably long hair, and both of us looking like Vivienne Westwood with our bizarre clothing, and with Gibbo and Maxi both having had very long sun bed sessions that week, it was slightly plausible that we looked like a band.

The Vivienne Westwood phase was brought on by the sheer volume of the clothes bought by Macca, all at a substantial discount from his mate Lee. Lee was a lovely lad who probably owned more clothes than Vivienne herself. The first time I met him was in a hotel room, and it was the first time I had seen

spending on such an epic scale. I think we were playing York City away, and since Lee was running the Vivienne Westwood shop in Leeds just up the road, he had popped in to see Macca. During the next forty-five minutes, items of clothing were strewn all over the room (again, if my wife is reading, there were no girls involved, and for the rest of you, none of that!). Macca gave a simple yes or no to the items shown. Hell, it was as if Elton John was in the room.

When all the picking had been done, Lee said calmly, while bringing his mobile credit card reader out, 'That'll be three grand, Mac.'

No emotion shown, Macca just swiped his card and carried on. When Lee turned to me and asked me what I wanted, I immediately started sweating like a drug smuggler in a Bangkok jail. I told him that I would see him next time, complete with credit card, but if I could just take a sample for now, that would be great.

Even though I joke about it, the dreaded credit card craze really had reared its ugly head at that time. A letter would come through the post, and you would suddenly believe you had ten grand to spend. I have actually seen a lad naïve and irresponsible enough to try to buy a twenty grand car on his credit card alone. In Birmingham, I had an American Express gold card that was so easy to use it almost dragged your hand into your wallet for you. I maxed it out, of course, and then very nearly needed hospital treatment at the end of the month when I saw the statement 'TO BE PAID IN FULL'. It is so irresponsible of the people doing the spending, I know, but how the firms in question get away with offering such murderous amounts of credit in the first place, knowing that it will be damn hard to ever pay it back, is far more worrying.

I had caught the Vivienne Westwood bug, and although I could already spend money as if it were growing on trees, I took it to a new level and now spent money as if I only had a week to live. Cars, clothes, meals out, holidays, it was all done without a thought. Now, I so wish I had at least bought a house earlier than I did, but as this is not a book about self-help, or the housing market, I shall continue leaving my monumental slice of melancholy to the side.

The king of blowing money had to be Gibbo though. He was the lad I talked about who tried to buy a car with his credit card ... say no more.

The four of us had such a ridiculous sense of humour that I think people really did believe we had a screw loose. Everything at the time had to be sung in a high-pitched voice, whether it be in the changing room – 'I'm going to the toilet and I won't be long' – or in a bar – 'You'll have a beer and I will too.'

I have no idea how this started but, before long, all the lads at the club were doing it. It must have driven people around us bonkers.

The worst offender was Macca and he took it to a new level one Saturday

afternoon. We had always carried this ‘sing-along’ into the tunnel before games, with the opposition teams not sure whether to laugh along or not. A nervous look was normally the best we got. But when a long-haired weirdo sings at the top of his voice, ‘I love cheese, and I love it up my bum’, even some of our team looked nervously at him. He just chuckled away and looked at me saying, ‘Yes Greavsie, come on.’

He definitely loved cheese I know, but the second part of that statement was something I was not prepared to witness.

I had ended my trips to Birmingham to see Tony, which was hard. He was, and still is, a rock of a man who, without a shadow of a doubt, got my career back on track. We both had a goal we were striving for, and although the Promised Land wasn’t quite reached, the amount I learnt from Tony about life, and about discipline and desire, would stay with me for ever.

Maintaining my training with Tony, I did go religiously to a gym in Plymouth. The sanctuary of a ‘spit and sawdust’ gym meant that I could be on my own, and continue to focus on playing better, becoming stronger, and getting to the top. The gym in Plymouth is also where Gibbo and I met the ‘King of the Gypsies’, Pete Tansey. Pete was a Goliath of a man, who had forearms bigger than most people’s thighs, and a personality to match. He also loved football and was a huge Stoke City fan – I did get him tickets to watch a game once, but unfortunately he only lasted nine minutes – way too much aggression shown to the away fans.

As well as regularly chatting away to Pete about football and fitness, one time we also helped him out with a boxing gig he had organised, by buying a few chairs for the punters to sit on and some prizes for a raffle. It wasn’t a big deal, and certainly didn’t break the bank, but Pete was at great pains to tell us how much it meant to him, and that he would call in a few favours to say thank you. Prior to this, he had asked us for a team picture, which I had the lads sign, for a ‘special’ friend of his. We were just told that the friend in question was a bloke called Reggie. One afternoon, a few weeks after the boxing event, the phone rang.

‘Hi, is that Chris? It’s Reggie here, Reggie Kray.’

At this point I was sort of laughing nervously, thinking it was a wind up.

‘It was a good thing you done for my mate Tans, you’re a good boy.’

I was in shock, so much so that I walked away from the wall still with the phone in my hand. The wire unclipped from its connection, so not only had I been phoned by Reggie Kray, I had now cut him off! Fiona must have thought I had officially lost the plot as I fumbled around with the socket, shouting, ‘Fucking hell, I’ve cut Reggie Kray off! I’ve fucking cut him off!’

Miraculously, he was still talking when I clipped the line back in. He mentioned that he would keep an eye on our results, and that he was really pleased with the signed team picture I had given him. After I had said goodbye and ‘all the best’, which was probably a bit optimistic, I put the phone down. Shortly after the receiver was down the phone rang again; it was Paul Gibbs.

‘Greavsie, you’re not going to believe who has just phoned me.’

The ‘nearly’ part of the season, the event that made it the closest I ever got to the top, came soon after the Reading game. I had scored three goals in as many games, two in the FA Cup run which had inevitably brought with it exposure for both the team and the players. My agent at the time was an ex-international who had played at the top, and who was convinced he could ‘get me a move’. I was very happy at Plymouth Argyle, and was glad to stay, but with the rumours of several clubs being interested in me now hitting the local papers and even some of the nationals, something seemed to be happening. It was a weird time really. Newcastle United had apparently enquired and were given a price (which was obviously way too much), and my agent had talked of interest from Man City, which was also well publicised.

The lads even rigged up a top for me to wear in training one day, complete with black and white stripes. In the end though, after a lot of hearsay, I was told that a move to Reading was imminent. It was approaching deadline day, and I had arrived for training as normal. Kevin Hodges pulled me aside saying, ‘Chrissy, don’t train today; I’ve had Alan Pardew on the phone, and I think the two clubs have agreed a deal.’

I was going to Reading, and, in exchange, Plymouth Argyle were getting one hundred and fifty thousand pounds and Andy Gurney, whom Reading had recently signed for two hundred and fifty thousand.

As you can imagine, I immediately phoned home, telling my wife that I would be a step closer to ‘making it’. I hadn’t even considered that I had already made it as a footballer – to me, ‘making it’ was getting to the very top, and nothing less would do. I hadn’t even thought about the money, but my agent told me I would be looking at around three thousand pounds a week, which to me back then, seemed as implausible, and as impressive, a figure as a hundred grand a week.

I drove home from training that day absolutely buzzing. Soon, I would be joining a club that had big aspirations of getting into the Premiership. I sat in the car on the drive, just thinking about what the future might hold, but as I got out ready to tell Fiona of my excitement, my mobile rang. It was my agent.

‘The deal’s off son, the clubs couldn’t agree terms. I’m sorry, but neither of them will budge; it won’t be happening.’

I put the phone down and just laughed. I laughed at the ridiculous nature of football. In twenty-four hours a deal had gone from a reality into a dream.

‘Isn’t it usually the other way around,’ I thought.

As it turned out, my agent was reportedly asking for fifty grand for himself, non-negotiable, or there would be no deal. However, as is the norm in football, I only found out about it five years later when I had signed for Brentford, and it was just a little bit too late. The Brentford manager, Martin Allen, had been the assistant manager to Alan Pardew at Reading at the time the deal was called off, and they had discussed my agent’s demands. If I had known back then what was going on, the deal would have gone through, without a shadow of a doubt, agent or no agent. I would have walked to Reading and played for nothing, to have a chance of playing in the Premiership. As it was though, I got the feeling that my one chance had passed. Don’t get me wrong, I nearly tore myself a new arsehole over the next few years, trying to make sure that I got another crack at it (excuse the pun there), but when your time is right, your time is right, and during the season of 99/00 that time was unmistakably right.

The rest of the season carried on much the same really. I was still enjoying my football, I got a new agent after sensing something wasn’t quite right with the one I had, and Fiona and I had celebrated the birth of our second child, Isabella. Having had two children in such quick succession, and without a great deal of help from either her or my parents, as both sets lived around three hundred miles away, this period was a test for us, but especially for Fiona, who doesn’t actually think she was seen in Plymouth without being pregnant.

While Fiona was ‘out of action’, I obviously had to keep the flag flying for the Hargreaves household on a social basis, and although I didn’t abuse it that much, I did stumble home on a couple of occasions from our next door neighbours’, Sonia and Rich, having had absolutely no idea what alcoholic cocktail had been ‘forced’ my way – it was just a slight release from the pressure of parenthood. The only thing I do remember from one of those nights is a large crowd of people, nakedness, some grass and a rugby ball. Or was that a dream? It’s slightly worrying that I’m not entirely sure.

Apart from the immense financial burden, the constant family arguments, and Fiona’s annoyance at the inevitable stretch marks, we really did hit the jackpot having children. Much to Fiona’s despair, every day had to be an adventure – you don’t get the nickname ‘Superdad’ by sitting in your armchair moaning about the weather and eating fudge all day, now do you? I suspect she doesn’t like the entirety of her spare time being consumed by constant bike rides, surfing trips and circumnavigations of the British Isles.

Other memorable Plymouth moments included the time when I lost Macca’s

cat. I was cat-sitting and had accidentally left the door to the roof terrace (labelled 'KEEP SHUT AT ALL TIMES') open. The cat ran straight through the door, and, as I looked on in disbelief, it started jumping from house to house like a crazed gazelle. I gave chase, and jumped over the first gap, which was way too long and had a seventy foot drop below, but I had to give up when I checked out the second gap – it had doubled and my bravery had halved. It was all good in the end though, it returned after a WEEK's absence, all safe and sound.

A slightly more severe incident involved breaking my nose, gashing my face, and nearly losing an eye. Again, Macca was involved. I had stooped to head a ball and had received a World Cup stud to the face. I was in shock, and there was blood everywhere. I looked up and walked towards Macca to ask him how bad it was. His reply was tremendously comforting, as while immediately looking away after seeing it, he said, 'Oh mate, that's fucking nasty! You are going to be scarred there – there is a sort of flap on your nose.'

Thanks Macca, you're a great support!

That particular scar healed up OK in the end, but I did get a few funny looks the next day as I sat in a café drinking coffee with Fiona and our neighbours Sonia and Rich. I looked as if I had had a nose job and my lips done all in one, and for good measure I was also wearing an eye patch!

A non-football-related moment, but one that was profoundly moving was watching the total eclipse of the sun, from the top of a cliff face in Devon. While many around the UK will have seen this, few will have had such a beautiful, or memorable, view. This was a definite highlight of my time at Plymouth.

Unfortunately, life down in the southwest had to come to an end. I got on well with Kevin Hodges, and do now, but I know he still thinks badly of me from when I left Plymouth Argyle. I can understand that, and had there been any sort of a decent contract offer on the table then, I would have signed it; it's as simple as that. Even though the interest from the few big clubs had died down, I knew that come the end of the season, I would probably be off. The team's form had dipped, the club's lack of ambition at the time was still a problem, and I suppose my transfer talk had wound me up more than it should have done. It all boiled over in a training session one morning. It was a 'keep ball' drill, and bad decisions by the ref (Hodgy) were really winding the players up. In the end, after seeing tackles flying in all over the place, I had had enough. As the ball neared our left-back, Jon Beswetherick, a great lad, but the closest any human will ever get to being a real-life zombie, I launched into a ridiculous swipe-cum-tackle that resulted in a bit of pain for poor 'Bessie', but six weeks out of action for me. This was six weeks when interest for possible transfer dampened, and six weeks which probably signalled the beginning of the end for my time at the club. The

injury came at a really important time in the season, which didn't help my transfer possibilities. Nevertheless, come the end of season, there were still a few clubs interested. Northampton Town was one of them. They had just been promoted to the division above, and their interest gave me a chance to play at a higher level.

Northampton Town were able to offer me more than double the money I was currently getting at Plymouth Argyle, as they would be benefiting from the Bosman ruling, and, much as I loved playing for Plymouth Argyle, with two young children in tow, I had to take their offer.

I still remember going into the office at Home Park, and Kevin Hodges saying, 'Well, I'm going to give out a press release saying that we have released you, you have to understand that.'

I know it was his way of showing his annoyance at my departure, but there really was no need for it. It tarnished what had been a great relationship, and I am still a bit gutted at the way my time there ended. He had no backing and the club had no money, and for that I felt for him, but to suggest that I had been released was a bit poor. I think Kev also firmly believed that I had milked that late season injury because I knew I was off, but I can categorically say that playing at any point, and at all times, was my only priority.

Even though the memories included the 'smashed face' incident, and despite the way I left, I count my time at Plymouth Argyle as nothing but positive. As a player, they were some of the happiest times I have ever had, and for my family, it was a period in our lives that we would always look back on very fondly. As we packed up the van to move northwards, I somehow felt that it wouldn't be the last time we would live in Devon.

Well, back to reality and it is Monday, so I have been over to Plymouth to do my punditry slot for the BBC. I suppose I am yet to find a 'proper' job, and I am getting fed up with people asking me what I am going to do. If anyone asks me that now, I just say, 'I'm going to get a pub and become an alcoholic.'

They obviously aren't even listening, as the normal response to my answer is, 'Oh really? That's nice.'

Well, either they're not listening, or they genuinely think that it is probably a pretty decent option.

Also today, I have had my hair cut. This is a major event in my life at the best of times, but it may become a problem when writing a book self-mockingly titled Where's Your Caravan? I deliberated over how much hair to have cut off for so long that the girl who was attempting to cut it started on her next client.

My worry was confirmed when I got the bill for thirty pounds; I must have paid for her next client as well – surely the amount of hair cut off doesn't affect the price? It does look a lot tidier, although I am now waiting for someone to shout down the street, 'Where's your mullet gone? Where's your mullet gone?'

As far as home life is concerned, the children are back into the swing of school. Isabella is on a school trip tomorrow, complete with sleeping bag, torch and midnight snack (home from home); Cameron is sorting his kit out for the endless after-school clubs he has at secondary school, which now include Ultimate Frisbee (a new and exciting school game that can be played by anyone ... as long as they are quick, can throw and can catch); and Harriet, our little pocket dynamo, is still insisting that she has created most of Devon.

'Dad, I painted the whole of Sidmouth including all the walls and inside all the houses, and I planted all the trees, and laid all the pavements.'

I asked her who helped her and she said, 'My baby, of course, Megan Concrete.'

Indeed.

Yesterday she said to me, 'Don't stand there Dad; I only laid that grass yesterday.'

And my wife? She just has those same five words of wisdom ready for me at any given time:

'HAVE YOU SEEN THIS BILL?'

I will now turn the laptop off, as my eyes are closing and my wife is making funny noises (not that type!). I think it's a hint.

2000/01

Back at the laptop, a cup of coffee by my side, and a few hours to spare, so here goes.

Well, I'm still stuck at home! It is frustrating at the moment; I feel like the guy at the circus who juggles the plates. My head is in a spin. One minute I get a phone call from someone asking me to play again, the next minute I am coaching, then I am trying to set up a bit more personal training stuff, all this while trying to find a decent place to open up a coffee shop. Moneywise, I am slowly reaching the edge, something needs to happen pretty sharpish, otherwise I will be listing all household goods (including three children) on eBay. The reason I want to open up a coffee shop is that I want to work, and work hard. I know it's a tough industry but I am up for the challenge, and with so many businesses ready to throw in the towel, I am waiting for the right one to take over and, hopefully, improve. One reason I am not jumping at the chance to play again is that I have damaged my Achilles playing in a charity game last weekend – the other reason being that I played as if I were the charity needing help.

Even the personal training has hit a minor snag. For the last two years or so I have been writing a daily blog for the local paper, the Herald Express. It involves me writing about football, life in general, world politics, you know the sort of stuff. Anyway, as the blog site attracts a few people to it, I thought I would promote my personal trainer service on there, so I put an email address on the site to enable any potential clients to contact me for sessions. Very soon after I had set it up, I received a couple of emails. As you can imagine I was really excited to be getting some early business, but alas, the first email was from a guy, I actually have in my phone under the name 'Stalker', wanting to meet up if at all possible to 'catch up'. The second email was from a woman asking me if I would like to come to her wedding reception. Seriously, what chance have I got, with this kind of response? (In case you're wondering, I decided against going to the reception!)

As far as the football world goes, I am still waiting for some poor soul to get the bullet; my CV will then be going in faster than a chairman could say, 'Your job is safe; I am fully behind you.'

It seems quite apt really; as I sit here starting to write about my days at

Northampton Town, it is only a couple of days since they pulled off one of the biggest victories in the club's history. Northampton Town's manager, Ian Sampson, an old teammate of mine, and now the boss there, took his team to Anfield and beat Liverpool, in a penalty shoot out and in front of the Kop, no less. It must have been a brilliant night for the four thousand 'Cobblers' fans who made the trip up to Merseyside, maybe a rather different night for Roy Hodgson and his underperforming stars!

We had shoe-horned the last piece of furniture into the rental van and were heading back up north. We had loved our time in Devon, we had two belting little babies, lots of new friends and a load of great memories, but with football as it is, it was time to move on. The day I officially signed for Northampton Town, two other players were signing as well. Marco Gabbiadini, an experienced forward who had enjoyed a great career with Sunderland and Derby County, and Jamie Forrester, another striker who had scored a bucketful of goals on his travels. It felt like a proper set up the day that we all signed. An official press launch, all our families made welcome, and even a bottle of bubbly in the boardroom. The manager at the time was Kevin Wilson, yet another striker, and yet another footballer who has had a decent career, banging in a load of goals in the process. At this point in time, he also still had his impressive eighties moustache intact. (Sorry Willo, I couldn't resist!) I got on brilliantly with Willo, Marco and Jamie. Willo and Marco were the last of the old school at Northampton Town; they had played at the top but were not 'big time Charlies' in the slightest. Jamie was a little pocket dynamo who had a wicked sense of humour, but who also had paranoia at the highest level – to be honest all strikers I have come across suffer from this type of mindset: 'Will I score? Will he pick me? What's for tea? How much sleep have I had?'

Northampton Town, 'the Cobblers', had been promoted the previous season, and the buzz around the place was great. I had a good feeling about the club which was proven right, and it lasted the entire time I was there. Fiona and I quickly bought a house (finally!), a little cottage out in the country, and I set about meeting yet another set of lads and doing another pre-season. You meet some real gems at a football club and Northampton Town was no exception. We had the little winger John Hodge, who was as much of a weirdo as you would ever wish to meet, but very funny with it, and midfield favourite Roy Hunter, who had been everywhere and knew everything about everything (even if he hadn't been there, or didn't know anything about it at all). Then we had the Geordie/Wearside/Tyneside crew of Steve Howard, Richard Hope and Lee

Howey. Between them they had probably consumed a good twenty thousand bottles of Newcastle Brown Ale in their time, Lee having had fifteen thousand of them. I remember one night out with the lads where Lee got a bit confused as to what was going on – either that or his standards were really slipping. We had picked out costumes for the Christmas do, and I had been stitched up with the hooker outfit. A pair of stilettos, some fishnets and a bit of lippy later, and I was away – and before you say it, no, with my hair I didn't need a wig. After a couple of drinking games, I walked into the toilet, and there was the big man, Lee Howey, at the sink. He had obviously spotted a 'young lady' coming in, and thought it might be a decent opportunity. Let's just say I hurried up and got out before we both had a bit of a fright!

Off the pitch, I became good friends with quite a few of the lads. Together with Marco and Jamie, I knocked about with our left-back Duncan Spedding, who only spoke in 'Alan Partridge' for his entire three years at the Cobblers and my fellow midfielder, James Hunt. Dunc is the only pro footballer I've met who hated football more than Paul McGregor. He had started his career at Southampton and was a decent player, but by the end of his three years at Northampton Town he had gained a pretty bad foot injury, one which eventually forced him to retire. Dunc was absolutely delighted the day the specialist told him he would have to retire; there was a huge flag waving over his house the day he got his insurance cheque through. As you can guess, I was delighted for him!

You may think it unusual for professional footballers to hate football. Obviously, they hadn't started that way, but football can be a high pressure game and sometimes this gets to players. This pressure, combined with a host of downsides to professional football, such as dealing with the results of managers' decisions, having to cope with injury after injury, the constant battle for adequate pay (in the lower leagues), the stress of moving around the country year after year, and having to train even on Christmas Day, regardless of your family status, would often put players off 'the beautiful game'. There is also the fan element – while having fans on your side is an amazing feeling, getting abuse from the terraces can make some players absolutely miserable, and spoil any enjoyment they get from playing. I suppose it was a combination of all these factors that saw off both Paul and Duncan.

Hunty was a proper Derby lad, and although sometimes seeming only a hair's breadth away from being a psychopath, he did have a heart of gold. It took him nearly two years to tell me that while playing for Plymouth Argyle, I had put him out of action for four months by shoving him off the pitch. When I asked him why he hadn't spoken to me about it in all that time, he just said, 'I was weighing you up pal.'

I replied, ‘Jesus, you took your time!’

Trigger from *Only Fools and Horses* could have been based on James Hunt; he was brilliant though, a real battler on the pitch, and hilarious off it. Or was it the other way around? He was great to be with on the pitch, tough tackling but fair, and a decent player with it. Off the pitch, he always had some bizarre story to tell; he was once convinced that a young girl had ‘tricked’ him into going home with her after a night out. I asked him why, and he replied, ‘Well pal, in the morning when she turned over to me and said “good morning”, she only had one eye.’

I laughed, as did all the rest of the lads, and we asked him how he hadn’t noticed.

‘I just thought she had a trendy hair-do, it was all swept over to one side, and it was dark in the club. I had also battered about ten bottles of beer down my neck.’

We were all in tears in the changing room, but Hunty was unrepentant, and just said in his deadpan Derby accent, ‘I said “good morning” back to her, but then asked her why she hadn’t told me about her glass eye. She said I didn’t ask, and that surely I’d noticed on the dance floor.’

We were all in pieces at this stage, so I asked him how it had ended with her.

‘Well, we stayed in bed for another half an hour or so, you know the score lads, but afterwards I told her that I couldn’t see her again.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘It wasn’t the eye. I just didn’t like her hair-do.’

Hunty and I had the same sort of approach to the game – we both wanted to do well, and were up definitely for the battle. Some managers liked this approach and some didn’t. Eventually, James Hunt left to sign for Oxford United, after failing to agree terms at the ‘Cobblers’, and he was certainly missed by the team on a Saturday. A few seasons later, he also got his own back for the Plymouth Argyle incident. I’ll tell you about that when we get to it, but it was impressive.

My debut for Northampton went pretty well, setting up the equaliser for Jamie in a 1–1 draw against Brentford, another team that I played for later in my career. That first season at Northampton Town saw me play in an unaccustomed left wing-back role. I got through it and quite enjoyed it really, but it was in central midfield that I would end up playing most of my games for the club.

I’m sitting here now looking through a programme from that season and Stoke were in that division back then, as were Wigan and Reading, all teams who

would soon taste life in the Premiership. There were also two teams in League One that season who would soon taste life in the Conference. Football is a funny old game, constantly changing.

After a decent start, we faltered towards the end of the 00/01 season. There were some good teams in the division and we had just been promoted, so it wasn't too bad a result. I played about thirty-five games that season, and was really enjoying my Northampton Town career until a reserve game, in which I was coming back from a slight injury, pretty much ruled me out for the rest of the campaign. I had torn meniscus cartilage in my right knee, and would have to have an operation to sort it out. Still, it would now give me plenty of time to enjoy tea and cake with our new friends, Ken and Vera, eighty-five and eighty-four, respectively. To be honest though, being injured at Northampton Town was not a good move. The rehab workouts and full days put on by the then physiotherapist, Denis Casey, were legendary. It would be a 9am start, and a 4pm finish. Nearly a normal day!

The rehab sessions were incredible. I am surprised some of the lads didn't take up careers in cycling after their training schedules with Denis. It would be cycling for breakfast, lunch and dinner, with a side salad of weights, swimming and jogging. I have to give Denis his due though, there weren't too many players wanting to be injured at Northampton Town, apart from Duncan Spedding that is!

I will come back to Ken and Vera, and life in a little village called Mears Ashby, later, but for now it's back on the phone and back on the emails. It is twelve o'clock and the house needs tidying (I have taken on the role of Mrs Doubtfire now Fiona is back working full time), the pots need washing (we have stopped using the dishwasher in these tough economic times, although I have been meaning to google how much a dishwasher cycle actually costs to run compared with the sink water used), and I need to get ready to coach the young lads at Exeter City (my only real source of income now, at around two hundred pounds a week).

I have recently put my name forward for the Hereford United manager's job – Simon Davey was sacked last week – and will wait and see what happens there. It is a club I used to play for and know well, and I would love the challenge of managing them, but with so many managers out of work it may go

to someone more experienced.

Other than all that, I did return to the jungle yesterday (Carol's house) for a Tarzan-style cameo. I strimmed, sawed, hacked and dug my way through eight hours of hard graft. I got through ten litres of petrol, two ham sandwiches and about four hundred obscenities, and again, with all the bramble and hawthorn scratches, I looked as if I had been self-harming. Times may be tough at the moment, but I have yet to reach that stage.

2001/02

The previous season had ended very disappointingly with an injury and subsequent operation, so to cheer us up, Fiona and I treated ourselves to a short break in New York. The trip to the Big Apple was a quality four-day blast of sight-seeing, spending, eating and drinking. We had no children with us, which was a rarity, but after only twenty-four hours of relaxing with no crying or noise, it got almost too quiet. Still, it was a brilliant trip, and we took in some amazing sights. We went for a helicopter ride down the Hudson and climbed the Statue of Liberty. Such was Fiona's fear of heights, she had to be gently coaxed up and down the spiral staircase, and being the caring boyfriend that I was, I grabbed her ankles every so often, scaring her half to death. We did all the tourist things that you imagine when seeing New York on the TV. We also ate at a restaurant on the top floor of one of the World Trade Center towers. Little did we know that, only a few months later, that same 1,362 feet tower would be gone, and many of the sight-seeing tours we had done would soon be banned for fear of another terrorist attack. As we ate in the south tower that night, able to see across New York to the ocean in the far distance, it was inconceivable that these vast structures would one day fall. The restaurant staff were so incredibly kind and friendly, I cannot bear to think of what went on in that restaurant the moment those planes came into view on 11th September.

A few years after Fiona and I visited New York, we found an old camcorder film that we had thought lost. It showed footage of us flying around the Statue of Liberty and then circling the World Trade Center Towers. Watching it was surreal; it was a poignant reminder of how New York had changed for ever, and how this event had global implications with an impact that continues even today, a decade later.

The last time I sat down for a session with the old lappy, Northampton Town had just pulled off a famous victory, beating Liverpool in the cup, at Anfield (on 22nd September 2010, if you want the details). Only a couple of weeks have passed since then, but, as is usually the case in football a couple of bad defeats mean that both these clubs and their managers are now under huge pressure. As well

as losing to the ‘Cobblers’, Liverpool have just lost the Merseyside derby and are lying second from bottom in the Premiership – their lowest league position in fifty years. (‘Statto,’ I hear you say.) At the weekend, Northampton Town lost a real six-pointer against another one of my former teams, the currently managerless Hereford United. Out of the jaws of victory, they snatched defeat – Northampton Town had been three nil up at half time. They are also second from bottom of their league. My old mate Ian ‘Sammo’ Sampson will have been getting through teacups like guests at a Greek wedding during his post-match talk/bollocking, and I’m pretty sure that, after the derby match, Liverpool’s manager Roy Hodgson may have had a few words to say in his team’s dressing room, despite his public show of solidarity. Who knows what fate awaits both clubs and their respective managers? We may well know by the end of this book!

I mentioned I put my name in for the Hereford United job, and I haven’t heard anything back yet, but with results like they had at the weekend – a 4–3 comeback after being dead and buried at half-time – their stand-in manager, Jamie Pitman, again a former teammate of mine (there is a running theme here!), may get the job. It’s funny how players who hang on in there at clubs end up getting a job when their playing days are over, either in coaching or management. Having had ten clubs, and never wanting to be one of those players who hung onto the rock face, clinging on rather than progressing, I have realised I may have to do it the hard way. I know a lot of players that were surplus to team requirements at a club, but who settled for not playing and instead stayed sitting on the bench, sometimes for years, in the hope that they might get a gig at a later date. Many of these players are now managers, so, if that is a player’s goal rather than actually playing football, it’s a good tactic.

Maybe I’m the one who got it wrong. I am sat here drinking my coffee and staring out of the window, as everyone else toddles off to work. However, it was never a choice for me; being a spare part at a club was just never an option. I’m not saying that’s the case for Jamie Pitman, he is a great lad who did it the hard way – on retiring, he got his qualification as a physiotherapist and earned his place managing the team. However, there are plenty out there who seem to have been frightened to death of moving from one club in case they might have to prove themselves somewhere else, and have chosen instead to cosy up to the management and bide their time.

As you can probably guess, seeing players acting like that really irritates me. But it’s not just players – it also drives me mad when I see coaches on the touchline, or in the dugout, who have their tongues firmly wedged up the manager’s arse, who only two weeks earlier were doing the same to the previous manager! Then there are the pretend theatricals from the mountain of staff on

each club's bench when the game is going on – it's all just too much for me. It's the same at international level as well. I think what I am trying to say, to all coaches and staff out there who are serious 'yes' men, is just, 'Stand up for yourselves, for Christ's sake, and don't be such total fucking sheep!'

Wow, and breathe Mr Hargreaves! I have no idea where that rant came from, but what the hell, it's staying in.

Well, as I said, everyone has popped off to work, and, as I have a morning off to myself, I will crack on with writing this book. At home, life is as hectic as ever. Fiona is now working full time, and, only a month in, she is showing early signs of a total breakdown. I am coaching part-time five times a week, and earning a quarter of what I used to earn when doing half the hours. I am also starting to get a few stares at the school gate when I do the drop every morning – people know I have retired and are obviously waiting for me to get a 'proper' job. Perhaps they think I'm just lazing around, but I can reassure them that I would like that to happen as well, and, after the fiftieth time of being asked, 'What are you doing now?' my reply has changed.

'Well, I'm just selling vibrators at the moment; it's decent money and the hours are really good.'

It actually goes down well, with most people responding, 'Oh that's nice.'

They're not listening, so what I say really doesn't matter!

Still, as much as the adults in the Hargreaves household may be showing signs of stress, the children are keeping us well entertained. At the weekend, our elder daughter Isabella wanted me to do some hill running with her; she is ten and says she is heading for the Olympics – we did twenty hill runs, you know, pushy dad and all that. My son Cameron had a break from playing football to go to an 'Ultimate Frisbee' weekend. How times change eh? A Frisbee used to be for the beach and the beach only, and now it's a real school sport. Finally, Harriet, our younger daughter, future stand-up comedian and cream-tea-eating champion, took me swimming. She forced me to buy her some goggles, as she said she could now swim, and then went on to sink at least ten times, all while beaming away and looking like a young Alan Carr. As ever, in this beautiful county we live in, we made it to the beach and then to the ice cream shop. The only difference from our previous routine being that this time we parked a fair distance away and walked to the ice cream shop – cost of parking nil, but trek to the cheaper ice cream shop immense.

My second season at Northampton Town was certainly a memorable one. Life was brilliant off the field with our two little babies in tow. We had moved to a

lovely little village called Mears Ashby, and had made some great friends, none better than Ken and Vera, our neighbours, and newly ‘adopted’ grandparents. I first said hello to Ken while walking Cameron around the village, and before long I was invited in for a cup of tea. It soon became a bit of an afternoon routine. While Isabella slept in her pram, and Cam played with crayons and watched TV, we had a good chat about life (usually Ken’s latest illnesses and Vera not being able to hear the phone), and we had a real laugh with it. Although Ken was eighty-five he had a wicked sense of humour, he loved a bit of ‘smut’, as he called it, and he really enjoyed talking about the ‘footy’. Vera loved showing the children her latest paintings or walking them around their lovely garden. I think you can sometimes be more honest with friends than you can with family, and with Ken we could talk about anything without bias or judgement. He was definitely a grandfather figure to me, but was also a real good mate with it.

Those afternoon teas were always accompanied by a huge slice of cake. Ken and Vera also invited us to many a meal at their house but with the modern body as it is, our constitutions weren’t really up to the task. By that, I mean that what Ken regarded as fine to eat may not have passed today’s stringent food safety ‘tests’ – for example: you could be almost certain that the milk, which he’d be about to put in the tea, had been out for four or five days (and, after my salmonella bout, I had become a tad more careful about what I ate)! Still, we went to a few meals, and from proper suet puddings to stuffed peppers, the meals were certainly memorable, in more ways than one. It always made us laugh the following day, when we would visit Ken and Vera, Ken would say, ‘I’m really not feeling the best today; it’s just oozing out of me, it really is oozing.’

We would laugh, at the description of Ken’s ailments as much as his belief that it was anything other than a pepper, laden with hot cheese, and suggest that maybe it was something that he had eaten. Ken would always reply, ‘Nonsense, I must have caught a bug. It’s that bloody doctor’s surgery; it’s a minefield for illness.’

So, was the Edam left on the side for a week, Ken?

But you have to admire that generation, there’s never any waste, and all vegetables are still grown in the garden. Ken even fattened up six turkeys for Christmas that year; little did I know how much involvement I would end up having in that little Christmas surprise.

The whole Hargreaves family would all pop over on a regular basis to watch the chicks growing into big old birds, and it was quite exciting for the children to see what would soon be on the Christmas table. As it approached Christmas Day, I assumed that Ken would soon be taking the turkeys somewhere to be

‘prepared’ for consumption, but no. One afternoon, there was a knock at my door and it was Ken.

‘It’s time.’

‘Time for what?’ I asked.

Ken answered, with a smile on his face, ‘It’s time you and I sorted those big birds out.’ And he didn’t mean in the lay-by near the local reservoir. He must have been close to bursting into laughter when he saw my face drop, but he kept it together and walked me over to his house. I had no escape route, as my wife and children were out, so I walked over with him, not wanting to ask the inevitable, ‘What are we going to do with them, Ken?’

As Ken opened the garage door, the answer was clear. It was like a scene from the film *Reservoir Dogs*. There were hooks everywhere, plastic sheeting in place, and a definite sense of fear in the air. For a moment I thought Ken might suggest we do Vera in, such was the grisly scene on show. In a flash Ken had collared one of the now freakishly large birds and was handing it to me, ‘Hold it still, man, and when I say pull, pull hard and quick!’

Hell, five minutes earlier I was scoffing some Quality Streets and watching GMTV, and now I was with a psychotic, eighty-five-year-old butcher, killing a twenty-two pound freak of a bird. In the end, it wasn’t that bad, of course, but for someone who had never had to kill his own Christmas dinner before, I was slightly disturbed.

As I grabbed the first bird and held it aloft, Ken got hold of a big metal pole and put the bird’s head in between the pole and some sort of specially prepared breeze block trap. He then shouted, ‘Pull man, pull!’

I lifted this flightless heavyweight up and, as commanded, pulled; it was like a crime scene, but with feathers and shit flying everywhere. When the turkey had eventually stopped moving I put it down and said to Ken, ‘Jesus, Ken, that was a bit hardcore! I’m pleased that’s over.’

He replied, ‘It’s not over, man, there are five more in there that need sorting out.’

After twenty minutes of leg-grabbing and neck-pulling, it was finally over and I could relax. Well, almost. As we walked further into the garage with the birds, Ken smiled at me and said, ‘Now we have these six big juicy birds to pluck, have you got enough stamina?’ – He had more banter than some of the lads in the changing room! We laughed for a long time about that experience. Ken said that he would make me gut them ‘next time’, but that I needed a few more hairs on my chest for that. It was traumatic enough to have to eat one on Christmas Day – I’m sure I saw it move!

Unfortunately, there wasn’t a next time, as Ken, God rest his soul, had a

couple of pretty bad strokes and eventually died after a year and a half of being in and out of hospital and then a nursing homes. Even in hospital he would play up and keep the nurses on their toes, but for Ken, not being able to walk, drive, or have any real independence was so debilitating that I think the fight and spirit in him just faded away. As much as we would have a laugh on the ward, and then in the home, he knew that the end was in sight. I was devastated when he passed away. Still, I always smile when we have turkey at Christmas.

The 01/02 season was another one where early promise petered out, to be replaced with end-of-season nerves. A few things changed that year, with manager Kevin Wilson, Willo, being sacked and replaced by our former assistant manager, Kevan Broadhurst. Off the field, the club was also in a transitional phase; it wouldn't be long before a lack of money would become a real issue.

While writing this book, it has been hard to remember all the games I have played – after seven hundred or so, and probably two hundred more reserve games at Grimsby Town, many just seem to mingle into one. There are some exceptions. I do actually remember playing against Blackpool four or five times, with different clubs – some won, some lost, and some when I could easily have sat with the St John Ambulance men and women, and not be missed, such was the lack of activity down the left wing. I suppose it's easier to remember games against Blackpool because it's always freezing cold, and you can always see the tower as you drive into town.

As I type away now, looking back on where they were, it seems incredible that Blackpool are playing in the Premiership. Ian Holloway has done a miraculous job with the team, and it makes a refreshing change to see a manager do post-match interviews which actually tell it how it is. He has been brilliant for the Premiership and if he can keep them in it this season it would be an even greater achievement – watch this space.

Anyway, a Tuesday night game for Northampton Town in the 01/02 season that I will never forget was playing Middlesbrough away. I had played at the Riverside Stadium a few years earlier with Hereford United, when we were completely battered by Ravanelli, Juninho and Emerson for ninety minutes. Surely that was, and will be, their finest team ever, but the fact that some of our lads were more interested in getting shirts that night than actually playing football didn't half piss me off – they were all told this in no uncertain terms at full time by an irate

long-haired and exceedingly tired midfielder.

This time, Northampton Town were drawn against them again in the Carling Cup, and the lads were really up for it. However, the previous weekend had seen me witness the death of a good friend of mine. Northampton Town had played on the Saturday against Colchester United, and, although we had lost, I had managed to notch my first goal for the club, which always gets the monkey off your back. The next day the family were planning to watch my mate ride in the preliminary rounds of the British Motorcross Championship. Kenny Wyatt was a brilliant Cleethorpes rider who had made a return to racing after a turbulent few years away from the sport. He was due to watch me play on the Saturday but was running a bit late so we agreed that I would just see him at the track, which was just outside Oxford, the next day. When we arrived, Kenny had already completed one race but was having pain in his groin. While, in a childish way, such injuries can be funny, I could totally empathise with his condition. It was also an injury that is made worse by racing, since you are constantly gripping onto the bike with your legs. I suggested that he put a couple of ice blocks on both sides before his next race, and raided the children's pack-ups to get some for him. Before the next race, Kenny asked me if I thought he should ride. I said that he should only do it if he felt right, but that if he felt OK, 'Then go for it.'

I keep thinking back to that question and know that, even if my answer had been negative, it would probably have made no difference whatsoever. Because of the type of lad Kenny was, he was always going to race. If he had had a proper team, including medical staff, around him at the circuit, then maybe he wouldn't have ridden in that second race. It was hard for riders like Kenny who were trying to compete with the big teams, and the set-ups and bikes that they had. To even stand a chance, such riders always had to push it to the absolute limit. As we saw Kenny battling away in the race, you could tell that the bike was struggling to keep up with the front-runners and that he was a bit out of sorts. When his bike failed to appear on one of the laps and I saw some dust in the distance, I immediately knew something was wrong. I left the children with Fiona and ran over the brow of the main hill at the track. Kenny's bike was flat on the ground; he lay beside it, motionless.

The next thirty minutes were a blur. People were milling about trying to help Kenny, but the medical team seemed to take an eternity to arrive. I can't say whether swifter action would have saved his life, but he seemed to lie there so long on the cold track that day. I can't help but feel that proper help did not arrive quickly enough. I wish now that I had moved the people out of the way who were trying to help, but were actually doing little other than panicking, and had tried to do something for him myself. At the time I just felt helpless, and

stood with Kenny's mum and his bike man and good friend, Alfie, not knowing how to help. My young children were now wondering what was going on and my wife was doing her best to distract them, but the whole situation was just terrible.

At one point, Kenny moved his leg, which we thought was a good sign, and when the ambulance eventually arrived and Kenny was driven off to hospital, we still had hope that he would be OK. However, as we followed the ambulance, it suddenly stopped in a lay-by en route – I knew then that it was something extremely serious, and he must have taken a turn for the worse. The ambulance took off again, and after parking our car and quickly sorting out the children, I ran down to the A and E entrance. As I was approaching the entrance, all I saw was Kenny's mum walking out in floods of tears. She looked up at me and cried, 'He's gone, Kenny's gone.'

I put my arms around her, and then could only watch as Kenny's family hugged in grief and disbelief.

I felt sick as I walked back to the car to see Fiona and the children; I phoned my dad, who had helped Kenny with his bike for years and who was very close to him. I just said, 'Kenny's died, Dad, he has died.' I don't think my dad could actually take it in – his son telling him that Kenny, someone he had helped for years, and whom he was so fond of, had died on a track. A brilliant and charismatic young lad had tragically died, and I had lost a good friend.

On the day of the game, I was still in shock at Kenny's death, and so had travelled up separately that morning. I got to my hotel room, made a cup of tea, sat down on the bed, and turned the TV on. In the early afternoon of what was already a very surreal day, something else had happened that would change the world for ever. As I turned on the TV and looked at the screen, the first thing I saw was footage of a plane crashing into the side of a skyscraper. It didn't take long to realise it wasn't a film, and it looked as if there had been a terrible accident. I turned the TV up, and there was confusion everywhere. The camera suddenly switched to another shot and showed another plane ploughing into another enormous skyscraper. I couldn't believe what I was seeing and was glued to the screen as the events unfolded. I don't think anyone immediately understood the magnitude of what had happened, but the devastation was horrific. I'm sure that for anyone who was watching, the sight of those towers tumbling down was something that would be etched in the memory for ever.

I was on autopilot as we played that night, as were a lot of the players. Thoughts both of Kenny and the day's events raced through my mind. After leaving my boot in Dean Windass's head (we were old mates from Hull!), and playing very well but losing, the game was over and I could finally reflect on

what had been one hell of a few days. Our assistant manager, Russell Slade, pulled me to one side after the game and said, ‘You were magnificent son, a different class, well done today.’

The fact that the pitch was like a bowling green and that I wasn’t even thinking about the game may have helped me to play well, but losing meant the day was definitely a bittersweet one.

It was sad to see Willo go. He had done a really good job for the club in gaining promotion, and then keeping them in League One, but with relegation on the cards, the decision was made to relieve him of his duties. Kevan Broadhurst replaced him that November (unofficially, Kevin Wilson left in September). Kevan was another decent fella, and although I had a few disagreements with him about performances and tactics, I could recognise that he was a good coach – he just didn’t like my style (of play or of character!). Northampton Town were getting sucked into a relegation fight, and, with only a few games to go, we had to win our home game against Wycombe Wanderers to be able to survive.

The season had gone very well for me, and I was beginning to get a lot of stick from the lads as they were convinced my dad must have been voting for the man of the match every week. I assured them that my dad was hardly ever present and that I would gladly share the champagne. (I lied about the second part.) I even won the champagne after a game in which I had played like my Auntie Margaret (I never saw her play, but I suspect she might not have been a natural). When the announcement came that the sponsors had voted for me, I was almost embarrassed to go into the sponsors’ lounge to accept the award. I felt even more embarrassed when some of the sponsors told me they had meant to vote for Marco Gabbiadini, but that some of their number 10 votes were mistaken for number 20. However, they said I was, nevertheless, welcome in there, and joked that they hadn’t seen me for a whole two weeks! I accepted with dignity, and walked passed ‘Gabbers’ with ‘his’ champagne and a wry smile.

The game against Wycombe at home (on 6th April) was, as is usual for a relegation decider, a tense affair, but I was quite relaxed going into the game. I had arranged a bit of a party for Fiona that Saturday night for her thirtieth birthday, so the night before the big game I was rushing around making sure that everything was in place. It was the right decision to be relaxed – after being 1–0 down, I managed to score the equaliser, following up with another header to make it 2–1. We ended up winning 4–1 and survived the drop. The night went pretty well too, I picked up the club’s Player of the Year award at the annual award ceremony, and then rushed to Fiona’s party. After scoring a couple of goals, picking up the Player of the Year award, and then getting together a load of our closest friends for an almighty knees-up, I felt that the day had gone as

planned!

I wish I had been a bit more relaxed with my football during my career, because I do think it brings the best out in a player. By relaxed, I obviously don't mean not trying or not being bothered; I just mean approaching games and seasons with a bit less tension flying through the system. In comparison to a lot of lads, I'm not too bad; I have witnessed pre-match rituals including players saying prayers in the toilets, some having several tots (glasses!) of whisky before a game, and one lad even pretending to eat a bag of peanuts before every game. (He mimed the process. Everyone who saw it was curious as to how this particular ritual had come about, but no one wanted to ask him, for risk of putting him off his game.) Still, whenever I have felt relaxed, I have enjoyed playing a whole lot more, and tended to have played better too.

Fiona and I had decided to get married that summer, and what a day it was. It was 1st June, scorching hot, we had secured the use of Ripley Castle, on the outskirts of Harrogate, and I was marrying my childhood sweetheart. I can think of worse ways to spend a summer's afternoon.

My stag do was another memorable affair. My brother Mark organised a little break in Prague for eight of us. It hadn't become the stag destination of choice it has now, so it still had that bit of mystery. The people in the group just made it even better. As well as my brother, the Birmingham contingent of Wayne, Paul and Andy came, as did Chatty Chapman from the northern section, leaving Paul McGregor, Daryl Burgess and myself to make up the football part of the squad. Normal stag do shenanigans soon began. Being naked but for a pair of sunglasses, with two beautiful girls for company, should conjure up a pleasant image for most men, but with the lads looking on, ten other girls present, and a room full of odd looking 'regulars', it did have its drawbacks. Yes, we did frequent a few places not in the official guide-book.

We had a brilliant time though, drinking absinthe and beer in the day, followed by absinthe and beer at night, but some of the best laughs were at the most unexpected times. It was torrential on one of the days, but we decided to do a bit of sightseeing for an hour or two. The sight of eight hungover lads in luminous waterproof tourist jackets walking through St Vitus Cathedral must have been hilarious. Our group comprised two lads with hair down to the shoulders, three mean-looking black guys – one with dreadlocks down his back, a dead ringer for David Walliams, but fatter, a young Bruce Forsyth, and a double for Vinnie Jones. What goes on on tour does have to stay on tour, but we were relatively well behaved, and the only thing we brought back with us from that trip was (a few bottles of) absinthe. This is the stuff that, infamously, drove Van Gogh to part with his own ear. It has been watered down no end since his

time, but still packs one hell of a punch.

A few weeks after returning from Prague, my brother Mark, who was staying with us for a while, Duncan Spedding, who had bottled the stag do big time (sorry Dunc, but you know you did), and I decided to reminisce, assisted by a few shots of the green stuff. One thing led to another and before long the three of us were in trouble. Dunc was ill for three days afterwards, Mark couldn't even get into his work gear the next day, and I actually fell off the treadmill at the club that morning. (My years of partying training had obviously helped somewhat.) It was evil stuff.

The funny thing was though, I had bought my dad a few bottles of it on the journey back, more for the novelty factor than anything, and although he accepted them with good grace I thought that they would remain at the back of the drinks cabinet for the next ten years. But no, I phoned my mum one night and after chatting away enquired as to how Dad was getting on. She replied, 'Oh he's fine son: he's just sat here having a glass of that stuff you brought him back from Prague. He has a couple of glasses a night with water!'

Jesus – drinking the stuff is bad enough but prolonging the agony with water is just downright torture – northern grit or what? He certainly put his sons to shame!

Despite the company, I survived the stag do – I was free, and alive, to marry. As a young lad, I really pushed the boundaries of our relationship to the limit, but we stayed together, just. I cannot put into words how much of a good person Fiona is – all I know is that having children with her and marrying her were the best things that I could ever have done. Had I not, I have no doubt that I would have drunk a hell of a lot more, would have slept with a lot more women, and would probably have been at many more clubs. Actually, when I put it like that ... Joking aside it was definitely meant to be, although she may disagree with me after having being put through hell by me for twenty years, but let's not ruin the moment!

The day itself was crazy: Fiona stayed at the castle with friends and family, to be pampered (drink champagne) and preened, while I was at home at my parents' house with our two little babies. I definitely drew the short straw there; in fact, on the morning of the wedding I got the kids ready, drove two hours to get there, and had a last minute shower and shave ten minutes before we met the registrar. Yep, get out the violin (speaking of which, did I mention the string quartet?).

It was, however, a classic wedding day. The location was incredible, the sun was blistering hot, one of our friends sang our first song, Katrina (Daryl's wife) fell over the chaise longue in the drawing room, some relatives didn't even last

till the meal (let's call it 'heat exhaustion'), someone got nicked on their way to the wedding, and my brother had a major altercation with his girlfriend. All in all, it was the perfect day!

Having a two hour champagne reception in thirty-five degree heat was a major factor in some of the above incidents, but I quite like the fact that our wedding was eventful. Fiona and I had agreed that the speeches should be done before the meal so that everyone could enjoy it and relax, but by the time the ceremony had taken place most of the guests had already had six or seven glasses of champers. Seeing my Uncle Sid frog-marching one of the waiters back up to the castle for more 'refreshments' was a bit worrying, but it was only a bit of harmless arm-twisting. I was delighted that we had got all of our old friends and our family together, to share a great day. Fiona and I will always remember that day, for obvious reasons, but we look back with particular fondness on some of the wilder stuff that happened. I haven't even mentioned the late-night chocolate cake/champagne/wedding dress combination, which, unsurprisingly, became very, very messy.

I finished proceedings off that day by saying a few words – that the bridesmaids had really made an effort and it just showed what a good make-up bag could do, and, of course, that I hoped everyone had been generous with their gifts. Then it was official, we had become Mr and Mrs Hargreaves, we were now husband and wife.

Having our children with us did make the wedding a little more interesting. Bizarrely, Fiona and I actually ended up being married to our son Cameron. He had started playing up a little bit just as the registrar mentioned our names, so before Cameron truly exploded into tears, and ruined the service, the registrar said his name. However, it ended up, 'Do you, Fiona, take Christian to be your lawful wedded husband, and ... Cameron!' Hell, it was like a wedding in the deep south of America! Even when Wayne sang our first song, brilliantly I might add, Isabella ran in screaming, so we scooped her up and she joined us for the first dance. It didn't matter though, having our family included in our wedding only made it better. After several more hours of dancing and drinking, we were played out by Daryl, who had brought his decks and record collection for the night, bringing a bit of old school to a very old venue. Seeing my Auntie Maureen dancing to Cypress Hill takes some beating.

We then had a short, but lovely, honeymoon in Sorrento. Swanning around the Amalfi coast for a few days topped off a brilliant week for us. I had wanted to keep it as a surprise for Fiona, but family friend Guy Allen bowled over to us both at breakfast the morning after the wedding: 'When are you taking this lovely lass off to Italy then, lad?'

What chance have you got? Guy was a one in a million though; he was generous to a fault, and always filled a room with his charisma and presence.

That summer was pretty damn good really, if a little bit excessive, especially when it came to trips away. After our relegation escape, the football club had taken the team on an end-of-season holiday. We were delighted that the club was taking us away, although when we heard that it was to Benidorm, the image of handkerchiefs on heads, and of 'Sticky Vicky', immediately sprang to mind. Incidentally, we did see 'Sticky Vicky' and she was certainly entertaining. She entered the arena like a prize fighter, complete with robe and music, and, after seeing more household goods appear from *you know where* than you'd see at a Jamie Oliver party, we left the arena slightly bewildered and a little bit scarred. Even if they were the right kind of item, you certainly would not want to use the ones used that night while working through one of Jamie's recipes and sipping on your Pinot Grigio.

Aside from a small incident involving a TV, a near deportation and a thirteenth-floor balcony, the trip went like a dream. As always, I was glad to get back to my family, but it was one hell of a laugh. With the likes of Chris Marsh, Jamie Forrester, James Hunt and Paul McGregor around, it was always going to be a good crack.

That summer we also took the children on their first holiday, to Puerto Pollensa in Majorca. We had a lovely time in an apartment near a belting little patisserie and it was great to be able to relax on the beach without the pressure of football. That is, it was until I got a call from the club, saying that although we had survived the drop, they needed to save money, and asking whether I would be prepared to take a twenty-five per cent pay cut to stay, as the financial situation was dire. Why couldn't anything just go smoothly? I can't tell you how many times I have walked along beaches in the six weeks after a season has just finished, with my mobile wedged to my ear and an agent or a manager on the other end of the line. My family will testify to it being a hell of a lot. Whether you are in contract or out of contract, it is always the same. The end of season scramble is just crazy. I have signed for football clubs a week after the season has finished, and a week before the season has kicked off, without even having a medical, such is the madness caused by the Bosman ruling. It has worked both ways for players, and in my career it has provided both benefits and negatives. Even ignoring the Bosman ruling, I think it is a lot harder for young players starting out now though, certainly at lower league clubs anyway. With budgets being very tight and squads being cut to the bare minimum, there are so many players on the market that it is inevitable plenty will fall by the wayside.

Despite the pay drop, I decided to stay at Northampton Town. I had spoken

to Kenny Jackett at Swansea and Ian Holloway at Queen's Park Rangers (QPR). They were both very good managers at good clubs, but my heart was with Northampton Town. As I've said all along, maybe that was my problem, the heart always ruling the head. Moving on may have furthered my career, and would have given me more money, but I loved the club I was at and thought that a bit of loyalty (for a change) was the way forward. How wrong I was! The club was in turmoil the following season, on and off the pitch. I have never really been very Machiavellian with my decisions about contracts and clubs, some players are always scheming to get away, and some do get what they want, but for me in this case, wanting to stay so much probably clouded my judgement.

As good as that summer was, and that previous season had been, it was around then that I realised my dream of playing in the Premiership was over. My hopes of playing for England had only just gone the season before. Like most players though, I was desperate to do well, and took my job extremely seriously. I would imagine that the public perceive footballers as lads who train for a few hours in a morning, and then play golf or go to the pub in the afternoon (and yes, in quite a lot of cases they would be spot on!), but I can tell you that most don't. I have played for many clubs and have come across a lot of lads, and the majority have been obsessed with the job, and are driven to be the best they can. They are disciplined, they maintain a careful diet, they train hard, and they try damn hard to keep fit so that they can keep playing each week, and keep earning money. You become so focused on the season in hand that everything else is on the periphery of your life, the job is everything.

Each season you set yourself a goal, whether it is a club level goal – to gain promotion, to get in the play-offs or to survive, or one on a personal level – to play in every game, to get a move, to score goals or to get clean sheets. There is no doubt in my mind that the lads playing at a lower level are just as professional and determined, if not more so, as the lads playing at the top. I'm not saying that the lads in the Premiership are less focused, but if you have a badly bruised and very painful ankle on a Thursday afternoon and you play for Accrington Stanley, there will be more chance of you playing on a Saturday than if you are at Man City. Yes, the medical staff at the top may rule these lads out of playing, but if it comes down to will, then the lad who needs to play to stay in the team, or pick up his appearance and, hopefully, win a bonus, will definitely play. Those in the Premiership will be on salaries so much higher that these bonuses are unlikely to be much motivation to a player undecided about playing on an injury.

There is no less commitment, desire or will to succeed, at the lowest level than at the top. The only real difference is that, at the top, there are thirty thousand more people watching. As far as players at all levels are concerned,

they just want to win and to do as well as they can. Yes, the public may see a player swanning about on a Wednesday, but I can pretty much bet that they have run themselves into the ground the night before in a game, or that they are still recovering from a ‘terror Tuesday’ training session the previous day. During the season, training is relentless, and every day is planned to maximise the benefits. Wednesday is usually a much needed day off, and one of relief – relief that a mid-week game has been played and (hopefully) won, so that you can lift your head up high and spend a day without that overriding thought of football constantly flying around your head. It is also a day when, if you have had no Tuesday night match, you see the build up to the weekend game. You know that the next day’s training will be geared towards the weekend game, and you will already have put in some decent work early in the week in preparation for it. Regardless of club or league, it is the same across the land. If Tuesday doesn’t have a game, then you will run, and you will run hard. At some clubs this training may involve a ball, and at some clubs it definitely won’t. On rare occasions this training may not happen, but only if you are on one hell of a winning streak and the manager has given you a few days off, or if you have had four or five games in ten days and need to heal. But the norm for a Tuesday is to run, to open the lungs up and to feel a bit of pain, so that come Saturday your first fifty yard track back doesn’t have you reaching for the oxygen.

Over the years, I have done some running sessions that would honestly shock a few athletes, such is the intensity. As well as twelve minute runs, sets of ‘doggies’ are classic drills in football. Doggies are not to be confused with the exercise where three people get a bit steamed up in a Ford Fiesta near a local beauty spot. Doggies are sets of sprints to a certain number of cones and back – the number of cones and the distance covered is determined by your current form and league position, but it’s never easy.

The game of football has changed dramatically in the last decade or so, and the attention to detail has increased significantly. The focus is now on how long a player has been in the ‘red’ zone (the point of optimum heart rate for fitness training), and how he performs at the weekend, not how many discs can collapse in his back during a morning’s running session. This change in focus has brought, if anything, a greater concentration on fitness. Mondays tend to be more flexible than other days, changing week to week. If the team won on the Saturday, the lads will be buzzing, training will be intense but there will be a relaxed atmosphere going into the next day’s game, or the next day’s training session. If the team has lost, the atmosphere will be tense, training will be full on, and there will be a bit more of an edge to it as everyone will be desperate to get to the next game and to put it right. Tuesday is your fitness day and after that

you only have Saturday in mind.

It is then usually a Wednesday off – which is why I mentioned it being the day that you might spot a footballer swanning around – although even on this ‘day off’, most lads pop in to do some weights, or maybe a bit of shooting. That is, unless you are over thirty-five, and are popping into the club for a much needed rub and a handful of Ibuprofen. Thursday will be another hard day, although one which is much more team related, involving shape and tactics rather than individual fitness. ‘Shape’ involves the team setting up as it would appear on a Saturday (i.e. 4-4-2 or 4-3-3). The players then run through drills and set pieces (corners, free-kicks etc.) to get a feel for the game. The Friday will be a day of final preparations: set piece, and drills and a bit more shape, and then a small-sided game (normally a five-a-side) for a bit of sharpness and fun.

After the Friday session, it is home to relax and prepare for the game. Some players like to be active and go for an afternoon out, or even a Saturday morning trip somewhere, while some like to get in their beds and not be seen until it is time to report for the game the following day. I have done a bit of both in my career, sometimes choosing to go to bed, other times wanting to do something to relieve the boredom and distract from constant thoughts about the game. This changed as soon as my children appeared on the scene (so for basically half my career). My only option became family activities, such as building dens or going for bike rides on a Saturday morning. Some lads cannot function if there is noise and fuss in the house, and plenty of players totally isolate themselves from their families on a Friday night and Saturday morning. It can be a bit hard to concentrate on the morning of an important game when *Bob the Builder* is on full pelt, your wife has decided to do the hoovering and the washing machine is turned to max, but I got used to the chaos and came to enjoy it. My wife and I did have some almighty arguments which always seemed to happen on a Saturday morning. I think it was just the tension in my body snapping when I was being vacuumed around at 7.30am. I would like no comments about my wife doing all of the housework, and me doing bugger all, because I can assure you that my OCD, combined with her working full time, and three children to help create unimaginable amounts of mess, means that the miles I have completed with the hoover have been long and arduous.

It was only when I had arrived at the club before a game, and was in the changing room, that I could finally turn off. Strangely enough, it became a sanctuary for me, and after the mascots and fans had been in, and before the disco had been cranked up, it was the one time I could breathe a sigh of relief and mentally prepare for a game. Being in a changing room before a game, finally being able to put your kit on, and together with the other players prepare

for a match – it gives you a great feeling. Later in my career, at Torquay United I used to mess about by wearing just my boxers, but with my match socks, shin-pads and boots on and ready for action. I would stand at the entrance to the changing room door and turn to the lads and say, ‘Come on then, let’s get into these lot.’

I never pushed it further by going in that state to see the referee before a game to do the normal ‘captain’s chat’ and team sheet swap, but I have to say I was highly tempted. It’s a good time to release a few match day nerves, but before long, when the warm-up has been done, and you have had a last minute chat, you are waiting, waiting for the bell or buzzer to sound, and for the battle to commence. When it does sound, that old gladiatorial spirit kicks in and you are up on your feet and out – the rest is in the hands of the gods … oh and the referee, and the twenty-one other players out there, of course.

The post-game atmosphere depends on the result. Win it, and the changing room is on fire; lose it, and the atmosphere is deadly. There is often a thin dividing line between the two, which is why having a philosophical approach can help, because nothing is constant in football – however, good a team, it cannot always win. Players’ immediate reaction to winning or losing will differ from person to person. Over my career, I have been horrendous when a game has been lost or I have played badly; I cannot function properly until the next game is won. Many players are the same. It may be the reason why so many players turn to drink after a match, whatever the outcome. Winning gives you such a euphoric feeling that you want to celebrate and release all the tension in your body, and losing makes you feel so awful that the only way to erase it for some time is with drink. I think we have become more aware of the post-match psychology, meaning it is not as bad as it was, but for many the demon drink has been their only escape.

2002/03

Having agreed to take the pay cut to stay at Northampton Town, I decided that I would need to do something to make up for the loss in wages, and so having sold our little cottage a few months earlier, while Fiona and the children were away at her parents, I did the logical thing and bought a house that needed doing up! Very rash, I accept, and when my wife eventually saw it she nearly punched me, but I thought that it would be a wise move. Unlike most of my rash decisions, it paid off – I only had the house ten months and, even after including the costs of buying, renovating and selling, I cleared a profit of nearly fifty grand. It's just a shame that I blew nearly as much the year before on holidays, cars and a wedding.

The previous owners of the house had a menagerie of animals, from baby crocs to parrots, lizards and snakes. I even saw a Komodo dragon wandering about at one point. They were the oddest couple ever; they had met on the internet, but were totally in love, and appeared insistent on keeping every animal known to man in a cage. My wife didn't speak to me for three days after visiting it, and I can see why: it was like a small zoo, but once all the animals had been rounded up and cleared out she did mellow a bit. I could see the potential in the house and was prepared to do the work to it, and in the end it was a great place to live, just around the corner from Abington Park where we (I) would teach Cam to ride his bike (as a proud parent, I'm sure he must be a record breaker, learning before he was even three) and where most afternoons we would pop in to see Tony Ansell at his lovely park café. Tony had done some catering for the club a few years earlier, and was still a strong supporter, so as well as popping in for a bite to eat, we'd always have a good chat.

The house also had a sort of farm at the back of it where the kids could mess about and feed the donkeys, horses and (vicious) geese. It was also the place where I taught Cam to ride his first motorbike (at only three), to the disbelief and horror of my wife.

After my little renovation project was done, we moved again, this time to a village called Mawsley, on the other side of Northampton. We bought a big house with a large garden, in a village with a lovely pub and good school. We were as close to living our little dream as we ever had been, but it could not last

for ever – football has a knack of moving you on. While based in Mawsley though, I met a great lad who remains a good friend today. At first, I would just say hello to Carl Andrews on the school run, and nothing more; he lived on the other side of Northampton so we never met in any other context. After a while we got chatting a bit about football, and discovered his wife Ange's love of drinking wine and spending matched Fiona's (giving us something in common), and I quickly came to know that he was a top bloke. Carl is one of those people who would do you a favour even if it meant him driving out in the middle of the night to pick you up (he did that a few times), or looking after all our children, and his, at the same time (he had four from his first marriage, and two from his second, so, with ours, that regularly made it eight. When we had a third child he would be outnumbered nine to one!). His wife Ange spend at an international level, so obviously she got on very well with my wife Fiona, and together we really did have a good laugh.

Carl was at home one night when the phone rang. Ange had been out with her friends and wanted Carl to pick her up. She had absolutely no idea where she was, and when Carl asked her where he could find her, she shouted, 'I'm here, stupid!' and just held her phone aloft.

Poor old Carl drove around for an hour before he found Ange, still with her phone in the air, waiting for some sort of satellite signal to be picked up. We still do have some adventures with the Andrew's, and long may that continue.

Our spending was as unrealistic as ever. (How I wish I had saved those pennies now, as I dunk my Tesco Value biscuit into my tea.) I had bought a big jeep and then a Jaguar, and Lee was still on speed dial at the Vivienne Westwood shop in Leeds. I'm sure it's better to have lived a bit of a life, though. I always used to have this argument with my old teammate Chris Willmott, a very good centre-half who could well have played at the top had he not had a very bad injury early on in his career. Motty (you will notice that a lot of footballers' nicknames end in 'y') was not one for spending. To say he was tight is a bit harsh, but he really could save with the best of them. He also had all his pockets stitched up, along with his mythical (well, no one ever saw it) wallet. I always used to tell him to live a little, that he should take his wife out a bit more, but his answer was that he didn't like going out, or spending money. My argument was that he wouldn't look back in twenty years and say, 'Oh do you remember that Sunday we nipped to the garden centre? What a day that was,' and that he should spend some of his money on 'living'. He was adamant that saving was the way forward. I haven't seen Motty for a while and I'm sure that now, as I turn the heating off under instruction from my wife, he is having the last laugh, as he drives to the garden centre with his wallet bulging and the heating at home

turned on to max. I'm not entirely convinced – I still believe that life is for living – perhaps there's a compromise between the two positions.

More changes at the top happened during the 02/03 season, and with the club not happy with our league position and fearing that we would be sucked into another relegation dogfight, Kevan was sacked just after Christmas. I had had a bit of an argument with him before he left, but I think it was the tension just spilling over. He wanted the perfect footballing team, which we clearly weren't, and the perfect footballing midfielder, which I clearly wasn't. But, during a long-winded shape session, I had a go at him.

Kev was pulling up every slight mistake, and I had had enough. I told him that it was ridiculous – we had to lighten up a bit and just do the basics first, before we turned into Barcelona. My intervention was taken badly; Broads shouted over, 'Why don't you just leave the training ground?' to which I flippantly replied, 'Why don't you?'

It was stupid of me to say it, and the poor sod was already under masses of pressure as the manager, and now here I was challenging his authority in front of the lads. After a standoff that John Wayne would have been proud of, I walked off to let the situation cool down. I drove back to the ground and waited for him to return after training. Martin Wilkinson, the chief scout, and Kevan walked into the office, and all I did was poke a branch through the door. Kevan opened it, laughed and said, 'What the hell is that, Greavsie?'

I replied, 'It's an olive branch; I was out of order back there.'

He saw the funny side of it, and it was soon forgotten, but before long he was out. I felt it was a harsh decision; Kevan Broadhurst was a great tactician and a good coach, but the club clearly weren't happy, someone had to take the blame, and he was gone.

Our next manager was Terry Fenwick, an ex-QPR and England international, who arrived with a fanfare and who certainly got straight to work. He got me into the office on his first day and said, 'What do we need?'

I obviously didn't give him the right advice, because he was out only seven games later. I have to say he was damn unlucky!

Before Terry had pulled me aside for a chat that first day, he had already demonstrated his mentality with the initial training session that he put on. We were assembled into groups of five or six, and told to form a circle, leaving one player from each group standing on the outside of it. He then said, 'Right lads, don't you fucking dare let that lad back into that circle.'

To the lad on the outside he said, 'Right, you better get back in that fucking circle, if it's the last thing you do.'

It was a right old scrap, blood was shed, legs and arms were battered, but I

quite liked that, and we definitely got the message. He then put us in pairs and made us stand on each other's shoulders, yes I said stand, and try to push each other over until the winning pair remained. I didn't like that. After then making us put boots on and have a full-on eleven-a-side practice match on a frozen pitch, we certainly knew there had been a big change at the club. I got injured in training that week, and missed five of the seven games that Terry was in charge, and in some of those the team were really unlucky, but after those seven games, no wins – five losses and two draws – he was out.

I think of three things when I think about Terry Fenwick. The first is incredibly strong eighties aftershave, the second is the lads on that first training day trying to get into a human ball, and the third is Maradona drifting past him in the 'Hand of God' game. He wasn't a bad manager, and must have had one of the shortest and unluckiest tenures in charge of Northampton Town. Martin Wilkinson, our chief scout, was put in place as the new 'caretaker' manager, but when a manager states publicly that he doesn't really want the job it does set alarm bells ringing. Those bells rang, and rang loud.

In the end Northampton Town suffered because of a massive lack of stability off the pitch and not enough quality on it. I have always been highly critical of myself in my career, especially after games, and I was very average in the 02/03 season. Later, I was angry with myself for taking my eye off the ball, perhaps literally. Having taken on the renovation project, I had decided to do most of the work myself, but putting in a new bathroom suite and varnishing floors before and after games is not conducive to playing well on a Saturday. I know now that it was the wrong thing to do, but at the time I felt as if I could do it all, the training, the playing, and the plastering, plumbing, sanding and painting. I even tried to sort out the wiring one morning, but after electrocuting myself and being knocked flying off a table and into the fireplace, I thought better of it. In the end I achieved what I had set out to do with the house, but I had lost a season's football in the process. I don't want to be too critical of a manager, nor do I think it was totally his fault, but Martin didn't have the tools for the job. He was a nice enough bloke, but he was our chief scout, put in place to steady the ship; it's just a shame we were on the bloody *Titanic*. It would have taken a lot more to snap me, and the rest of the lads, back to it.

Today has been great, the young lads I coach at Exeter City are on their half-term break, so we are having them in training all week. I still find it strange looking over to see the first team training, knowing that only last season I was one of those fortunate lads doing that job for a living, but coaching the under-

16s is a really rewarding job. I spoke to Marcus Stewart before training today; he has played for numerous clubs including Ipswich and Sunderland and is still registered as a player at Exeter City. We pretty much agreed that we both loved the game and would miss it, but that coaching was the next best thing. For me, coaching young lads, as I am at the moment, is really rewarding. Not only can you help them with their football knowledge and development, you can also help them as young men. After all, there is a lot going on in their lives outside of their football environment – hammering them about their haircuts and their girlfriends is just an added bonus.

After a full day's training coaching those boys, I took my daughter, Isabella, to athletics. I couldn't resist a blast around the track myself, although I am now in desperate need of an Ibuprofen sandwich and a dog basket, such is the stiffness in my body. After a quick drink and a few hundred words typed, I am going to fly out again and pick up my son Cameron from his football training. Harriet is finally in bed, thank the lord, after getting through a record twenty-one episodes of her favourite cartoon (still Peppa Pig), and my wife is still knee-deep in paper work, and melancholy, after another week of her full time job as a (reluctant) NVQ Training Coordinator ...

Cam has now been picked up, but after sitting down in readiness to type away again, I am now having a total body failure. Perhaps that run earlier was a bad idea. Instead of typing, I will recharge the old body with red wine and chocolate, refill the memory bank with more of my Northampton Town days, and I'll try again tomorrow.

It is now tomorrow – that's an odd sentence, if ever I've heard one. I had to laugh when I visited my local Tesco this morning. I didn't laugh at the woman at the check-out talking to the woman opposite about her husband's chronic pile problem, or at the bloke in front of me who needed seven minutes to decide whether to go back to his car to get his 'bags for life', so that the check-out assistant could type in his 0.000001 pence of redeemable Clubcard points. No, I had to laugh at the lad who always tries to talk to me about football. I usually have a bit of banter with a couple of the staff in the shop about Torquay United's or Exeter City's fortunes, and in particular I always stop to talk to a lad who has a knack of saying the most annoying things.

'Why do you give him two minutes of your time?' I hear you say, and in truth I don't really know, maybe it's because I'm a nice person – or more likely, maybe it's because my wife is normally with me, so if I abused him, which I often want to, my wife would be totally embarrassed. Anyway, this morning, as I strolled in to get some supplies, I bumped into Mr Bean himself. As I was picking up some bread, he leaned in and whispered, 'Bet you're missing playing eh? Can't you

get a club? I bet that TV work keeps you going though. You must be bloody loaded. Shame you haven't played in the Premiership, or you could do Match of the Day.'

Of course, he said all this while smiling as if he was an old mate, and leaning in towards me like Fagin.

My reply could have gone one of three ways. I could easily have swung my loaf of Kingsmill across his head, and then again in a downward motion, to inflict as much discomfort as possible, while bending and whispering in his ear, 'If you ever try to talk to me again I will hurt you. Please ask if you can start working on the beauty aisle, as your face and breath are both in need of some serious attention.'

I didn't choose this option because of time constraints, and it 'might' have been rising to the bait. Nor did I blank him, because that is no way to behave either. Instead, I laughed and left him with a taste in his mouth that would hopefully remain all day. I replied, while hurrying out of his breath range, 'Yes, I can't spend it quickly enough mate. It's not fair really, but I have come in to an inheritance that is way more than I have ever earned in football. It's crazy! I am one lucky bastard.'

I then walked off smiling in a sort of 'why me' way, to reiterate the great luck I had had. I was obviously lying, and any normal person would know that, but 'Bean' was so bitter that I knew he just couldn't be sure either way, and it showed in his reaction. He nervously replied, 'Oh, get the drinks in then, eh? It's all right for some.'

Once in the distance, I called back, 'Keep up the good work.'

I have since been into the store and he still believes it, but he remains as annoying as ever.

You'd think you'd get used to it. A lot of people really do say the most ridiculous things, and then expect you to chat away to them as if they are your best mate. After a recent play-off game – in which we were leading with ten minutes to go, but were then pegged back and beaten at the death – a couple came up to me and my wife and children in a department store. The guy approached me and shook my hand saying, 'Hi Chris, oh what about that game, eh? It was fantastic, wasn't it? I cannot believe you lost it; I was going crazy!'

(I should add at this stage that he supported the other team.)

'I was jumping up and down until the final whistle; it's easily the best game I have ever been to. I can't wait to go to Wembley. Anyway, how are tricks?'

Now, I could have replied, 'How's tricks? Oh, absolutely fucking tremendous. I have just had my heart ripped out and will have to think about it every day for the next three months.'

(That was an estimate, it was actually much longer!)

'And, to make it worse, I'm out with my family and some knob head has just come up to me saying they have just seen the greatest game of football in their lives. Why don't you get out a little DVD player and replay the game now, so that we can all have a good laugh watching it. And at the same time can you talk about my defeat in front of my kids again, because I'm not sure that they heard it the first time. Cheers then, bye.'

Or I could simply have replied, 'Oh, I'm pleased you enjoyed it, now fuck off and die.'

I did neither, of course. I kept my composure and replied, 'Wow, thanks for reminding me, it had honestly slipped my mind, and yes it was one heck of a game. I have promised the children I am taking them to Wembley next year, because we are a bit busy this summer, but you enjoy the day. Hope to see you again soon, when something else bad has happened to me.'

Yes, I did use a little sarcasm in my reply, but I said it with humour and we all laughed. And I really did mean the middle part: everything in my body would go in to making sure that my children would be going to Wembley that next season.

Before I continue with my Northampton days, and my story of the B roads to football success, I feel I have to talk about something, or actually someone, who has dominated the front and back pages of the papers for the past couple of weeks, Wayne Rooney. His dummy was well and truly spat out when he recently announced that his club's ambitions didn't match his own, and that he would be looking to get away. Strange then that the next day, after agreeing to the club's two hundred and fifty thousand pound contract offer, his worries about the club's lack of ambition had totally disappeared. His agent had pulled Man United's pants down big time, and that does not happen very often. To rub salt into the common man's wounds, old 'Wayno' was snapped the following day, poolside, quaffing champers with his missus in Dubai. I know one thing, if I had had a three-in-a-bed romp with a couple of hookers, and it hadn't been for the first time, my wife would not have settled for a holiday in Dubai and a bottle of champers – she may have settled for the life of total luxury and relaxation, but hey, I'm trying to make a point here. The point is that this latest incident must be the lowest we have come to in the professional game for a long time. The Terry/Bridge affair/abortion scandal, Ashley Cole's photo-texting habits, the World Cup disaster, and now this – it just makes footballers look like a total bunch of chavs. While these chavs might be rich, they're hardly setting a good example. Surely the kids out there are bemused by what goes on in the world of football. There have always been loads of parties, but it now seems that anything

goes. By the time I have finished writing this book I am sure a shed-load more controversies will have happened in football, and it will be interesting to see what happens with Rooney and Ferguson. Whatever happens, the game has to be conveyed in a better light, because at the moment we have a crap, rich, national football team, and we have more footballers making the front pages than the back.

When we eventually knew our fate at the end of the 02/03 season, it was as much of a relief as anything. I know that sounds defeatist but it's not; I hated losing any game, and I detested being relegated, but sometimes you know when the writing is on the wall, and this was one of those occasions. With relegation looking a possibility Kevan Broadhurst had been sacked, but relegation had happened regardless. Northampton Town would see three more managers come and go, and it was a summer of discontent. Well almost; we had booked a trip to Euro Disney with the children, and, although my mood was far from joyful on the way there, as we saw the children's faces light up at the hotel when Mickey and Minnie appeared, I forgot about the disaster that had just happened. I would sum Euro Disney up in two words, expensive and French. (I know that is technically three words.) The fact that the children were in a constant state of amazement for the entire break made it worth every penny, but why can't we do something similar here in Britain. At least then we could take a pack-up!

2003/04

Although we were relegated at the end of the 02/03 season, Northampton Town wanted Martin to stay on as manager, and for him to try to get us promoted. Pre-season had gone pretty well. The team had been on a trip to America that, in Martin Wilkinson's eyes, had gone so well, he had assembled his staff to celebrate with a bottle of bubbly on the assumption that promotion was already in the bag with this new exciting team. It wasn't, and I say the 'team' went on the trip, but I didn't go. A combination of a bit of tension between me and Martin (honestly, this is not a constant theme), and a real desire not to go on a ten-hour flight, meant that I would be training on my own for that week. For some reason, that summer just didn't feel right – I still don't know why.

After returning to pre-season after our summer break, it was clear I wasn't really figuring in the plans for the team. I don't think Martin particularly liked me, which was fine, and I suppose I did drop my shoulder a bit really, as far as the trip was concerned. I don't really like flying, and this had been made worse by a mammoth lightning strike and turbulence on my previous flight, but I really didn't want to go. The trip, the bonhomie and the assurance that the club would now do well all felt very false; I didn't for one minute think that he had the club on the right path. So, that summer I decided to stay with my family and get fit on my own instead.

As expected, I didn't start the season, but after a few dodgy results I was back in the team, and before long we also had a new (unofficial) manager. Martin Wilkinson was the next victim of our lack of success, and so Richard Hill, a former 'Cobblers' favourite as a player and current assistant manager, took the reins. It was only in a caretaker role, but Richard clearly thought that it might develop into something more official.

Apart from the fact that he didn't even want the job, a few things had bothered me about Martin Wilkinson, and they were all off-the-pitch incidents. I know he thought I was a bit flash, which was fine – I was – but some of his comments and actions were just bizarre. He once turned to me in the changing room, looked at my shoes and said, 'My dad always told me to be cautious of lads who wear brown shoes.'

I honestly felt like replying, while looking at his feet, 'And my dad told me

to be cautious of shit managers and people who wear socks with sandals.'

Another occasion of erratic behaviour arose one day while Martin was talking to one of our centre-forwards at the time, Darren Stamp. 'Stampy' (again a 'y' in the nickname) had been asked to go to the office one afternoon to sort out a move to Mansfield Town. Stampy had been told he was surplus to requirements and that he could leave if the price was right. When he arrived at the club after training, Martin Wilkinson was just outside the club shop. Stampy said Martin approached him like a lost friend, putting his hand on his shoulder and saying, 'Oh Stampy, how has it come to this, my old mate, eh?'

A surprised and annoyed Stampy replied, 'Well fuck me, maybe it's because you said I am not needed, and are selling me to Mansfield for ten grand?'

Wilkinson snapped back, 'Well, we are going have to sort this out; I'm not happy with your comments. Wait inside, and I'll have another chat with you in a minute.'

Stampy waited in the club shop, and then watched open-mouthed as Martin walked through the back of the club shop, out through the office, all the way around to the front of the club shop, got into his car and drove off. Stampy never saw Martin again, and signed for Mansfield Town for ten grand. Who said football is a funny old game? Well, maybe it's more the people involved!

Our new manager, Richard Hill, had more of a Dickensian attitude to the game. His no-nonsense 'If you make a mistake I will kill you' approach did work for some, but certainly didn't for others. I remember him hammering our right-winger, Josh Low, after a game. When Hilly had finished his long rant and had walked off, a normally placid Josh turned to me and said, 'I hate that twat! I don't want to play football any more.'

Some players appreciate that hardcore management style, others don't. Ultimately Richard Hill lost the changing room with his approach, but it could just as easily have gone the other way.

As it turned out, not enough of the players could understand his methods. Some players react well to bollockings and rants, some don't, and too many players that season needed the 'arm-around-the shoulder' approach, not a boot up the arse. I have worked with plenty of managers in my career, all with different man-management skills – and some with none at all. While I have no major preference in how I'm managed, my experience with players makes me think that the 'arm-around-the shoulder' approach is generally more successful, and is less likely to produce a strong negative reaction. I'm not talking about bringing your teddy into training and everyone having a group hug, but as a manager, to get the best out of your players, having a decent rapport with them is surely helpful.

I recently completed my coaching badges in Belfast, along with Keith Gillespie, an ex-international and former Man United and Newcastle United player. Keith told me that Kevin Keegan, when manager of Newcastle United, used to say to him before games that he was the best right-winger in the country, and that he would have a blinder that same afternoon. He said Keegan gave him such belief and confidence when saying it that, more often than not, he would go on to have an absolute blinder. That said, Keith also told me that I would feel great after drinking ten pints of Guinness a night and smoking like a trooper for a week. He lied about that one, so perhaps he's not entirely reliable!

Still, Richard Hill's management technique failed; the club needed another new manager, and so the merry-go-round just kept going.

In 03/04, with our new owners, a new chairman and a new board of directors, life was never dull at the Cobblers. One of our new directors was someone I knew very well, and I have mentioned him before. We were playing away in a Carling Cup game at Portsmouth, and as we were walking out from our pre-match meal, a huge spanking new BMW rolled into the hotel car park. To my amazement Lee 'The Face' Power appeared from the driver's seat. Lee had played for Norwich City in Europe, but had retired after his spell at Plymouth Argyle. When I had known him in Devon, he had also been absolutely skint. Seeing him in this new car, I had to laugh as I walked up to him.

'What have you done, robbed a bank? The last time I saw you, you needed a couple of hundred quid!'

He laughed and said, 'Na, I've just done a bit of this and that, Hagi.' (Hagi was my nickname at Plymouth Argyle.) I asked him what he was doing in Portsmouth, to which he replied, 'I'm one of your new directors, mate, so you better play well.'

I was in stitches, talk about a survivor – Lee Power could be taken hostage, and within an hour he would not only have talked his way out of it, but he would be running the show.

I did my best to 'play well' for Lee that night, but we lost the game 3–1. Still, the goal scorer for the Cobblers on the night? – yes, it was moi! – although the goal came about when the referee surprised me and the other twelve thousand people in the stadium by making me retake the penalty, especially after their keeper had saved the first one! The keeper was so surprised he didn't even move.

With so much having happened already at Northampton Town over the first three seasons, it seemed inevitable that the fourth would also be eventful. One of the things you get used to in football is seeing fellow players come and go, and I have certainly seen a few. I have met some great people in my football career,

and am really happy when I bump into players that I used to play with, but on the whole I have only kept in close touch with a handful of those players. It is the same for most players: you would happily have a chat or a drink with your ex-teammates, but as far as regularly keeping in touch is concerned, you would need to spend half your time on the phone to do it, and as I rarely answer my phone to anyone anyway, that becomes a major problem.

A few of my best mates had now left the club. Daryl Burgess left in the summer of 2003, after having had a long and niggling injury. He was sad to leave, and even sadder to be thundering down the motorway to his new club Rochdale every day, but we had become great friends, as had our families. We had spent some fantastic holidays together, and had had some momentous nights out as couples. The two years we were all together at Northampton Town saw us really live life to the full; Katrina and Fiona got on like a house on fire, as did all our children. We holidayed together in Spain and France, and, between us, we had also kept a few of Birmingham's finest eating and drinking establishments in business, but nothing lasts for ever. Daryl had known nothing else but football, and when he finally retired I was still playing and earning decent money. Only now do I realise what he was going through, and I recognise that it must have been tough. Daryl is one of football's good guys, and Katrina can certainly put most men under the table with her quick wit alone, never mind her ability to drink a bottle of vodka without flinching.

At about the same time as Daryl finished playing, his wife Katrina was going through the immense stress of her brother-in-law's murder. Robert McCartney had been drinking in a pub in Belfast when things got out of hand, and he was viciously attacked and killed. The notorious case saw McCartney's sisters stand up to the IRA, meet the President of the USA, and bring about public outcry after the cover-up in the pub that day. Katrina's sister was left without a husband, and had two young boys to bring up. It was a hell of a stressful time for Daryl and Katrina.

Other friends had left the club too. James Hunt had moved on, as had Jamie Forrester, and Marco had retired after an illustrious career. He went on to buy a B&B back up in York – I have yet to go, but I am expecting a mammoth discount and free wine when I do!

Chris Marsh had also retired after a battle with injury, and another with the demon drink. 'Digger' (nicknamed after John 'Digger' Barnes, because of his uncanny knack for being able to imitate the running style of the great Liverpool player) was special; he had no malice in his body at all, he was a good player and a top person. He also loved a drink. He had a real struggle with it for a while, but in the end his personality and charisma won through and the real

Chris Marsh was back. Another good player and good friend, Paul McGregor, also retired at the tender age of twenty-seven. Knowing Macca as I do, I would imagine that he gets great pleasure at the thought of having retired at the same age as George Best, but I'm not convinced, as with George Best, that it was the right thing to do. True to form though, Paul McGregor was rebellious to the end, writing an article for the one of the broadsheets that he 'wasn't prepared to take bullshit from people who knew less about the game than [he did], especially on a cold night away at Lincoln'. I suppose he did have a point, and he could afford to leave – he didn't have the responsibility of providing for any children. He also believed, and still does, that he would make it in the music industry. (Ten years and counting, Macca. I am still waiting for my VIP pass at Glastonbury.)

The last to leave and to retire (hell, it sounds like I was driving them off!) was Dunc. I've mentioned him before – how Duncan Spedding was one funny guy, had come to hate football, constantly spoke like Alan Partridge, and was supremely delighted when the decision was made for him to retire. Our families were also very close, and we had enjoyed some great breaks with them, but Andrea (his then girlfriend, now wife) was a saint for putting up with Dunc, who was officially the most acidic person in football – I'd go so far to describe him as a man bitch! He was a real good laugh though, and together with Daryl and his gang, we all got on brilliantly – that is until a drunken argument after a night out (between Dunc and Katrina) resulted in Dunc and Daryl's group never speaking again, but hey, let's not split hairs here.

After the exit first of Martin Wilkinson and then of Richard Hill, the club announced our new manager in the October of that season. Colin Calderwood would be our seventh manager in four years, and his arrival finally brought with it some much-needed stability for the club. The club's new owners, the Cardoza family, were very ambitious, and their appointment of Calderwood and his assistant John Deehan, as well as their desire to develop the area around the ground, meant that the club was soon well and truly back on track. The previous chairman, Barry Stonhill, had done a brilliant job with the club, but after having seen many hundreds of thousands of pounds of his own money disappear, I think he felt the time was right to step down.

We quickly improved on the pitch, and, although I hadn't started in the first few games, partly due to John Deehan not really liking me (OK, I might have to admit this IS a recurring theme!), and partly due to me having had an argument with him after the first game, I was soon back in the team. We quickly crept back up the league and we also had a great FA Cup run, even ending up playing against Man United in the fifth round, but it's fairly obvious why I don't want to dwell on that. After playing nearly five hundred league games before then

without a hitch, in the game against the reds, I managed to score an own goal. I certainly helped them out, because at the time Diego Forlan, who was nearest to me on the goal line, would have probably missed anyway. Although I managed to give Nicky Butt and Paul Scholes a bit of a game that day, I had to face the press and then a family party afterwards, having bagged the one and only own-goal of my career. At least it was against Man United, and I did have a laugh with the lads at *TalkSPORT* the next day, but it still annoys the hell out of me even today.

I played against my old mate Daryl Burgess towards the end of the season; he was now at Rochdale and was staying over at my house after the game so that we could all go out for a meal afterwards. It was a good laugh having a drink with our wives after the game, especially as I was able to give him some serious stick. During the game I had had a bit of a scuffle with Rochdale's number nine, resulting in me staying on the pitch, but him being sent off. To make matters worse for Rochdale, I then managed to put a volley into the top corner in the last five minutes of the game to win it. As I scored, I ran past Daryl, gave him a nudge and said, 'Your round, pal.'

I was delighted he was staying over that night, because we had decided that the loser had to get the beers in, all night! As usual though, Daryl was gracious and humble in defeat – that is, if you can say someone calling you 'a jammy bastard' all night is 'humble'.

As well as playing against a former teammate that season, I also played against a former team of mine, Plymouth Argyle. They had been promoted to the division above us the season before, so it was a great surprise to be drawn against them in the first round of the cup. I had left that club only fairly recently, and I did get a bit of stick that afternoon, but as often happens in football, the old boy scores against his former club. Much to the fury of the Plymouth Argyle fans, I scored that day and Northampton Town won.

I got a few more goals that season and, after a final day win against Mansfield Town, we scraped into the play-offs, to play ... Mansfield again in the semi-final.

It had been a great achievement to get into the play-offs, but with Mansfield Town taking forty thousand fans to their previous play-off final, we too wanted to make sure that we went one step further. The first leg against Mansfield Town had been at home, and before you could say, 'Mine's a Bovril, a pie, and a Mars Bar', or be told that the price was five pounds for the said items, we had lost 2–0 and now had a mountain to climb. The second leg looked a daunting prospect, but I remember walking on to the team coach, and giving a comedy war cry of, 'Come on you beauties, it's our time!'

The lads laughed, and it helped lift the mood a little. We took three thousand fans to the match against Mansfield Town that night, some of whom couldn't even get in, and the atmosphere was fantastic. We scored in the first twenty minutes. Just before half time I rose from a cross and nodded in the equaliser in front of the Cobblers fans. This put us level with their 2–0 win against us in the first leg. It was a great moment and I have to say at that point I was visualising the coach cruising down towards Wembley. We were now right in the game.

I will stop at this point to apologise to my readers. I am suddenly worried about this book, and whether you will find this section, or, in fact, this book, any good. If you don't, all I can do is apologise again and suggest that you a) try for a refund in the shop, b) stop reading it immediately and use the pages for kindling, or c) keep soldiering on with it and hate me afterwards. Option a is my least favourite. Have I mentioned my increasing paranoia?

The second half was dominated by us, and with ten minutes to go, Martin Smith got the third goal, and the final was now in our grasp. The next part was like the record that suddenly scratches halfway through the song. It was, without doubt, the most ridiculous decision by an official I have ever seen. In the final few minutes of the game, our striker Eric Sabin went in for a challenge with one of the Mansfield Town players; they both got up afterward, and the Mansfield Town player, who had gone in much harder, reacted, and kicked out at Eric. There was then a big melee, which saw the normal referee's consultation with his linesman, who was fifty yards away – how a bloke who is further away from the incident than the referee can help is always beyond me. Both players were then booked, but, incredibly, the ref gave a free kick to Mansfield Town. As much as we complained, he had made his decision. The cliché 'well, if they score now it will be a disgrace' was never more deserved as the ball was pumped into our box, and yes, in that final minute they scored.

I could honestly have killed both the linesman and referee at this point. As well as those two muppets, while I am at it, I could have also killed the old farts sat around the table at the FA who, in their infinite wisdom, and during their seven-course lunches designed to thrash out new initiatives to improve our beautiful game, do such things as giving a manager who can't speak English six million pounds a year to balls-up our national team. It was they who decided, for the first year ever, and no one really knows why, to do away with the away goal

rule. With their 2–0 win before, and our 3–1 score now, Northampton Town were equal with Mansfield Town.

Because of Tweedledum and Tweedledee at the ground, and the prawn sandwich brigade at the FA, we were now going into extra time. You may think I am going over the top, but I'm really not. Winning that game, as we deserved to, would have probably meant most of us staying at the club the next season. We would have had a chance to win the final, and it would have given the whole of Northampton a day to remember. We lost on penalties that night, and, of all people, Eric Sabin missed the vital spot kick. That was my last goal and my last game for Northampton Town, and I really wish it had ended on a high. I loved the club and its fans, and had enjoyed a brilliant time there; it will always be a very special place for me. I couldn't help but feel a gargantuan lump in my throat as I looked on at my family and the fans in the stand that night.

The morning after the game we were all summoned in to see the management about our futures. Colin Calderwood stayed silent, which, after speaking to him a few months later, I know he felt was wrong. He had said to me only a month or so earlier that I had done really well for him, and that he wanted to give me a new two-year deal in the summer. However, the man doing the talking was John Deehan who said, 'Well Chris, the best we can do is offer you half of what you are on, for six months, and if you speak to the PFA, I think they would advise you to sign.'

I looked at Colin, who looked at Deehan, as if unsure whether to get involved before responding, 'It's a fair offer.'

Fucking fair my arse – I had agreed to stay at the club and have my wages cut by twenty-five per cent for the previous contract, but I knew that this was taking the piss, and so did John Deehan. He knew that I couldn't, and wouldn't, accept it, probably why he gave me such a derisory offer. I stood up and said, 'No problem – I'm not going to spit my dummy out. I have always been a man of principle, and I'll do the same as my dad would do and not let people take the piss. All the best then.'

I shook Colin's hand and John's (harder – I couldn't help but show my anger a little), said my goodbyes to everyone, and left the club. That same week, Martin Allen offered me a contract for three times as much, and for four times as long. I was on my way to Brentford.

We have just had bonfire night, which, as usual, consisted of me burning myself, fireworks flying randomly everywhere, children playing with sparklers, and a few bottles of beer. In short, it was a health and safety master class. As far as

work is concerned, I still have my eye on opening up a business, I would desperately love to manage a team, and I still do the pots each day, as we have had to ban any dishwasher use. Despite these stresses, I know that I have a fantastic life. For now though I still have the great pleasure of being able to pick up my beautiful girls from school and I will leave you with my motto which is simply 'Don't ask the Lord, just thank Him when you receive.'

P.S. Just to let you know, I have just googled whether or not a dishwasher cycle is, in fact, more expensive than washing up, and it's not, so hooray!

I come back to continue writing in a different mood. Today I am very low. I am missing the game dreadfully. I miss the atmosphere of a match day and the buzz of playing, and being able to say I'm a professional footballer. If I was single or selfish I could easily go on a three-week bender to drown my sorrows to get through this rocky patch, but as it is, it's bath time, Cam needs help with his homework, and anyway, my wallet doesn't contain beer tokens.

2004/05

I was sad to be leaving Northampton Town, but I couldn't help but feel excited at the prospect of meeting up with Martin Allen at Brentford. I travelled up to London to meet him with my agent, Justin Paige, who always got on well with prospective managers. Justin had been my agent since I required a replacement after the failed Reading deal. As soon as I sat down at the table with Martin Allen and his assistant Adrian Whitbread, I knew he was very different from any other manager I had played for. He looked at me for around a minute and then said, 'Well, you're not bad looking, and your hair is pretty, but can you play? Will you run through a brick wall for me?'

He then stared at me for a while again, something I came to realise he would often do when assessing someone, smiled a little bit, then said, 'Right, let's get this tied up then, Justin.'

I don't think I had said anything at all by this stage. He carried on, 'I want you to do what you did at Northampton for me, and we will get promoted.'

I said, 'I'll do my best', to which he replied with both a twinkle and a slightly psychotic look in his eye, 'Yes, you fucking will my son. Yes, you fucking will.'

I immediately liked Martin Allen. I know he is not everyone's cup of tea; he can be controversial. Some players, chairmen and fans have found his unconventional style a bit too much, but for me he is a top bloke with a large heart and a big appetite to win. He is also fair – if you try your best, and if you are honest, you will get on with the man; if not, well, expect the unexpected.

During my time at Brentford some crazy stuff happened, but it was all part of the PR machine, to get us doing well and to make the club noticed. We were pictured painting the club's training ground in pre-season; it was all for show, but it certainly got the message across – Martin wanted to show that the team was determined and ready to work, and that we were normal, hard-working lads who weren't afraid to get our hands dirty. It wasn't his only odd training technique. A few years later, when I had joined Torquay United, a teammate of mine, Lee Hodges, told me what Martin Allen had been like at Reading as assistant manager. He said that one afternoon Martin had made the lads queue up at a snack bar at the ground. He then told each individual player to order an

imaginary drink or snack. Hodgy took his turn, ‘I’ll have a steak and kidney pie, please.’

Martin, who was looking on, responded, ‘Shock, you fat bastard!'

He then led them to the stand and told them they were watching themselves in an imaginary game. He wanted them to understand the fans’ point of view. He even got the lads to shout abuse at themselves; Hodgy said it was hilarious shouting, ‘Hodges, you’re fucking rubbish!’ – instead of someone else shouting it.

Pre-season wasn’t as hard as I expected, although maybe it was down to the fact that I had expected a Martin Allen pre-season to be extremely hard, and so had arrived back super fit. Either way, it was OK. The best parts about it were the daily chats we would have with the manager. He was brilliant at motivating the boys, and there would be tears in his eyes during most of his speeches, such was his fierce determination. He would then just stare at each player and then slowly smile – as if he had assessed him and found him worthy. Despite his force and determination, he wasn’t always serious. He often had us in tears of laughter with his banter; he really could rip the boys to pieces, but not in a nasty way. On one occasion, towards the end of the pre-season, the club had a BBQ. I’d arrived late, so Martin chucked me an apron, leaving me to do the honours. After cooking the BBQ, in an apron complete with fake tits and fanny, I felt ready for the new season ahead.

I didn’t foresee any problems with driving to Brentford because I was so keen to play, but the four or five hour round trip each day would end up being a major issue. Moving to Brentford was just not possible; everything was so ridiculously expensive, and the children had just moved schools, so I would leave for Osterley, via Heathrow, where the training ground was, at 6.30am every morning and thunder down the motorway to join a full-on training session. I am not exaggerating when I describe those sessions as full on; if Martin said jump, you only asked how high. A slight bonus to the location of the training ground was its position under the Heathrow flight paths. A well-timed landing could easily drown out Martin mid-speech.

The club was tipped for relegation that season, but the mood inside the camp did not reflect this at all; we had our eyes on the division above, the Championship. Martin had signed some really good players and, together with those already at the club, we had a decent squad. We had experienced players such as Deon Burton, Andy Myers, Isaiah Rankin, Scott Fitzgerald and John Salako, and some good young players in Jay Tabb, Stephen Hunt and Andy Frampton. We had also signed a couple of decent centre-halves in Sam Sodje and Michael Turner. Sam went on to get a lucrative deal involving a move to

Reading, and Michael is now an established Premiership centre-half. Stephen Hunt is also now playing regular Premiership football – I know you are still pinching yourself, Hunty! My fellow midfielder Stewart Talbot, and stalwart right back Kevin O'Connor, added to a solid team.

The season went well; we were winning games and, through Martin, the club was getting some very good publicity. During our cup runs he decided that, to draw attention to us, him and the game in question, he would jump into the river of every city or town where we had a cup game. In any TV interview he agreed to do, he would promise to get in a word that he would ask us to suggest to him the day before. Instead of subtly fitting in the word 'banana', for example, he would just pile in. If the interviewer had asked, 'So, what did you think of the first half, Martin?' he would reply, 'Well, banana, it was a pretty average affair, banana, banana.'

He was just as unpredictable in the changing room, regularly making the lads do press-ups during games. He once made John Salako give him twenty-five of the best of them at half time, and this a guy who had played for England, but you just didn't argue with Martin Allen. To be fair though, Sal deserved them for missing a penalty in the first minute. Joking aside 'Sal' was a really great lad, and a top class player. He could have a laugh with the best of them, but, as far as training and looking after his body was concerned, he was first rate. It was brilliant to see such enthusiasm from someone who didn't have to put it in, or who didn't need the money – something he 'accidentally' reminded us one day when Martin had arranged for his mate to come in and speak to the lads about mortgages. When the guy introduced himself as a mortgage broker Sal interrupted him and said, 'Oh, I don't think I'll need to stay for this then, mate; I haven't got one.' He smiled at the lads and left. Chin up lads!

There was a massive range in the finances of the lads at Brentford. A few of the boys didn't have a ceramic receptacle to piss in, but the car park did give an indication of there being some serious money about; a clear sign that some of the boys had played at a decent level. Andy Myers rolled up every day in his obscene forty thousand pound American jeep, Deon Burton arrived in his seventy grand Range Rover, and Sal came in any one of several sixty grand motors. The credit crunch hadn't exactly arrived at this point.

I had to laugh when Andy Myers came in one morning and asked the lads to look for an earring he had dropped in the car park. I told him to chill out and not to worry about it, to which he replied, 'It was three grand, mate.'

Hell! It was worth more than some of our cars. After three months of driving the Jaguar I had recklessly bought, I had to get rid of it, and I wasn't the only one. I said to Deon one morning, 'That car has to go; it's costing me forty quid a

day to get in to work.'

He replied, 'I know, I'm putting seventy a day in mine.'

I don't think he missed the seventy quid though; I think he just found it a pain in the arse to keep having to fill it up.

I bought an old Renault Laguna and drove that instead. It's funny really, what with the image of footballers as it is, and feeling you ought to live up to it, you tend to want to keep up with the Joneses, but once you're all on the same pitch it doesn't really matter. I remember driving that old Laguna to a televised Sky game one night, thinking that I should really be in a shiny flash new motor. I parked it around the corner, rolled into the club, gave it the large one, and picked up the Man of the Match champagne – presented by Sal, which was all the better as he had, of course, thought he had won it – and drove back to Northampton. I know the idea 'if you feel good, you play well' can have some justification, but it's all bollocks really – it's all in the head. Knowing that didn't stop me buying Fiona a brand new Mini Cooper – at least one of us could feel good about what we drove.

I did some serious mileage that season; I succeeded in blowing two cars up. The second, and newer Laguna, gave in late one night, just outside Northampton. As I was nearing home, I pulled off a slip road and the engine just kept revving. I stopped in a lay-by and watched as the engine seemed to explode – there was smoke everywhere. It was lucky, and unbelievably coincidental, that a fire engine happened to be passing at the time. It pulled over, the lads sorted it out (by filling the car with foam), and then one of them said, 'I hope you have a warranty, pal.'

I stood in the lay-by that night at about 2am, thinking three things: was I doing too many miles? did I have warranty? and please, Carl, be in!

By Christmas we were in a play-off position, and Martin decided it was time for us to have a break. We had really been pushing it, training and playing at one hundred per cent. I had even managed to play with a torn calf muscle. It is amazing what you can put your body through, especially when you have a manager telling you he 'needs' you to do it. I got through that particular game, a third round FA Cup tie, with the help of a few sessions in a hyperbaric chamber, aided by some serious will power and a manager who could talk you into most things. Wayne Bridge was in the same chamber having the same oxygen treatment for his broken leg. It is a popular form of treatment at clubs for rehab purposes, with most American football clubs having their own chambers on site. It is also a very important and beneficial form of therapy for people with far more serious injuries or debilitating illnesses. It is a bit embarrassing though, when you see what injuries and illnesses other people have who use the oxygen

treatment, especially when you are in there with them.

I was in the oxygen tank one day, and it was full – there were about eight people in there. Before long, the subject turned to ‘who had what’. At this point I started to feel slightly ashamed. Each person took a turn explaining what had happened to them to make them end up there, whether it be multiple sclerosis, or cancer, or, in one case, a guy had had his foot amputated. Then the time came for me to explain my horrific injury. I was dreading my turn but I introduced myself and said, ‘Well, I have torn my calf and my club want me to be fit to play on Saturday.’

There was a slight silence, and then everyone just burst into laughter, me included. Everyone saw the funny side of it. It was incredible to see how positive people were, even those who had suffered awful pain and injury. The therapy is not actually officially recognised by doctors, and so getting treatment is hard. Apparently there is no clinical evidence that it works, but you try telling that to the guys I spoke to, certainly those who had MS. They said that it was a vital part of their lives, not only as a treatment, but also as a way of meeting, talking with and helping each other. As far as injuries are concerned, the theory is that it helps by sending more oxygen to the area of trauma enabling it to heal faster. As far as calf strains are concerned, it did enough in a week to enable me to hobble onto a pitch and play football.

Brentford’s overnight stays at hotels were a big event. The players would eat their evening meal and then head off to their respective rooms. I shared with Stewart Talbot, and, after around an hour of us being in our room, there would always be a knock on the door. In would walk a waitress with four pints of Guinness from the manager (in this case Martin) and a note. The note just said, ‘Keep it going, you old bastards.’

Let’s just say that the management team would also make the most of their overnight stay, and they didn’t have to worry about playing the next day. It’s the same at most clubs, and I can testify to it being the same at international level as well.

On one occasion while at Brentford we had all been given a weekend off as we had no game, and so my wife and I decided to meet up with Daryl and Katrina in Manchester. They were staying in a hotel called the Lowry, and after a bit of internet searching, we got a room at the same hotel and headed up there. We checked in, our bags were dispatched to the room, and we were then accompanied to it by a member of staff. As we entered the lift, we were joined by a lady whom I sort of recognised, but couldn’t put a name to. We said our pleasantries and waited for the lift to get to our floor. As it did we stepped out, along with the lady whom my wife had now subtly informed me was Nancy

Dell’Olio, Sven-Göran Eriksson’s girlfriend. All four of us walked down the corridor, and at the same time as the concierge opened the door to our room, Miss Dell’Olio knocked on the door opposite ours. I let Fiona go into our room first, and as the door opposite opened for Nancy, who should be standing there, complete with white robe? None other than a surprisingly small-looking Sven-Göran Eriksson. He saw me, we both said hello, and then both doors were shut. Fiona and I immediately took turns to look through the small hole in the door to see what activity would happen opposite. Wouldn’t it be funny if he had done the same, just to check out what was going on? I somehow suspect he didn’t, though. Fiona and I got ready and headed up to Daryl and Katrina’s room to tell them about our neighbours, and to raid their mini bar instead of ours.

After having a nice meal and a bit of a night out, we headed back to the hotel. We walked into the bar expecting it to be quiet, but there were still quite a few people in there. The entire England coaching staff was in there, with a table full of drinks, a few hangers on, and definitely no sign of Miss Dell’Olio. Talk about making the most of it!

Brentford were sponsored by Qatar Airways at the time, but it was still a big surprise when we were told that we would be having a Christmas break in Abu Dhabi. It was an even bigger surprise when the manager told us we would be travelling there First Class and that the management team would be in standard. It was typical of Martin Allen to do something like that though – the same way as it was typical to put us in standard on the way back, and himself and the management team in First Class. A good lesson in there somewhere.

The trip was fantastic, to have a bit of sunshine on your back in winter is a good feeling, and the team spirit was, understandably, high. Abu Dhabi is a strange place, so much luxury in such desolate surroundings, and so much industry going on to make it bigger and better. It is incredible to see the progress that has been made there, on what was just a desert a few years ago. The latest F1 Grand Prix has just been held there, at what must be one of the most incredible circuits in the world. Everything in Abu Dhabi, and at its neighbour Dubai, is geared to being the best in the world and the attention to detail is phenomenal. I know the property bubble may have burst in Dubai at the moment, but drinking a few cold beers and smoking a hookah pipe with Martin Allen and the Brentford squad certainly goes down as one of my better trips abroad with a team of players. There are no nightclubs allowed in Abu Dhabi, but what you will find underneath most hotels in the region is something that is very, very similar. The only difference being that you don’t pay to get in and the clientele are mostly ladies who are doing the ‘night shift’.

During the 04/05 season, I was really putting in a shift myself both on and

off the field of play. My body was being battered by the amount of second balls I was attacking. Our main tactic was for Stuart Nelson, our goalkeeper, to plant the ball high and far to Deon Burton, our striker, to knock it down to the midfield; we would then attack it as if our lives depended on it, ‘encouraged’ by Martin’s constant shouts of, ‘Second ball!'

Let’s be honest here, there are plenty of clubs in the Premiership who win games doing exactly the same. The tactic was very effective and, although it meant a few cuts and bruises, and ten bookings for me by Christmas, it worked.

We were given a few days off around Christmas and, to be honest, I wish we hadn’t been. I had arranged to meet up with Stuart Talbot and Scott Fitzgerald in Windsor for a bite to eat and a few drinks. As you can guess, knowing my history, the food part soon disappeared and the ‘few’ drinks turned into a ‘few more’. I had stopped drinking lager years before, and, to be honest, I hardly drank anything at all at that point, but as the lads were sinking them quicker than you could say, ‘I’m gonna regret drinking ten pints of “wife beater” big time in the morning.’ I joined them for a few gallons of the fizzy stuff. Unfortunately, after several pints, the evening became a bit blurry. Here I was trying to enjoy myself on a now rare outing to the pub, but I had now (according to what I was told) turned into a complete nutter. After inviting myself to sit with a few couples having a quiet night out (please don’t ask me why), telling the bouncers they were a bunch of fairies (they saw the funny side, fortunately for me) and giving a lad five pounds to ride his BMX to the next pub (great initiative shown from the lad in question), my friends said my behaviour just got more random (hell, and I thought that lot was random). The last time they saw me, I was trying to show off by doing bunny hops on this poor lad’s BMX – a proud moment in one of England’s finest historical towns.

To cut a long story short, I ended up ringing my wife (so she tells me) and asking for a lift, which, considering she was in Northampton, was a big ask. I eventually ended up sleeping in Fiona’s Mini (I had borrowed it) as I couldn’t find Stu’s house. (The car was parked only just around the corner.) We always learn lessons from our mistakes, and you could make a rule book from my mistakes in Windsor alone, but I did learn three things in particular from this experience: don’t drink lager (especially Stella), don’t visit Windsor unless it’s with your wife, and take a bigger car to sleep in.

It was during this part of the season that I was getting some really bad pain in my pubic bone and groin area (sorry to give you such detail). This was the result of a combination of playing and training hard, exacerbated by being in the car for five hours a day. The area that was injured is called the ‘pubis symphysis’ and such injuries can cause a really nasty and very lengthy problem. I cannot

totally explain the pain; I'm nervous about comparing it to childbirth, in case I get abusive letters, but I was in excruciating agony. It *must* have been worse than childbirth (much worse!).

I was due to see a specialist about the groin problem the day after the club's Christmas get-together in London. I had seen him a couple of times before, and his diagnosis and treatment had always been incredibly accurate and helpful. The actual test to diagnose a hernia is very unpleasant indeed – after making me run on a treadmill for a few minutes (to antagonise the problem a little bit more, which makes diagnosis easier), Ian carried out an odd procedure. Without going into too much detail, it basically involved a finger being inserted in the hole underneath your scrotal sack (enough detail?). If the muscle inside grips the finger, you are fine, but if the muscle is loose then you have a muscle tear, and usually need a hernia op. Mine was the latter, and I hated the test.

Before seeing the specialist, I had the Christmas party to get through, and before I continue, please don't think that such official club celebrations were common, despite what I have written over the last few pages. They were few and far between, and at Brentford, Martin would always insist that our wives or partners be present at any function or night out. The reasons for this were twofold – he wanted there to be a family feel to the club, and he definitely didn't want the lads gallivanting around London on their own. As much as I always loved being with the lads, I always hated the thought of Christmas parties. I have been at about twenty-two Christmas parties, which might seem to contradict my previous statement, but I have always tried to steer the lads away from the bad taste of fancy dress outfits. The last thing I want to do to celebrate Christmas is to walk down the street dressed as a Smurf, next to a drunken Mr Blobby and a Power Ranger. I just think it looks crap, especially if it's in the town of the club you play for. You are probably conspicuous enough in that town or city without dressing up as Vicky Pollard, or half of Batman and Robin. If I'm a working bloke walking down the street and I see a Premiership player stumbling towards me in wig and tights, I'm surely not going to be happy. I still find it difficult to understand why managers allow their players to dress up and go out and get hammered, inevitably surrounded by the club's fans.

For this season's Christmas party, Fiona and I were staying over in London that night. As is typical in these situations, my wife needed 'something to wear'. It was like a scene from *The Italian Job*, with me racing a little Mini around the centre of London for about four hours, until Fiona eventually emerged from yet another expensive-looking store holding an expensive-looking bag, containing an expensive pair of jeans, which, of course, she only wore the once! My wife recently sold that same pair of jeans at a car boot sale, and when the woman kept

bartering her down and down to about one pound fifty, I just threw them at her, saying, ‘Oh, for Christ’s sake, just take them, it’s the worst one hundred and seventy pounds I have ever spent!’

I am now banned from future car boot sales.

We all gathered at the function in Scalini’s, a restaurant in London. We had a good time, eating, dancing and making merry. The team also had a good laugh at my comedy toe – I had broken it, and it had swollen to look like something out of a cartoon. Martin Allen chased me around the room and squeezed it, which didn’t exactly help the cause, but it did make everyone laugh – it was like a Benny Hill sketch. As much as I laughed as well, that toe would go on to cause me some major grief.

Leading up to that weekend I had played a night game – in fact, it was the same one when my car had blown up – my damaged toe was giving me a bit of discomfort at the time, and when I finally returned home after the game it was unbearable. After a couple of hours of tossing and turning I limped downstairs and went into the kitchen searching for some pain relief. With all supplies gone, I decided to drill the nail and release the blood behind the toe. I did the normal man thing and put the needle over the stove to kill any germs and then sank it into the nail of my big toe. It is an immense relief when you have pierced the nail and the blood comes out, your toe immediately stops throbbing. I don’t know if that incident made it worse, or put me in the position I ended up in, but it couldn’t have helped. During the night, after the club party, I was really struggling with the pain. My toe and foot were huge; I was shivering and felt horrendous. I even went to the all-night chemist (useless) and put my foot in the ice bucket for an hour. (OK, I’d had some champagne beforehand, don’t judge me!) None of it helped. When I went to the specialist the next day, for treatment for my groin, he said, ‘I think we may have a bit of trouble here, Chris.’

I asked him why and he replied, ‘Have you seen the size of your leg?’

I hadn’t really noticed, but it was huge. Within ten minutes, an ambulance had arrived and I was on the way to hospital. I had septicaemia and would be on a drip for the next four days. I think there are three lessons here: don’t drink with a bad toe, don’t stick a needle in your own toe, and don’t let your manager squeeze your toe.

When I went back to see Ian about the groin, since he’d been able to do nothing the last visit, because of the urgency of my toe, I was in for even greater pain than from the septicaemia. If I hadn’t experienced it, I wouldn’t have believed it possible. Ian tried a few things to sort it out. I went on a drip for a few hours, to have some sort of chemical released into my bloodstream to mask the pain, and also an injection, one which goes down in the records as the worst I

have ever had. I have probably had a hundred or so injections over my career, some a tickle, and some that smarted a bit, but this bad boy was something else – clearly far too large for use on a mere human. It even came with its own metal holder and a nurse to comfort me!

As Ian drove this horse needle through my pelvic bone I really did wince (I was at this point squeezing the nurse's hand, which she had offered me as if to say, 'Brace yourself'). He inserted a second needle into the big daddy of a needle, and I really did hope it would work. It did for about three months, and in that time I didn't feel any pain in my groin at all; we played in some really good games and had a decent cup run.

During that cup run I had one of those moments that will always remain special to me. We were playing Luton away, they were riding high and would end up being promoted that season, and, leading up to the game, there was a bit of needling (no pun intended) going on between the two teams and their managers. The place was packed, with two or three thousand Brentford fans crammed into the away end. It was a tight game, but halfway through the second half I caught hold of a volley on the edge of the box and scored. Little Jay Tabb, our enigmatic winger (he would drift in and out of matches; he could light a pitch up with his ability, but was quiet and unassuming off the pitch), sealed the game for us and afterwards we walked over to the fans to celebrate. I saw my family at the front of the stand and picked my little boy Cameron up out of the crowd and onto the pitch. He was only a little titch at the time, but as I lifted him up and showed him off to the fans it was great; he just beamed away, and the fans all cheered as if we had scored a goal. It was a lovely FA Cup memory for us – Cam has absolutely no idea what I am talking about now, but at least I remember. My wife was also there, but she swears she can't remember the game!

The groin injection wore off; I eventually seized up and it was decided that I would have to have an operation: a double hernia and groin repair. It was gutting, because it was nearing the end of the season but, if it all went well, I would still have an outside chance of making the play-offs in three weeks' time. The lads were all delighted as we had agreed (had our arms twisted) to Martin's idea of us only getting a bonus if we reached the play-offs. I could smell the Championship, decent football, and the wage increase that would come with it.

I was lucky, the groin operation went really well and I even recovered fast enough to make the play-offs. The hardest thing about the operation was being picked up and driven home by Fiona's dad. Iain is a true gent of a man, but though he had recently undertaken an advanced driving course his skills seemed to go the other way; feeding the wheel like a learner driver when on the M25 was always going to be terrifying!

We played Sheffield Wednesday in the play-offs that year, and although we had beaten them at Hillsborough and drawn with them at home in the league, it wasn't to be. Roared on by twenty-five thousand Sheffield Wednesday fans, they beat us away, and we couldn't recover enough to beat them at home. It was the one time Martin changed his formation and tactics before a game, and I know he still regrets that, but either way, the Brentford dream was over.

The away fixture was also my five hundredth league game, and the Sky pundit that night was none other than Garry Birtles, the player I had made my debut with seventeen years before.

Between these play-off games, I had also decided to get my hair cut. I had seen the first leg on Sky, and had thought I looked a bit like a Hell's Angel. This was backed up by a phone call from my mum saying some of the girls at work thought it was 'ageing'. In a fit of vanity I did the unthinkable, and got the lot chopped off. The result was shocking. They say Samson lost his strength when he had his mane sheared off; well, I can empathise with Samson. As well as looking like Andrew Ridgeley in his Wham days, I felt like I had sandbags in my boots in that second play-off game. I knew it was bad at the pre-match meal when Deon turned to me and said, 'Oh my God, what have you done?'

I said never again to any haircut and, although my club sponsor a few years later at Torquay United was a hairdresser, even there, the closest I'd get to a short back and sides was two centimetres off the back, and a head massage.

I mentioned earlier in the book that I have finally cut my mane off for good. It was a moment of real clarity. My neighbour Amanda (whose house is home to our daughter for most of the time, as her boyfriend, Will, lives there) is a hairdresser, and after having a chat one afternoon, we decided it was time. I had finished playing football, and couldn't get away with that haircut for much longer. Amanda did a great job with both the haircut and the therapy needed for me to go through with the procedure. I looked at a few old recordings of my TV 'punditry' stuff with my long hair and I was in shock at how bad it looked – I looked like Ozzy Osbourne. (Thank you, Amanda, for bringing me back to reality.)

It was yet another blow to lose the play-offs, and again I felt I had fallen short. My body had taken one hell of a beating, and the daily commute was a major problem. It wouldn't have been that bad if there had been other people to travel

in with; we could have split the journey, but as I was the only ‘northerner’ travelling and because the training was so full-on, I didn’t think that carrying on at Brentford was a possibility.

After vehemently saying no for a month after the season had finished, Martin eventually conceded defeat and agreed to let me go. I was now thirty-three and my body could not cope with the constant stress of the driving, and our way of playing and training. So, the year contract I had left was ripped up, and we said our goodbyes. I only have good things to say about Brentford; it is a tremendous club, with great fans. As for Martin Allen, I am equally positive – he is a fantastic bloke. Just don’t pull out of a tackle when he’s your manager.

One final memory from that season again comes in the form of an off-the-field incident. The club’s end of season awards ceremony took place at a nice hotel in London and, as my wife and I were given the go-ahead to attend (my parents were down providing a much needed and very rare babysitting service), we decided to stay over. With Fiona not having been out for a while and with me finally being able to relax after another hard slog, we did have a few drinks. After being asked to ‘throw over’ the signed match ball to the table who had given the winning bid, one of the lads teed me up for a header which I couldn’t refuse. This resulted in the destruction of an array of plates and glasses. Fiona hadn’t avoided commotion either – she had somehow managed to fall over the sofa in the bar area. We thought we had stayed up until about 3am until we surfaced for breakfast the next morning, and were told that we had ‘retired’ at half ten. Clearly, we were starting to feel our age.

As the season had ended, and my contract had been torn up, I was starting to get a little bit concerned. While not yet a regular occurrence, my season had ended with my third play-off loss. That summer was spent on a beach, and, as usual, on the phone, trying to sort out my next club. I managed to whip Fiona off for a little break to Madrid, which basically involved rushing past masterpieces at a rapid pace. What a great city it is, but trying to cram everything in was hard, and all too soon I had to return to the UK to work out what was going to happen with my football career.

2005/06

The Hargreaves have had some success this week in the form of CH junior. Last night Cameron picked up an ‘Excellence in Exeter award’ at Exeter Cathedral for artistic and sporting endeavour. It was nice to see him rewarded for all his hard work. It’s incredible really, but he hardly has a night free what with the amount of sport he does and after school clubs he attends. He does cross country for the school and trains with the Exeter City academy three nights a week. As well as playing football for Exeter City on a Sunday, he also plays for the school football and rugby teams, and plays Ultimate Frisbee.

He is achieving high grades at school, but I know Cam would love to play football when he is older; in fact, I think he would love to play any sport, so long as it was at a professional level. However, for me, unless he plays at the very top, I would rather he found a career in something else. I hope that doesn’t sound ungrateful or elitist, but he is an intelligent boy and he loves engineering, and if you asked me whether I would rather him design bridges or play Second or Third Division football, the answer is simple, ‘Bye bye football.’

I want Cam to have the power to decide what he wants to do, and getting an education will give him that, playing lower league football won’t. Whoever said knowledge is power was spot on. It may sound ruthless, but it is true. I know parents sometimes want to live their lives through their children, but so what if they do? Yes, I want my son to play at the top level, and yes, I want him to get a good education, because as we all know, both scenarios will give him a comfortable life.

One thing for sure is that if he does go into football, Cam will not be taking the bullshit that I took as a young player. He also won’t be allowed to piss his chances of making it up the wall either.

As far as my girls are concerned they will not be allowed a boyfriend until at least twenty-one (I laugh as I type that – I think that might be wishful thinking – I know I have no chance, especially considering that Harriet is four, and already says she has a boyfriend).

In true CIA style I intend to get the playroom completely hooked up with the latest CCTV technology (maybe with a camera looking through my eye on a family picture). I want my girls to be able to spend time with friends without

having to roam the streets, but I'll be monitoring the situation from my control room with cigar in mouth and News 24 showing. If any Justin Bieber wannabes even try to go near my princesses, I will be in there like a flash and Mr Bieber will be out on his ear. Controlling, you say? Never – just protective!

The business model I had in mind has now changed, in so far as what I will be selling has now altered. I don't know enough about the industry to go into a coffee shop or eatery, so I now have my eye on opening up a sports shop. An existing sports shop is available in Sidmouth and, with a big refit and some fresh new brands in there, I really think it could be a great business.

I am also eyeing up a job with BBC Radio Devon. It will probably go to a young student with no experience, but who has a massive armament of qualifications, but we shall see. Having made the decision to hang the boots up, it's obvious that I have discovered finding work outside of football is tough. To earn the same amount of money as I have been used to is not a possibility, unless I retrain and become a doctor, or get a job as a club manager. Getting such a role could take three months, six months, even a year – maybe never – so until then, I have to do something constructive, otherwise I will go mad.

I have made the decision to pull some of my pension money out; this is something I didn't want to do as that money had been collected over twenty years of blood, sweat and tears, and was really for when I can't work at all, or a severe rainy day. The fact that it is currently absolutely pissing down on the pension front is a parallel that cannot be overlooked, though; I have three hungry beaks looking up at me, Christmas is fast approaching, and my wife is so stressed I swear she's moments away from a seizure. I have always had a pretty philosophical view of life, and I do believe that my time will come again. I also believe that I have already been one lucky boy. However, earning two hundred pounds a week for the part-time coaching, with an odd few hundred quid here and there for occasional TV work, is not going to keep the wolves from the door for ever; hence an emergency fund needed.

It does amaze me how some people plead poverty, and yet can't be bothered to get off their arses and look for a job. I am generalising, and I do accept that for some people it is much harder than it is for me, but for many, watching Jeremy Kyle and smoking fags all day seems to be an OK way to live. Where do they get the money for the fags is the first question I ask? The second is why are some on the dole earning more than me for doing bugger all? The third question is how on earth can someone with no job afford to buy the latest PlayStation game on offer? The queue at the supermarket the other day to buy Tour of Duty was ridiculous. The government has got it all wrong. While I am in top rant form, how on earth have we found eight billion pounds to send over to Dublin,

when the poor sods over here who have been swindled out of their pension monies and savings are just abandoned? Wrong, wrong, wrong.

Onto football matters now, and after narrowly missing out on promotion to the championship at the end of the 04/05 season, I now had to make a few decisions. After leaving Brentford, quite a few clubs were keen for me to sign for them. Russell Slade at Grimsby Town, Martin Ling at Leyton Orient and Brian Talbot at Oxford United were all asking me to meet up to discuss terms. I thought long and hard about the Grimsby Town move, I knew Russ well, and he really did try to get me up there. He offered me the captaincy, a decent contract, and the chance to move back home. The problem was that, although returning to my hometown club would have been special – it would certainly have made my dad very proud – there were too many bad memories of those early days for me. I had been a bit of a tearaway, I had ruined the chance of a big move, and I had put Fiona through hell. In fact, I had more skeletons back there than in an entire series of *Scooby Doo*. Admittedly we were only young, and my hoovering and cleaning alone over the subsequent years has made up for early indiscretions, but I just didn't want to put myself or my wife through it all again. I also felt that there was more for the children in Northampton – they were at a good school, we had a nice life, and Fiona and I didn't feel that moving back home was the right choice. Of course, it would have been brilliant for us to be nearer our families, but having lived away for so long, we were used to it.

I spoke to Martin Ling at Leyton Orient, who offered me the same deal as Grimsby Town, and the same role, but the travelling would have become a major issue again, and, although he said I could have days off and take it easier in training, I said no. I also said no to three other clubs, all in the same league as Brentford, which had all offered one-year deals. Was I right to make the decision to sign for Oxford United? Well, standing on the pitch as captain, after the last game of the 05/06 season, and having just been relegated to the Conference by one of the teams I had rejected, Leyton Orient, who, incidentally, were celebrating promotion, may give you the answer.

I met up with Brian Talbot and immediately liked him. As a player, he was very good and very fit. He had won back-to-back FA Cup finals with different clubs, he had played for England, and he had had an illustrious career at club level. He had been a player-manager at West Bromwich Albion and had guided Rushden & Diamonds from non-league obscurity to league status. He wanted more success, and felt that Oxford United was a sleeping giant, and that he could bring the success he wanted to the club. He was also one funny guy – he didn't

know it, but he was bloody hilarious. I said to him a few times that he could be a stand-up comedian, but he would just look at me and say, ‘Don’t be stoopid, man.’

He had a glint in his eye and a great sense of humour.

Andy Burgess told me a tale about Brian, from when he was with him at Rushden & Diamonds. Burg had started going out with Brian’s daughter, and after Brian eventually relented and accepted that one of his players was with his daughter (a big no-no in football), Brian sort of looked after Andy. Burg visited the family house several times, and on one occasion Brian and his wife were having a bit of a row. The argument was based around a very large trophy cabinet of Brian’s. As Burg walked in, he heard Brian saying, ‘No problem Sandra, I’ll just smash it all up. Yes – where’s the axe? I’ll smash it up, no problem, no problem at all.’

He was perfectly calm while saying this, and as he saw Burg just said, ‘Hello Andy, sit down son.’ He then carried on, ‘Yes, it can all go, smash it up.’

By this point, Brian was as much performing for Burg as he was arguing with his wife, knowing that Burg would find the suggestion of smashing up the cabinet funny. Arguments were always half tongue in cheek with Brian, and, as that cabinet probably contained a fair few decent awards, the irony wasn’t lost on Burg.

On the surface Oxford looked like a good club; the ground, for that level, was incredible. It had a good history, and it now had an experienced manager, with tons of awards behind him, at the helm.

The problem for Brian was that, unlike his experience up the road at Rushden & Diamonds – they had risen from the non-league and at one time were throwing money around at Championship level; they also had their own ground, magnificent facilities and a very wealthy chairman – his budget at Oxford was tight, there was no money to spend, he had inherited a very average squad, and the ground ownership would become a major problem. Brian wanted me to lead the team and to drive them on to promotion, but there were problems straightforward. For starters, he didn’t really get on with his assistant David Oldfield. David had had a decent career at Leicester City, but it was quite clear from the off that the two of them didn’t click. It was also clear that David didn’t like or rate many of the boys, myself included. I would have been much happier if he had just said, ‘Listen, I don’t think you’re very good, but I am putting up with it because it’s my job’, rather than skirting around the truth and being of no help to Brian whatsoever. He just seemed bitter to me, and I honestly think that meant Brian was on his own at the club.

Pre-season with Oxford United was tough, and, having had no real rehab

after my groin operation the previous month, I was finding the pain a real problem. I felt terrible, but I couldn't exactly throw it in; I felt obliged to dig in with the rest of the lads, so that's what I did. It was, of course, the wrong thing to do, and before long I had pretty much totally seized up, but at that point I was surviving, with the help of a lot of tablets and a whole load of ice.

The team were actually looking pretty good, and, having survived Brian's pre-season regime, we were up for the challenge ahead. We had a few experienced campaigners and decent players in Steve Basham and Lee Bradbury, as well as the legendary tag team of Billy Turley and Barry Quinn. We also had a couple of exciting prospects in Chris Hackett and Craig Davies, and a lad who would become a good friend and future teammate at another club, Lee Mansell. I also had a magnificent new car-school (the football term for carpool) in the form of my old Northampton teammate Chris Willmott, and two new signings from Rushden & Diamonds, Andy Burgess and John Dempster. Stuart Gray, another Rushden & Diamonds old boy, completed the car share. Those of us in this car school would go on to become really good mates and would have some brilliant times that season. I even ended up starting a soccer school called Pro Soccer Academy with 'Burg' the next season. He took that seriously, but his 'deal with it in the morning approach' to everything else was mental. Stephen Mulhern looka-like, John 'Digga' Dempster, was a great lad, who walked like Julian Clary, also looked a bit like Paul Nicholls, and liked to MC in his spare time. Stuart Gray, like many old pros, was one of those who had come to hate the game, which was painful for him, but funny for us. At least we had old Motty in the car to calm us down, and tell us that we all needed to save more money for our impending old age.

When the fixture list came out for that season, we were to play Grimsby Town away in our first game. In all the years in the game I had never returned to play against my hometown club; we always missed each other. I was either in a league above or in a league below, or I was suspended. How ironic that the club I had said no to a month earlier would now be the first test we would face. All my old mates would be at the game, my family would be there, and I would be stepping out onto the pitch where I had made my debut seventeen years ago.

The night before the game felt so odd; to be staying in a hotel with the lads, but with my family only a few miles away, was really strange. I was very nervous the next day, caused by a mixture of returning to the place where it had all started and wondering what people would be expecting of me. It was also me wanting to do well, to say to the fans that I was a hometown lad who was still a half-decent player, and who could have done well, had it not been for Alan Buckley and too many nightclubs. It was great to see a few old faces, Grimsby

stalwart and legend John McDermott was still there, as was my old boot boy and mucker Gary Croft. John is a great lad who puts Gordon Ramsey's use of the F word to shame, and Crofty went from Grimsby Town to Blackburn Rovers for one point six million in a whirlwind few years that saw him officially live the dream. I think John now coaches at the local college and Crofty owns an estate agent business, funny old game eh?

The team started really well, and, although we came in at half time 0–0, we had been the better team and really fancied our chances. The second half had barely got started though, before we conceded. A corner had been whipped in and as I tried to reach the ball it fell to the lad I was marking. He hit a shot which looped into the corner of the net beyond Billy. I always marked at corners, and I can count on one hand with a couple of fingers chopped off the amount of times a player had left my grasp to score from a corner, but he had, and we were now losing. So many things crossed my mind that afternoon, not least the fact that I very much needed not to lose the game that day. We kept piling forward, and I really tried to make up for my mistake, but with a couple of minutes to go we were still behind. After a bit of decent interplay in the last minute of the game, we got a free kick ten yards into their half. Chris Hackett stepped up and whipped a great ball just inside their box; I jumped up, caught it full on the head, and watched as it slammed into the net in front of the Pontoon stand, the stand where the Grimsby Town faithful would pile in, and the stand where, as a young boy, I had stood and dreamed of one day playing on the field.

It was a brilliant moment for me, in what turned out to be a horrendous season. Still, it was a moment I will always remember. After the game, the general feeling was that we would be fighting for promotion that season – our performance had been that good. If things had panned out a little differently maybe we would have been, but too many player changes, too many management changes and a season of frustration would turn that prediction on its head.

After a couple of months we were still doing OK, but a loss at home against, of all teams, local rivals Rushden & Diamonds seemed to change things. Brian had his own views on players and they certainly differed from mine. Ones that we needed didn't play enough, but Brian felt that some of them just weren't up to the task. He also had some problems with not being able to play certain players because of contractual issues, but the likes of Steve Basham, Lee Bradbury and Chris Hackett were decent players who needed to play. Brian thought 'Brads' was too slow, Chris Hackett too erratic, and had decided that Steve Basham couldn't score. Chris Hackett is currently playing at Millwall and doing well, Lee Bradbury has had a recent promotion at Bournemouth, and Steve

Basham will always get you a goal when you need it. Two of these players left the club that season, and the other, Steve Basham, was often on the bench. It just summed up the season really, frustrating. Even though I believe Brian overlooked these players, he still had the experience and knowledge to pull us out of trouble, and I honestly believe that we would have finished comfortably in the table had he stayed, but it wasn't to be.

The chairman at the time, Firoz Kassam, had been instrumental, along with the council, in moving the stadium from the old Manor Ground site (I had played there many times, and have now been many times in the hospital that took its place!) to a site on the other side of the city. Kassam modestly named it the Kassam Stadium, and the club was reborn.

The problem now was that he didn't want to spend any more money. He had thrown the chequebook at the previous three or four managers, including one who left under a cloud of controversy, and another who had brought an entourage of Argentinians who 'revolutionised' the club then quickly left. Unfortunately for Brian, all the money had gone. Kassam was now incredibly wary of football, and of spending money on it.

As a result, Brian couldn't get any players in, and had to let some go; in short it was an absolute mess. Lots of fans were already disgruntled at the ground move, but this situation now made it much worse. Kassam wanted results and he wanted the manager to do it with no budget. The chairman felt that spending all that money over the past couple of seasons should have bought the club success, and Brian bore the brunt of Kassam's frustration when it hadn't. Kassam's patience wore thin, and Brian was sacked in March of the 05/06 season. Kassam still owned the stadium, but wanted out and he didn't want to let it go until he got the right price. So, the club was stuck with an uninterested chairman. It was an awful time for the club and I happened to be there during it – lucky me!

I felt sorry for Brian, he definitely didn't get a fair crack at it, and he was let down by staff and players alike. I'm not saying he didn't make any mistakes, but there is no doubt that he had it tough there. I felt responsible for not being able to help him more. I hadn't been the player I was the previous season, by a country mile; I was unable to play in some of the games because I honestly couldn't move. It was as if my body had just said 'enough is enough'. I never really spoke to Brian after he left, which was strange – until then we would chat every day in his office about the team and the players, and his vision for the club.

There is always a killer game for a manager under pressure and for Brian it was away at Stockport. We both knew that day would be his last. We conceded an early goal and were then under some severe pressure. We managed to get a

foothold back in the game and, just after half time, I managed to put a cross in for Tim Sills to head in the equaliser. We were all fired up that day; well, some of us were, and we tried desperately to push on and get a winner – a win would have seen Brian keep his job, as would even just a draw. However, with five minutes to go, our centre-back, Jon Ashton, played a sloppy ball back to our keeper, their striker nipped in to score, and they stole the win.

In the changing room after the game, I absolutely lost it with the lads, and particularly with ‘Ash’. I kicked everything I could, wrecked the table, and abused most of the lads. I was just fuming, because it seemed no one in the team really cared! They obviously did, but I was the captain of a struggling team, and I was in fucking bits and couldn’t even rely on my own body! Ash summed up the team attitude that season – not really that bothered: ‘what will be, will be’.

To be fair to Ash, I liked him. He was a great lad, but he was still very much in his party mode that season. Winning, drawing or losing didn’t affect his Saturday night one bit. I am delighted to say that he eventually saw the light in the end. We still went down, but Ash eventually, via a few other clubs, moved on to Stevenage, settled down a bit, and got his head around playing. He was probably their best player in the team’s recent promotion campaign, where he was definitely up for the challenge.

After Brian had joined in and hammered Ash, saying that he was immediately on the transfer list, we all got changed and got back on the coach. I remember doing a quick radio interview after the match where I said some pretty strong stuff. I basically said that the club needed to pull together and fight, on and off the pitch, otherwise we would be in real danger, and that if anyone didn’t want to help, then they should sod off. It was half directed at some of the lads I thought didn’t care, and half directed at some of the people around the club who were doom merchants. Everyone nodded, but on the Wednesday of the next week Brian was sacked.

Although I felt as if I had let him down on the pitch, we did have the same opinions on a lot of areas of the game, and I was one hundred per cent behind him with tactics, advice, and support. In fact, I think I would have been of more use to him as an assistant manager that season than his captain!

He pulled me in on Monday morning and after engaging in a bit of banter that, as usual, brought me to tears of laughter, he quickly got serious and told me that he was making Ash train with the youth team. I think this was the first time we disagreed on anything significant. I stuck up for Ash and said that he shouldn’t do it, that we were a team and that it wouldn’t be a good sign. Maybe my disagreement was the last straw for Brian, and looking back maybe Brian should have done exactly what he suggested. Ash needed to see what his laid-

back attitude meant, and the consequence for him should have really fucking hurt. I should have agreed with Brian and backed him. Ash was too happy-go-lucky, and, as far as Brian was concerned, he didn't really give a shit either way; Brian knew it and didn't like it.

I always use something he said back then when I'm speaking to the young lads I coach now. One time, having caught Ash using his mobile phone on the coach after a game – mobiles were banned on all trips – Brian strode down the aisle of the coach and said to Ash, 'Who's on the phone, and what are you talking about?'

Ash went bright red, and replied, 'My missus, I was just telling her what time I would be back.'

Brian responded, 'Well, I've got a wife and four children – that makes five things more important to me than your girlfriend is to you, and I'm not on the phone am I? Turn it off, and start growing up.'

Although not allowing phones on the coach may have been a bit harsh, Brian did have a valid point, especially considering Ash got through girlfriends like Warren Beatty!

After my disagreement with him, Brian came in to warn the lads that he thought he might be sacked very soon; some were bothered and some weren't. I felt I'd let him down; I was his captain, the man he had brought in to lead the team, a job I was extremely proud of doing, but, and as much as I tried, I couldn't get my body right. Before he was sacked Brian had got rid of David Oldfield, which wasn't a major blow to me (but obviously was to Dave and his family), and had also got rid of a fair few players, so the new manager would really have his work cut out. The new man was Darren Patterson, the manager of the youth team. As a random fact about Darren, he was on the pitch playing for Crystal Palace when 'King' Eric Cantona infamously took to kung fu fighting for five minutes – Cantona was probably fed up with Daz kicking him up in the air all game! Anyway the team all thought, as he did, that Darren would have at least until the end of the season to steady the ship. He got four games. After two wins and two draws, he was ousted to make way for the return of the bald eagle, Jim Smith.

Darren was just what we needed at that time; he was well aware of the problems off the field but he could also really relate to the problems on it. He was still a young man himself, and with his energy and motivation, he quickly created a new team spirit in the camp. He was massively up for the challenge, and his no-nonsense approach simplified a lot of things. The team shape was planned out, the players knew exactly what was required of them, and he assured us that we would get out of trouble. I've known Darren for a few years now and

he is one hell of a lad – he is a winner, and he is dead honest, and he was the same as a manager. He asked me to come and see him after training on that first day, and his words were simple, ‘Chris, you’re my type of player. If you play like you did in the last couple of games, you will drag the team out of trouble. I want you to believe in me and, if you do, we will be all right.’

I already did believe in him, and I wanted to do well for him because he deserved a go at management. Those four games he was in charge were great; we fought for every ball, blood was shed for the cause, and the team spirit and unity required had returned.

Talking of bloodshed, in one of those games I got one almighty boot in the face at Notts County away. It was a great Terry Butcher moment as I was bound up and sent back on. I had dived in for a header on the edge of our box when a dozy someone’s size nine boot, complete with its six metal studs, found its way onto my forehead. You should always worry about the extent of the cut and the stitches required when you look at the ref, and he says, ‘Oh hell, I think you may need to see a doctor.’

This wasn’t the only painful incident of the season. As I mentioned earlier in this book, this was also the season when James Hunt got his revenge for the Plymouth Argyle incident. He had gone to Bristol Rovers by this time, and Oxford United was playing against them. Towards the end of the game, with it being a tight but uninspiring 0–0 draw, we both went to challenge for a header. Hunty mistimed his header (as usual) and barged into me. I was badly winded, but was just about able to laugh, saying that he had finally got his own back. He apologised and laughed as well, but at that time little did we know how bad it actually was. I managed to get through to the end of the match, but was in real pain afterwards. I returned home late and tried to get to sleep but soon realised that was not going to happen.

Sleeping after any game is a near impossibility for a footballer. I’m quite sure that this is the same for most sportsmen and women after they have competed. The combination of adrenaline still pumping through your veins, the nervous energy still being expended regardless of whether you won or lost, and the litre or so of Red Bull still flying through your system means that trying to get your head down is a definite struggle. Add to this the fact that you might have an injury that interferes with sleep. This could be something minor, but painful, such as a classic leg burn – this is a grass burn from making a sliding tackle, which inevitably takes off a layer of skin on the side of your leg. It then becomes difficult to turn over in a bed, as each time you move, the fresh flesh is exposed and it is agony. When you take a shower and water hits the wound, you scream. Getting two grass burns, one each side, is very common, and means you

have to lie very, very still. Any sort of muscle trauma can have the same effect. With all this, you can end up not sleeping at all, and it gets worse as you get older. Not the injuries or the Red Bull intake, just the inevitable fact that, when playing for a Devon club anyway, when you get home, no one is up! You can't talk to anyone about the game (not that my wife would want to anyway) so there is no form of release. This is why so many players go and get slaughtered on a Saturday or Tuesday night – not only can they finally turn off from the game, but they can also sleep on their eventual return home!

After an hour of wriggling about in agony I got up. It was about two in the morning, but I said to my wife that I was struggling to breathe, and that I would drive myself to the local hospital. She turned over and grunted, which I thought was very supportive! After a quick consultation with a young doctor in A&E, I was given an X-ray and told to wait. The doctor returned and reassured me that it wasn't too bad after all, and that I would be fine in a few days. I was relieved, but still in a lot of pain. The following morning, after having had an extremely uncomfortable night, I travelled to Oxford for treatment. I was sent for another X-ray – this time privately, which is a privilege I know, but also a necessity when a club needs to know about a player's fitness. After a short time I was given the results. I had broken three ribs and punctured my lung! Thanks Hunty and thanks Kettering General.

So, back to Darren's short stint at Oxford United. If Darren had remained in charge there is no doubt in my mind that we would have survived that season. However, after only four games at the helm he was told that although he would still be needed at the club for the youth team, he would be replaced as manager of the first team. Jim Smith would be taking over. With Jim's arrival imminent, the atmosphere in the town was incredible. Their hero was coming home, the club would be saved, and everything would be rosy.

That was certainly the feeling outside the club, but on the inside things were a little different. The lads had really taken to Darren Patterson, and, at such a delicate time of the season, yet another change was not good. We were really playing well for each other, and had turned a huge corner on the field. As much as we all had massive respect for Jim, the general feeling was that it was a really bad move. Darren was obviously gutted, and felt like he'd had the rug pulled from under his feet, and half of the lads were shitting themselves again at the prospect of a new manager coming in, one whose reputation definitely preceded him. So, with new tactics, a new team, new back room staff, the whole process of trying to get it sorted again was going to be another uphill challenge.

I had lots of run-ins and disagreements with Jim over those few months, and I think there was a great deal of misunderstanding between us during that time. I

obviously knew he had been a legend at the club, he had a great track record, and, without doubt, he wanted the best for Oxford, but his approach to players already low on confidence was harsh. Yes, he had worked with better players, and yes, he got frustrated, but waving the *Racing Post* about while telling your striker he's shit, in the middle of a shooting session, can have its drawbacks.

Since those days, I've got to know Jim a lot more, and I know what a brilliant character he is. Like many involved in the game, he is bloody funny, and bloody generous with it, and he could have given Oliver Reed a run for his money in any drinking establishment. I also know that he was under the most extreme pressure, as a former hero of the club, to keep the now struggling team in the division. At the time, though, I just looked at the basics; if you tell the lads they're crap, they will be crap. It was a really difficult time, and one that I hate looking back on. Jim brought in a couple of loan players and dropped a few of the regulars to the bench, as is the norm when a new manager takes over, but the tension was high from the beginning, and these changes weren't taken well.

In hindsight, it's almost funny, but one night I even heard Jim hammering me in the hotel bar. I didn't mind the hammering; what I did mind was that I had a game the next day, and all this was happening while I was laid in my bed, which incredibly was next to the wall where Jim was sat – how's that for bad luck? He didn't stop yapping till around one o'clock in the morning. Jim could really blow his top with the best of them – it could be with a player, with his assistants Andy Awford and Shaun North, or even with the bus driver, who took the wrath of Jim's anger on several occasions.

We played Boston United away once, and the driver had gone the wrong way and, as a result, we were stuck in heavy traffic. We had to abandon the pre-match meal and get sandwiches from a garage. Jim absolutely caned this poor bloke, 'Fucking useless, I'll drive the fucking thing myself you twat! One fucking job to do and you piss that up the wall!'

It didn't help that the team were all shouting the usual insults from the back. 'Have you shagged the sat nav girl, because she is all over the place?'

This would be followed by, 'Can you turn that fucking traffic finder off, driver?' and, 'Put it in second, Nobby; it's not a night game!'

When we eventually got to Boston, Jim was still in a bad mood; he strolled into the club, a club he had once managed, and said, 'What a fucking shithole.'

He was right though, it was!

Even when we went in to see the ref for the captains' meeting, Jim piped up and said, 'Well I'm sure we will get fuck all today, because you officials at this level are all fucking useless.'

I laughed, but I knew there was only one certainty from now on – we

wouldn't get anything that day, and we didn't. The ref turned down a huge penalty shout, Billy Turley was fouled for their goal, and Jim spent the entire afternoon stood on the touchline with his head in his hands. It always made me chuckle though – win, lose or draw, you'd see the cigar smoke wafting down the coach after a game and hear Jim muttering, 'Fucking useless, eh?'

(I have to apologise again about the language, and believe me, my mum has told me off for the 'excessive use of obscenities', but, in my defence, they are often all other people's words.)

Even on the eve of the last game of the season, Jim wasn't fully behind his choice of team. It was the biggest game in the club's recent history, and I still didn't know I was playing until an hour and a half before the game, and I was supposed to be the captain! Jim pulled me into office and said, 'I'm not sure about playing you, Chris, but the lads seem to want you to play, so off you go.'

Wow, you're really making me feel special Jim, nice one!

Our Player of the Year presentations took place on the pitch before the game, and it was the quietest handclapping I have ever heard as the names were announced. Lee 'Lamb' Mansell (named for his wool-like hair) took the fans' Player of the Year award, and I took the players' Player of the Year award. During both these presentations, you could pretty much feel the tumbleweeds passing by. We were all, fans and players alike, more concerned with knowing our fate.

I don't want to talk about the game and the relegation too much, because it is just too frustrating, and there's no need for me to relive all that torment again. However, in brief, after taking a lead through an Eric Sabin goal, Chris Willmott was sent off, we conceded a couple of goals, and ended up losing the game. Leyton Orient was promoted and Oxford United, with its big stadium, famous manager and history, were down. I knelt down on that pitch and watched as the jubilant away fans celebrated their promotion. I just felt broken. I had rejected the club that had sent us down – what a horrible twist of fate. After the game, I said to the lads that they had tried their best, and that they could at least say they gave it a go, but I also said that Jim hadn't helped them at all with his attitude. That comment would come back to bite me on the arse, and I was wrong to say it without him being there, but I was mad – mad that I was captain of a team that had got relegated when it could, so easily, have been avoided.

After being sat silent in the dressing room for about an hour and a half after the game, I, with the rest of the players in my car school, walked out of the club. As we did so, an irate fan came up to me and shouted, 'It's your fucking fault, Hargreaves – you're the captain and you have been shit. It's your fault we are down.'

As much as I would have loved to have taken him around the back of the stand and given him a few lessons in politeness, I could understand where he was coming from. I was angry as well though, so let him have both barrels back, reacting by threatening to rip his head off (Oops!), saying that it was the fault of other people at the club who had more control than I did, although in reality I felt the fan was right, and I certainly did blame myself. I had always looked at myself after defeats and blamed myself for pretty much everything, and this game was no different, I felt responsible. The only funny part of the whole day was when the same fan noticed Digga, and after shouting at me turned to him, ‘And you’re even worse, Dempster, you can’t even play!'

John Dempster was actually a really good player, but it was funny how he always seemed to be on the receiving end of abuse.

We had a PR shoot towards the end of the season at the Little Chef, and the photographer asked me to pile my plate up for the shot. I turned to him and said, ‘Are you sure mate? You’ve got no chance – we’re in the middle of a relegation battle, and you want the captain to smile and say cheese while munching down a double breakfast and chips? That will go down great with the fans, won’t it?’

Instead, I turned to Digga, and told him to smile, while putting my two sausages on his plate. A few of the other lads had done the same and the next day Digga was pictured beaming away in front of six sausages, six rashers of bacon and four eggs. At a game a few days later another fan shouted, ‘It’s no wonder you can’t move, Dempster, you fat bastard; you’re too busy ramming sausages down your neck!'

He was subbed after thirty-five minutes that day!

After the final match, we parked up on the way home and all had a pint and a bite to eat, in silence. It had been a shit day in a shit season, and, even now, I still find it hard to believe it happened. However, it had, and we were facing life in the Conference. I had suffered this fate for the second time in my career, and it was no easier to bear – it hurt like hell. I came out of that season with a punctured lung, three broken ribs, a four-inch scar to the forehead, and a relegation to the Conference. I was like a bear with a thorn in his paw that summer, so annoyed that I couldn’t think about anything else. I don’t even remember going away, which we must have done to get away from it all. I only remember returning home to see *Sky Sports News* still on loop, saying ‘Oxford United – Relegated’.

2006/07

Sometimes I wake up and really feel like writing; today is not one of those days. I don't know if it's because everything seems to be annoying me today, or whether it's because writing about life with Jim as manager brings back awful memories, but either way I am a little subdued. The fact that my wife is on stress alert might not be helping; she seems intent on making herself feel as bad as she can. Comments such as, 'Well I've just been so busy, you know, it's just "the situation" we are in', don't help. What situation? As far as I am concerned, no one has beriberi, we are all able to read, write and walk, and at the last count there are still just a few people worse off than us in the world. I obviously didn't say this out loud because it would cause a daylong sponsored silence, but I certainly feel as if I am being made to feel bad about 'the situation'. The fact that I am coaching 6-9pm every night, I am trying to do a bit of TV work, and I am writing a book for HarperCollins just seems to be a right pain in the arse!

Maybe I shouldn't talk about this, but, since my retirement, I have seen large changes in lots of colleagues, friends, and even my family. Some are delighted I have retired (no comments about fans at this stage, please), and for others it is a strange mix of pleased one-upmanship and fear. One-upmanship, that they now seem to delight in telling me they are earning decent money, or that they are buying this or that. I'm pretty damn sure I never did that when I played, and if I did, it was never, ever intentional. If I had twenty pounds and was on a night out with somebody with ten pounds, we now had fifteen pounds each; that was my take on things.

I can understand the fact that being a footballer, at any level, immediately propels you to a certain status, whether it's warranted or not (and it's usually not), but for me now, not having that is fine. For some, me not having that status is great.

The fear of the unknown is more understandable; my wife has looked into me working as a driver, a barman, a gardener (I took her up on that one for a while, as you know!), a postman, and into my going on the dole. Talk about having faith in someone! I won't do the last one, because I believe there is always work out there if you are willing and able, and I don't particularly want to do any of the others. Don't get me wrong, I will do anything to provide for my family, and I

would work bloody hard, but I want to either stay in football or work in the media, two jobs that I love, but in two industries that are both fickle and unpredictable. Getting work in either field is going to be tough. This is why, as I mentioned, I have pulled some of my pension money out; I am going to try to buy my way out of trouble with the money I grafted all my career for. I am going to try to set up a business so that I am answerable only to myself, and hopefully, when I have done that I can silence a few of those who have doubted my resolve. The only thing this temporary blip in my career has done to me is to make me stronger, and more resilient, and that can't be a bad thing can it?

With the season before being an almighty crock of shit, the new 06/07 campaign had to have more to offer. The club had come to terms with the fact that it would be in the Conference and with Nick Merry and Kelvin Thomas now in charge of financial matters, the off-field problems were very much in hand. Nick was a great guy; he looked like J. R. Ewing, complete with Stetson and Rolls Royce. Both he and Kelvin were astute businessmen who wanted to get the club on an even keel. That meant promotion and it also meant, somehow, buying the ground off Mr Kassam.

We had moved to a new training ground, and straightaway there was a better feel to the whole club. We had the Mitchell brothers from *Eastenders* keeping a close eye on us, in the form of Paul and Neil Sullivan. Neil was our brilliant physio who could repair prolapsed discs in a couple of minutes, and Paul was our kit man and camp comic – don't worry Paul, not in a Louis Spence way. We also had Lindsey on board, our masseur, agony aunt and fitness trainer all rolled into one, and finally we had our main fitness 'guru', Jordan Milson. He was fresh out of Liverpool University, thought he could still be a player and was absolutely bloody hilarious. He took some monumental hammerings but I have to say that the 06/07 pre-season was one of the most enjoyable I had ever had. The fact that Jim wasn't around probably helped to calm the nerves, but with Jordan attempting to control the lads it was one hell of a laugh. The team spirit was spot on; Turley, Quinn, Dempster and Burgess were back on form, and we had also just signed a moaning, unfit, young Welshman called Rob Duffy, who slotted into the car school like a slipper on an ugly sister, but who, before long, was in the circle of trust, and, more importantly, was banging the goals in on a Saturday. Experienced players Gavin Johnson and Rufus Brevett had signed, as had a great little midfielder, Carl Pettifer, another new striker in Yemi Odubade, and a new captain in the form of experienced campaigner and former Oxford United stopper, Phil Gilchrist – after one pre-season game it became clear that he

was the ideal man for the job.

Another old teammate of mine, Eddie Hutchinson, had joined the club from Brentford; Jim had signed him on a three year deal. Rumour has it that the club thought they were signing his twin brother, who played for Woking, because Hutch hardly got to play under Jim, and he also took some severe batterings along the way (from the manager, who thought he was useless, and from the lads, who knew he was useless). He was a really good lad though, and just walked around the club all day saying, 'No game', as a comment on the poor quality of our banter. His coming to Oxford United had been a close call; he had chosen Oxford United over Swindon, the team he had actually been on the way to signing for, a couple of days earlier. Halfway there, he had had a change of heart, and in true Hutch fashion had decided to text their manager to say it would be a no, instead of doing the decent, but obviously more awkward, task of ringing. The stumbling block here lay in the fact that their manager happened to be Dennis Wise, and receiving a text from a player he was expecting to sign in an hour was never going to go down well. Hutch said he shat himself when the phone rang straight after he'd sent the text and Dennis was saying, 'A fucking text, you sent me a fucking text to say no? At least have the balls to make a phone call!' I asked Hutch what he had replied, and he said, 'Are you mad? I didn't answer; I just blanked the call and picked up the answer phone message.'

Hilarious – he looked like a thug, had tattoos all over and could kick a player off a park, but give him confrontation and he turned into the lion in the *Wizard of Oz*.

For obvious reasons (my bad mouthing Jim), I didn't start the campaign, but Jim was good about it. I walked into his office and apologised for what I had said at the end of the previous season. I had known he had been under enormous pressure, and should have taken this into account. I just said that I thought hammering the players all the time didn't work, and that I realised he had worked with better players in his career, but sometimes you have to work with what you've got. I then said that, if he wanted me to train with the kids (as punishment for my attitude the previous season), no problem, but that I would get another club sorted as quickly as possible. To his credit, he said that I could train with the first team and that there was no ill feeling.

I had my phone with me for most of that pre-season as Fiona was due to give birth at any moment, and every time it rang it was hilarious. We would be in the middle of a running or core session, and I would dash over to answer it and pretend (to make the lads laugh) it was either a manager or an agent.

'Hi Alex, I know you're after a hard-working midfielder but Manchester is a long way, and I'm not sure your game suits me', or, 'Listen, tell fucking Arsène

Wenger that unless he pulls his finger out and gives me an extra fifty grand, the deal's off.'

Joking aside, as close as I came to leaving that season, I didn't feel right about going anywhere else, so I decided to stay and try to put right what we had all done wrong the year before. Surprisingly, neither Man United nor Arsenal actually made contact.

Whatever change of heart had happened, or how it came about, I can't really remember, but I ended up in the team, and we started the season like a house on fire. We broke records for clean sheets, wins, goals scored – the lot. We took over grounds with our fans, and everyone was talking about us romping away with the league. After beating Cambridge 3–1 (Hargreaves scored from a Brevett cross), their manager Jimmy Quinn said that no one would beat us all season. He thought we would walk away with it. Sat in a quiet Cambridgeshire pub with a few of the lads after the game, we couldn't help but agree, such was the confidence in the camp, but come on, is it ever that easy?

It was during this season that Fiona and I had our third child. During the birth, Kettering General had the opportunity to win back points they'd lost ballsing up my rib X-ray back in the 05/06 season ... and they failed, dismally. The birth was smooth, and Fiona and the baby were fine, but I so nearly missed it. I wasn't playing away or training, in fact I had dropped Fiona off, but when we spoke to the midwife she said it would be 'a while yet', and that I could go and move the car from the emergency bay. I had parked there as we thought the baby was seriously on its way. As I strolled back in, expecting to see Fiona having a cup of tea, I heard shrieks coming from a room. They sounded like Fiona's (I had heard them many times before!). I ran down the corridor and into the room to find my wife in full delivery mode shouting, 'Where the hell have you been?!" and the midwife screaming, 'Push, push, it's coming!' I wanted to explain that the car park was like terminal four at Heathrow, and that the midwife had stitched me up, but I figured the excuse could wait. At the time, I just said, 'I'm here, don't worry ... and yes, push!'

Imagine if I had popped to get the paper and Mars Bar that I so nearly did!

Two incidents that happened off the pitch that season, when taken together, sort of reflected how it ended up panning out for us on the pitch. The first was a real treat. As we were doing so well in the league, Jim Rosenthal, an Oxford United fan and TV presenting royalty, sorted tickets for us to watch Joe Calzaghe fight. He was fighting Mikkel Kessler, a brute of a man, at the Manchester Evening News Arena; it would be a full house, and we would be front row with Phil Taylor, Lennox Lewis and whoever else was there to see Calzaghe at work. It turned out to be a brilliant fight, going all the way to the

death, and ending with victory for the relentless Calzaghe. The night out afterwards was truly epic – it involved too much drink, too many people and a gimp in a corner. It was great of Jim to have sorted it out for us, and it really felt like the season would be a constant high.

The second incident was much less glamorous, and definitely, looking back, much funnier, but all the same at the time it was a nightmare, reflecting the end part of our season. We (those of us doing the car school) had agreed to nip out for a quiet drink after a Friday night game at the Kassam to celebrate the birth of my third child, Harriet. I don't really like pre-arranged nights out anyway, and after what happened during the game that evening, I should have known it would be a long one. I can't remember who we were playing, but I do remember us winning, and that their midfielder was really getting on my nerves. I wouldn't say my tackle on him towards the end of the game was late, but it did come with a St Bernard and an SOS flare (really late, and obviously so!). He stopped annoying me (or, in fact, any of us) but I was in the changing room before the ref could get his whistle towards his mouth.

We all congregated in a bar in Northampton afterwards, and the usual suspects were 'on it' straightaway. Burg treated every night out as his last, and before long he had swan dived into a huge hawthorn bush, receiving marks ranging from a seven point nine to a ten, while Digga and Rob Duffy were having some banter with a taxi driver. Motty had also jumped in a taxi as it was way past his bedtime, and he would have had to break into another twenty to stay out any later, so he was off home. I quickly jumped into the passenger seat to say bye to Motty, and to tell the driver to keep an eye on his miles per gallon because Motty would be interested to know how the taxi was round town (well, I'd take any chance for a dig at his thrifty ways!). I then hopped back out to continue the evening with the rest of the lads.

After telling Digga and Duffy off (they sound like children's entertainers!) for pretending to be a train, and messing about with a taxi driver's bubble (the light they stick on the top of their cabs to advertise), we all walked over to the casino. I had had enough by now though, both of drinking and of the lads' antics, and had decided to head off home. Just as I was leaving, I saw the two taxi drivers from earlier and a policeman approaching. I didn't really think anything of it, as the lads hadn't caused any damage. I thought that rather than getting involved in an hour of pointless finger pointing I would leave and get a cab around the corner. I had a young baby at home and a wife who was expecting her husband back, so I just headed off.

You know sometimes when you get the feeling you are being followed? Well, this was one of those occasions. I had broken into a bit of a jog because it

was cold. I thought I could hear footsteps behind me, but I had consumed a few beers so I didn't think too much of it. But, incredibly, as I jogged through an alleyway and onto the main road where the taxi rank was, I was literally rugby-tackled to the floor. Within minutes, a squad car had pulled up and I was being arrested and dragged into it as if I had robbed a bank. I had parked my car near Northampton's ground that night, as that was where we would always meet in the morning, and as I was bundled around, I felt my key drop to the floor.

I explained to the officer at the time that it was my only key, but he was pure Juliet Bravo, straight down the middle, with only black and white as his viewpoints on any possible misdemeanour, so my key was left on the floor, and I was sat in the back of the car with my hands wedged behind my back. I knew most of the officers in Northampton through the football, and got on well with them, but this guy must have been new because he seriously thought he was on the set of *Police, Camera, Action*. Here I was in the back of a car, with him on the radio blurting out, 'Suspect detained. I have an ETA of four minutes, over.'

When I arrived at the station it was comical – who should be sat in the foyer waiting to be spoken to but Andy Burgess. It turns out that he had been accused by the taxi driver of trying to steal his 'signage'. I still had no idea why I had been arrested; I walked up to the counter and the guy said, 'Hello Chris, how's it going?'

I replied, 'Well, not very well by the looks of it. Why the hell am I in here?', to which he said, 'I'm not totally sure, mate, but you are going to be in for the night, and I think you will be needing a solicitor in the morning. You couldn't just empty your pockets, mate, could you? Oh and you might want to ring your missus at some point, as it's normal procedure for an officer to visit the house in these cases. Anyway, how's the old footy going? I thought you were great at the Cobblers.'

After being shown to our luxurious rooms and given our complimentary cup of tea, here we both were, in adjacent cells. I had been sent off in the game, I had lost my car key, I was spending the night in the cells on my wetting-the-baby's-head night, and my wife had threatened to drive into the station to get me out. Meanwhile, I had Burg next door acting like an excited school kid, singing his theme tune to life, 'Deal with it in the morning, deal with it in the morning', and also chanting, 'There's only one pickle face, one pickle faaaaaccee.'

This was a reference to Harriet, whom we had nicknamed 'Pickle'. When a lady came in to give me another cup of tea, I even asked her if I could move cells!

After a cold night in a piss-smelling box I was extremely angry, particularly as still no one had told me why I had been detained. At about ten o'clock, an

officer came in and led me into an interview room. I sat patiently until the door opened and a middle-aged lady came in, explaining that she would be my defence. She said, ‘Mr Hargreaves, if you accept the theft of the fifty pounds, you can leave today and we can then arrange a court date.’

I was aghast (a strong word I know, but it was accurate for my mood at the time) and replied, ‘Woah there Miss Marple, now hold on a minute! First, you haven’t even asked me what went on – I have no idea what you are talking about, and second, aren’t you being just the slightest bit presumptuous here? – what fifty quid?’

The tape was recording, and two other officers were present at the time. One officer spoke, ‘Chris, the taxi driver said you used threatening language against him, then leaned over and took fifty pounds out of his top pocket shouting, “If you say anything, I’ll get you”.’

Hell! I had turned into Nick Cotton overnight. At least I now knew why I had been arrested and detained, and it definitely explained the raised eyebrows at the detention desk when I emptied my pockets and the coincidental sum of fifty-two pounds and thirty-five pence was declared.

I absolutely lost it, I was so angry that this jumped-up little weasel, who was probably driving around with bald tyres and no insurance, had the cheek to say I had stolen some money, and I was fuming that they had taken his word on it. I said, ‘Listen, if that little fucking pipsqueak wants fifty quid that desperately, I’ll set up a direct debit for him each month. What firm does he work for? Because he is now in big fucking trouble? I am disgusted that he would lie to get money, and I’m even more disgusted that you lot have believed him, and then kept me locked up with a load of reprobates all night.’ (The reprobates comment *might* have been referring to Burg next door.)

One officer, who knew straightaway that there had been a major mistake, told me to calm down, and that we needed to talk a bit more, but I was on fire, ‘Calm down? I am fuming – you lot have made me lose my car key, you have ripped my suit (a Vivienne Westwood), I had to ring my wife to say there may be a squad car coming round at three in the morning, and all this while that little weasel is driving his pissing rust bucket around under your noses, charging people a fortune for taking them the long way home and then accusing people of theft. Why don’t you check my bank notes and the statement in my pocket, because I drew that extra fifty quid out about 2am, and why don’t you ring the other lads who were in the taxi. I want you to get that little shit in, and charge him with being a lying deceitful little shithead, and I hope you get to him first, because otherwise I will batter the lying little prick.’

I think I had got my point across, maybe too severely with the last statement,

especially as it was on record, but, after telling the solicitor she would no longer be needed – she actually apologised on the way out and said that she had seen some men broken when wrongly accused of worse offences – the officer said he would ring the other lads in the taxi, Motty being one of them, to get their side of events. He also said that he would then look into the taxi driver's behaviour. I went from being on the verge of being charged for robbery, to the far lesser offence of disturbing the peace, to a probable caution, to being invited back in by the officer who said that sometimes mistakes were made, and that in hindsight maybe I shouldn't have run away from the scene of a possible crime. I laughed and I said that there was no crime, I wasn't running, I was jogging, and that if I had had my trainers on, I would have been running, then they would have never caught up with me. Still – it was irrelevant, because I hadn't even been trying to get away.

I learned a few lessons from that experience: not to wet the baby's head was one, another was to get the bus rather than a taxi home at the end of the night, but the main two lessons were to always have a spare set of keys for a car – it was sat outside TGI Friday's for two weeks while the key was ordered from Renault (bloody French!) – and to always wear trainers on a night out.

The funny thing was, that a week or so later, when we were invited in to see the same officer, he said that when he phoned Motty for a witness statement, old, loyal, reliable Motty panicked like hell when he answered the phone, and when asked the question, 'What happened in the car, Mr Willmott?' he replied, 'Well officer, I can't be sure of anything; my vision was impaired a little bit. But I'm pretty sure Greavsie wouldn't have robbed the guy, and I definitely didn't.'

Jesus, where are your mates when you need them? Talk about looking after number one!

The season seemed to turn on its head after one result – a loss away to Gravesend & Northfleet (now called Ebbsfleet United), an awful team with an awful ground. We were top of the league by a few points, but Dagenham & Redbridge were also winning relentlessly, and as we stuttered, they just carried on winning. That loss at Gravesend was our first in about twenty-two games, but for Jim it wasn't good enough. He seemed to turn back into the Jim of the previous season, one who thought that all the lads were crap and that change was needed. Jim had signed a couple of new strikers, but they weren't the answer by a long shot. Before long, the ship had been steadied, but it was clear we would be in the play-offs. Missing out on automatic promotion was a real killer, the fans were gutted, we were gutted, and Jim was on the warpath.

I have mostly spent today Christmas shopping! Although the financial situation is still weak, I am ploughing on and buying gifts for the family. Cam and Issy wanted kayaks, but having had surf boards last year they are coming round to my argument (only made because I don't have the money for kayaks) that I don't really fancy diving in (from the kayak I would have to also buy for myself to monitor the children) to save either of my clan, while the temperature is sub-zero. I took them surfing just after Christmas last year, and after suffering from mild hypothermia, it took us all a week to thaw out. Having reminded them how unpleasant that was, the older two have 'settled' for a long board and digital camera respectively. My wife tells me she doesn't want anything, but were I to be so stupid as to actually buy her nothing, she would be doing a sponsored silence for a week, bless her.

As far as Harriet is concerned, she just wants anything to do with Peppa Pig, the sixth member of our family. We have all grown to love that little pig, seeing so much of her at 6.30am every day, so it's only right that Hattie gets a Peppa house, rucksack, mug, jigsaw and lamp. And what do I want? Well, I'm not playing football this Boxing Day (huge self-pity burst coming on again) so I don't have to give the normal, and wooden, footballer's answer of 'three points', so in true Hargreaves tradition, I will be happy with my annual Chocolate Orange and industrial size Toblerone. I am more than happy to receive just these items on Christmas morning, and I am even happier to see the children's excited faces when I open the 'surprise' packages – after all how could I possibly know what the long triangular-shaped box or the small wrapped cube could be?

Harriet will still be excited this year, but the older two are ten and twelve years old and may now be having some doubts about Santa's authenticity. That said, Cam did actually put his hands over his ears and shout, 'La la la la, I can't hear you.' when his mum told him that the podgy man with the beard didn't actually exist – we had thought it best for the poor, as it was his first day at secondary school.

Yesterday, Hattie took part in her pre-school nativity play titled Wriggly Nativity and what a show it was. Harriet had been singing the songs all week and after every one she would do a twirl in true Michael Jackson fashion, grab her crotch and shout, 'Chicca, chicca, owww.'

This was a very, very worrying sight. We persuaded her not to do that in front of the other parents, so it was a relief to see the show go smoothly, especially as during last year's production she left the stage and ran to her mother shouting, 'I don't like it, Mummy.'

I bet there have been plenty of performers who wish they could have done that over the years, and at times I could definitely have left the field of play

shouting the same thing!

It will be a sad day next year when Harriet does her school nativity play, as it will be the last such performance a Hargreaves does for a long while. Any grandchildren will be a while off; Cam currently claims he hates girls, and I won't be letting any boys near my little girls until they are both at least thirty-five. I would have more children if Fiona would let me, but I think we are stopping at three.

Those last few hundred words were written pre-Christmas; I was due to crack on and complete the book (or at least writing about the next club) before the New Year, but some sort of freakish computer virus took hold of my laptop, which saw my writing curtailed for a couple of weeks. It is now sorted, so whoever was hacking away in his bedroom trying to get hold of my bank records has failed. I am slightly disappointed about this though, as had he seen the state of our current account, he might well have slipped me a few hundred pounds to tide me over. Our financial worries, of course, didn't stop us (my wife) attacking Christmas as if it were her last. It was, as I think I have mentioned before, my first Christmas off in a long, long time, and so we (my wife) decided that we would be heading up north for the Yuletide period.

Already filled with a heavy heart knowing that I wouldn't be sliding around in mud on Boxing Day and New Year's Day, I did wince a bit at the prospect of a 'family' Christmas. You know what it's like: the kitchen reaches about three hundred degrees by eleven o'clock, such is the power needed to cook a thirty pound Turkey, the kids are feeling ill by 9.30am having destroyed their selection boxes, and the atmosphere between long-lost family members is of Antarctic quality proportions. Thankfully (only joking) we were trapped in Devon for an extra few days, as the big cold snap of 2010 brought with it two feet of snow and a blocked road. We seized this opportunity to go sledging with the children, and followed this up by eating, drinking, and being merry with Amanda and Paul next door. It's always an added bonus when next door have a wee dram of something to warm the cockles, no swinging involved, just good clean fun.

After digging a trench out of the village and wheel spinning for the first mile we eventually made it to the motorway. The car was, as usual, packed to bursting point; we had shoes and boots under our feet, the glove box was full of ham sandwiches, and the children were barely visible, but after a mammoth five and a half hours, three stops, four arguments and forty quid's worth of service station crap, we made it to Fiona's parents.

All my worries about a Christmas away from football subsided as Joan and Iain looked after us brilliantly, although I did dip in and out of a mild depression a few hundred times after seeing, hearing about or watching any football. It did

help that Fiona's parents live in a village called North Cotes where people are sometimes never seen again, and that they have a garden big enough to get lost in. Visiting my parents, Martin and Averil, and seeing a few old mates in Cleethorpes did evoke a few memories.

We went to my mum and dad's for Christmas dinner; my brother Mark and his son Harvey joined us, and we all ate until we felt very ill. My parents' hospitality knows no bounds, my dad would give you (if he liked you – he would also never speak to you again if you crossed him) his last fiver, and my mum would rustle you up a bacon bun in three minutes flat, after being woken in the middle of the night, such is her kindness and generosity. My dad has seen a few tough times with his business, but even in the dark days he would never give up or show weakness. Times were extremely tough when we had to move houses and business premises in the eighties, and I remember my dad walking back from his workshop every day, for what seemed like a few years, to rustle up an omelette for us boys at dinner time. He still had oil on his hands from mending bikes, but he never moaned – neither did we by the way, as telling Dad the omelettes were getting a bit monotonous after a few months would not have been the best idea in the world! My mum also worked full time and never moaned, even though she hated some of the jobs she did. We were pretty oblivious to all this; I was too busy chasing girls and kicking a ball about, and Mark was too busy being in a strop, but I know it must have been hard for them. Seeing them this Christmas, having struggled a bit with finances for my own family, just made me appreciate this all the more.

Our New Year's Eve was spent at Fiona's parents, and, as Iain is Scottish, we went full tilt and had haggis, bagpipes and plenty of tartan. All in all it was a great break, and although there were a couple of tense moments, it was nice to be with our folks for once. It gave me the opportunity to realise that Fiona and I are pretty damn lucky down here in Devon; we are still together, we have our children with us, and, within reason, we are free to do what we want. After seeing the problems faced by my brother, and Fiona's sister Becky regarding broken relationships – what with who has the kids when and where – I am relieved that we have what we have. I am also mightily relieved that I didn't run off with Sticky Vicky, although she would have come in handy for storing extra bits and bobs when packing the car.

With the play-offs fast approaching, I was rested for the last game of the season, against York. It can sometimes be good to play in the last game, but with two games in three days coming up, it probably wasn't wise. I could so easily have

missed all of these games though, not through injury – this time it was a bigger scare. Towards the end of the season we were heading to an away game on the team bus, nothing unusual there, and the journey was entirely as normal – normal being playing cards, abusing each other, and constantly eating. We sort of took turns to heat our food up in the microwave, which was in the middle of the coach down some steps, opposite the toilet. During a break from a marathon game of cards, I nipped down to check my food. Barry Quinn and Jordan Milson were also down there preparing to nuke their meals. We had a bit of a chat about something (probably Rob Duffy cheating at cards) when suddenly the middle door of the coach, and the one that I was leaning on, gave way. It flung open and I was clinging on to anything I could grasp to stop myself from hitting the white lines on the tarmac below, which were flying past at one hell of a rate. Miraculously, Quinny grabbed the front of my T-shirt, while I had just my fingertips on the outer edge of the door. I didn't even dare to move; it was like a scene from *Lethal Weapon*, until fortunately, Jordan and Quinny managed to pull me in.

After they pulled me in, the three of us had a hug, as if we all knew the possible gravity of the situation. I ran up the stairs and down to our lovable driver, Nobby, and said, 'Fuck me, Nobby, that door has just flung open and I nearly ate fucking cats' eyes back there!'

He replied, 'Yeah, I must get that door checked out, it's been a bit ropey recently.'

No shit, Sherlock! I walked back down the coach, huffing and puffing about my ordeal.

I had to laugh the next day, while I was talking to Alan Hodgkinson, our goalkeeping coach, football legend and official top bloke, because he let on what Jim's reaction to this had been. As news of what had happened filtered through to Jim, he chuckled and said to the coaching staff, 'Fucking hell, that's a blow. That could have been just what we needed to get old Greavsie out.'

It wasn't much better on the day either, I returned to my seat to tell the lads exactly what had happened. They sort of raised an eyebrow, then Rob Duffy said, 'It's your deal.'

What a bunch of wankers! Thanks again to Barry Quinn and Jordan Milson whose help definitely enabled this book to be written.

We were due to play Exeter City over two legs and, even though we were a bit hacked off about losing out on automatic promotion, and were still putting up with Jim consistently howling at us and telling us we were useless, we were excited about the play-offs.

The first leg went successfully, we played really well, and beat them 2–1

away, helped by a few thousand Oxford fans who made the journey down and cheered us on. The problem was that we should have won by a lot more than 2–1. Unfortunately, our centre-forward Chris Zebroski missed two gilt-edged chances late on, and during Jim's post-match TV interview it was almost as if he sowed the seed of defeat for the second leg. He said something along the lines of, 'Well, it's not over by any stretch. We missed a few big chances, and with our home form and how things are, you never know what will happen.'

It was a message that sort of summed up Jim for me. He was a great bloke and knew the game inside out, but he could never seem to turn a negative into a positive; there was always an undercurrent of dread. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't Jim who went on to the pitch, and he couldn't be blamed for our failures on it, but his body language (and actual language) was often that of complete fucking annoyance at everything. Darren Patterson tried his best to rally the troops, but Jim was a big character, and always had the last word. Towards the end of the season Jim had lost his main allies and assistants, in Andy Awford and Shaun North, and I think he took it very hard. It wasn't Darren's fault, but Jim was clearly pissed off that he no longer had 'his' men with him. Andy was a decent fella, as was Shaun North, whose path I would cross again very soon, but it was felt by the powers that be that they were surplus to requirements.

After that first leg we returned to the hotel, which was Nigel Mansell's Woodbury Park complex, in Devon. It was nice to relax before travelling back the next day to prepare for the second leg, but after a sleepless night in a hotel with no outside windows and very little airflow, and with only forty-eight hours to get ready for the next game, I was shattered. I still felt as if my legs were full of sand on the Sunday night, and I had a game the next day. As much as I tried ice baths, massage and tablets, I just felt crap. I managed to sort myself out for the Monday night and we did go for it, but an inspired Exeter City, playing really good football, were better than us on the night.

After taking a 3–1 lead, the second leg was eventually lost on penalties – our keeper Billy Turley missing the last, despite being by far the best penalty taker the day before. It was a bizarre end to an emotional two years at the club, and, as I entered the office to see Jim a few days later, I knew it was the end of my time at Oxford United. He said that I had been brilliant for him that season as a player, and as a leader, but that he couldn't forget what had gone on.

To be honest, I had read the script and understood – all I had wanted to do was to help get the club back in the league, I honestly hadn't cared about a contract or about the money, I just wanted to right a wrong that I felt part of, whether or not I ended up staying afterwards. I played football for people like Andrea, who made our food at the training ground and who loved the club, for

Jordan, our fitness trainer who had been brilliant for us all season, and for Lindsey and the ‘Brothers Grimm’, Neil and Paul. They deserved to see a bit of success for all their hard work, which is why I dug in and played fifty or so games. I wanted to earn success for them and my fellow players, not for any contract at the end. Don’t get me wrong, I wouldn’t have refused one, but I had undermined Jim to the players the season before, and I was wrong for doing that. My job was to play football, not to tell other people about who should have done what. My comments about Jim had emerged from my frustrations, at what could so easily have been avoided, boiling over. There had been a few highlights and a few goals to remember from the 06/07 season, and I really did enjoy it. The Oxford United lads were a brilliant bunch to work with, and the people in and around the club were spot on, but it just wasn’t to be in the end.

Anyway, I shook Jim’s hand and wished him all the best, apologised about saying what I had said the season before, and said that I had always tried my best for him, whatever had gone on between us, to which he replied, ‘I know you have, son.’

By the end of this season I had a slight complex about play-offs; this had been my third in three years, and my fourth all told. How much disappointment can one person take?

Well, now that the post-Christmas weather and gloom has relented a little, we are gradually getting back into the swing of things. The morning school run is still epic. I peel myself off the bed at about 7am to start on the pack-ups, and to get the children’s breakfast ready, and Fiona drifts in and out of consciousness for about twenty minutes, while cursing about having to get up and go to work. Harriet can be up at any time, and be in any bed at any time, so that is always an early test. We must actually put a lock on the bedroom door, because if little Hattie ever happens to walk in to our room late one night during after-hours ‘activities’, the poor girl will be scarred for life – don’t get me wrong we are not swinging from the chandeliers every night, but for a little girl, God only knows what the repercussions could be! An old mate of mine once told me that his son had walked in on him and his wife while he was in a certain position. The little boy asked why daddy was kissing mummy ‘there’, and quickly received a shocked and flustered reply of, ‘Oh, no, I’m just kissing Mummy better because she has a poorly ... um.’

He still has nightmares about it (the dad that is!).

Cam is up around 7am. He shovels his Coco Pops in, throws his pack-up in his bag, and is off on his bike for school at around 7.30. The children’s pack-ups

are all a little different – I know this is a football book, but I feel I have to share this with you as much in a plea for sympathy as anything, and also in case any of you reading can say, ‘It’s just like that in our house.’

Cameron, who is twelve, is eating adult-sized amounts of food, so his box contains about four cereal or chocolate bars of different varieties, a bag of crisps, two ham or cheese buns (or bap, cob or roll, whichever lingo you prefer) and an edible piece of fruit – to Cam, edible means an apple or banana only; any other fruit triggers his gag mechanism, which we blame on the organic chocolate puds we gave him as a baby. Isabella and Harriet have similar, although Issy doesn’t really like bread and Harriet asks for a cheese and ham bun, without the bread, and then asks for a separate bap/roll/cob. Finally to Fiona, who astounds me with the complexity of her food regime. Her pack-up, if she chooses to eat anything at all during the day, consists mainly of fresh air, but may sometimes have in it, in no particular order, some lettuce, some meat (if there is any left after the children’s survival packs have been done) and a ninety-nine point nine per cent fat-free yoghurt. Yummy!

My philosophy on food has always been the same, to eat pretty much what you want, in moderation, but to exercise a lot. Fiona’s mentality is a bit more simplistic: not to exercise and not to eat; well, at the moment it is anyway, because the amount we both consumed over Christmas, and, in fact, last Saturday night alone, would have frightened even the most hardened of foodies into dieting. We have also been having regular ‘cook offs’ with friends of ours, Jason and Sarah, and the standard has been getting higher and higher, to an extent where Jason and Sarah hosted a night in a Moroccan den complete with hookah pipes and a lamb tagine. We topped the evening off by dressing up as if we were on the set of the Arabian Nights, complete with belly dancing outfits and Moroccan hats. God knows what the neighbours thought when Fiona arrived dressed as a belly dancer, and I was made up like Omar Sharif – swingers who dress up, eh?

Recently though, with the financial climate as it is, a budget bag seemed a bit more appropriate – the whole meal had to be done for ten pounds. Incidentally, our menu was tortilla chips with melted cheese to start, followed by pea soup, followed by homemade burgers with chunky chips and relish, finished off with a chocolate torte. Regrettably though, the budget was blown down at the local pub where we had far too many pre-dinner drinks, and returned home to burn almost the entire first and second courses.

I have definitely eaten a lot more since I have stopped playing, and much to my wife’s annoyance I have actually lost weight – it must be the stress!

In the mornings, when the food is done and Cameron has shot off on his bike

to meet his mates, Fiona leaves for work, or I drop her off if I need the car (the BMWs went a while ago). I then rally the remaining troops and we head off for school. Harriet either goes in smoothly with no resistance, or, in her words, she ‘cries her eyes off’ and begs me to stay. I almost don’t want to correct mistakes in her speech because at the moment ‘basagne’, lunch ‘botch’, ‘basghetti bolognaise’, and ‘basgusting’ are just too cute. Add to that her constant shouts of ‘God almighty’, and ‘Come on, darling’, and I am always laughing too much to say anything. I had never heard anything like it when she was looking for her boots one morning. She must have overheard Fiona rushing around, because as we were sorting out stuff for the school run, we heard Harriet shout, ‘For God’s sake, where are my fucking boots?’

As much as we wanted to laugh, we had to tell her that it was wrong to say that. She was very upset, but it made us laugh even more when all she kept slowly repeating, while sobbing, was, ‘I just said fucking boots, Daddy.’

As is normal on the school drop-off, the moment I have gone and am out of sight Harriet recovers and goes off to play, but that initial part of the transaction always pulls at the old heartstrings. A few months ago I dropped her at school all ready for her school trip. She had her bag packed, all her outdoor gear on, her teddy bear ready, and was beaming away ready to go; she had been talking about it all week. Unfortunately, I walked through the door only for the teacher to say, ‘Oh dear, the trip is next week, Mr Hargreaves.’

Hattie fell to the floor as if she had been shot, and was inconsolable. I felt that sorry for her that I cancelled everything I had to do that day, and took her out of school and to the beach. Weak, I know. Before this I had obviously phoned Fiona and sworn at around fifteen bleeps per minute for telling me that it was the day of the trip.

Like everyone, we do have our little disagreements and most are caused over tiny mistakes like that one. I once asked her for the number of a family member I wanted to text, as I needed to have a delicate chat with that person about somebody else in the family. What happened was, oh yes, Fiona texted me the wrong person’s number, giving me the number of the poor sod I was going to talk about, and yes, he received the text meant for somebody else. Indefensible, yes, and did that family relationship dissolve? Yes.

Fiona and I have that sort of relationship where we can have an argument and it will be over in ten minutes if one of us (usually me) has relented, or has made the other one laugh. After losing it one morning because there were no Shreddies in the house (I know, no need to tell me), I returned to the house for an afternoon snooze (this was pre-children, of course) to find the entire contents of the bed filled with boxes of Shreddies. The Jack Daniels by the bed trick (JD last

thing at night, and first thing in the morning) has been done, as has the money on the bed routine (both being pure rock 'n' roll!), but never has there been a bed full of Shreddies before. Fiona is a real diamond though, and if it wasn't for her constant moaning and demands I don't know how I would have the strength to carry on. I joke, but the real truth is that without Fiona, God only knows what I would have ended up like. It's a cliché to say that she is 'one in a million', but she truly is.

I love having the children around, and although there are moments of monumental annoyance, nothing beats being out with the kids on a bike ride, or having a day at the beach. The ever so slight financial predicament I find myself in has stopped holidays to a certain extent, but with the weather now improving, and the beach being free, our summer days out will soon begin again.

On the subject of money, I am officially going into business. I have teamed up with two partners and I am buying a sports shop. It will be called 'Sports Republic', and I cannot wait. At the moment in the shop it is a bit like going on to the set of Are You Being Served?, but I am really excited about the whole revamp. It is something I want to do so that if I do go into management, I have a plan B. I want to try to keep my destiny in my own hands, instead of it being in the hands of a manager or a chairman.

I spent yesterday coaching the youth team at Exeter City, as Kwame Ampadu, their normal coach, was away with the reserves, and I absolutely loved it – so did the lads, thankfully – but to get a job on a full-time basis in football is still proving tough. I would say it is still a work in progress, and you never know, by the time this book is finished I may be in a post!

Last week really summed up the variety, the uncertainty and the efforts that I am going through to try to get myself back in the game. By that I'm not even referring to football, I mean back in the game of earning decent money and achieving something.

On Sunday, I visited a sports traders' fair and spoke to each and every one of the suppliers there. I am learning a hell of a lot about the industry, not least the fact that I will need to stock 'skorts' in the shop – a skort is a skirt and undershort combination used for netball and such-like. I gained this bit of info after doing a bit of market research with the Sidmouth Ladies Netball Team, although when I told my wife that I had been 'doing' the Sidmouth Netball team, she did raise an eyebrow.

On Monday morning, I cracked on with some writing for this very book. I have loved writing it but have found it hard to concentrate on when I am trying to focus my efforts on feeding the family. Monday afternoon was spent in Plymouth at the BBC. It's great to sit on the sofa with Natalie Cornah, the

presenter, and be able to talk about the woes and ways of the games without having to worry about my own performance the weekend before!

On Tuesday, I spent the whole day coaching, which was great. I really enjoy being in and around a football club; I even joined in with the under-18 and under-16 game at the end – I don't really like to talk about the fact that I was the top scorer, but if I have to I will – I took the lads again in the afternoon and then took the under-16 boys at the academy in the evening for the 6–9pm session. I ran home afterwards, and got back at 9.30pm. It's incredible to think that the normal Tuesday last season would have involved an hour and a half training session, equating to about a hundred pounds an hour – multiply that by about ten or fifteen for a top Premiership player. Yesterday, if I even get paid for filling in for Kwame with the youth team, may see me earn around eighty pounds. This equates to just under ten pounds an hour – not a bad sum in the real world, but, forgetting the TV work, for my best paid day of the week it gives you an idea of the pay difference between coaching and playing.

On Wednesday, in true Mrs Doubtfire spirit, I did the weekly (I mean daily, my dear, just in case you ever read this book and haven't killed me by this point) tidying, hoovering and cleaning. (I pull the curtains to, in case any of the neighbours spot me, and I fly round the house with a can of polish, a Henry hoover and a Robin Williams inflatable suit.) That evening I did a spot of personal training with a lovely lady in Exeter. On Thursday I had a long meeting about the shop, and coached the kids again at night, and on Friday I had an even longer meeting about the shop. Saturday started early; I took the under-16s to play Swansea (eleven pounds fifty to get INTO Wales). We got into the boneshaker of a minibus at 7.15am and arrived back at 4pm, having lost, and been frozen nearly to death for a few hours. During the last week I have also spoken to two chairmen about vacant manager's jobs, so as you can tell, a bit of a varied week, but as it stands I cannot wait to open the sports shop.

2007/08

You don't normally receive job offers when you are off camping, but, fortunately for me, I experienced a break from the norm during a camping trip to Devon. Some friends of ours had asked us to go camping with them; my initial reaction was no, and my wife's initial reaction was never. However, a lot of persuasion resulted in a classic Hargreaves of Toad Hall trip to the camping shop – one where I go and buy the entire contents of the shop, do the activity once, then never use any of it again. (No wonder my finances are in trouble.) We were soon packed up and driving down to the southwest. The camping trip was incredible – we had a one-year-old baby with us, the weather was torrential with brief hints of a force ten gale, we had no heating, and the toilet was a choice of a five minute walk, or a pee in a bucket. It was just fun, fun, fun.

I phoned every single local hotel and B&B, but they were all booked up. I could easily have left everything where it was and driven off to a nice room somewhere, but, with none available, we dug in and camped out. We did manage to get to the beach a few times, but when you have to tie your tent strings to the alloys of your car to stop the tent blowing off a cliff, and when your wife is convinced there is a rabid badger roaming around the tent late at night, you know it's going to be a tough week. Finally the torment ended; after saying our goodbyes to Nina, Tony and their children, and whacking the heating in the car to full pelt, we limped out of the campsite.

After around twenty miles of driving, my phone picked up a signal again and the texts and answer phone messages started bleeping away. After reading texts from friends saying 'Are you still alive?' and listening to the local coastguards' message asking if we needed help, as they had seen a badger rummaging through a tent, I picked up a message from Paul Buckle. He had recently taken over as manager of Torquay United and wanted me to pop down for a chat. A quick family conference and we decided that a walk and an ice cream on Torquay seafront might be the perfect antidote to six days spent under canvas surviving off Kendal mint cake.

I arrived at Plainmoor and was directed by a lovely young girl (I told you I would get you in, Kerry my darling!) to the manager's office. As I was walking up the steps of the grandstand, a bloke stopped me and asked me if I could help

him lump a big old TV he had dragged out of an office down to the skip at the bottom of the stand. Of course, I said yes, and with an already weary glass back, after sleeping on a flat airbed for a week, I proceeded to lift this late eighties' beast down the steps. As I was doing so I saw Buckle running down the stand shouting, 'Jesus, what the fuck are you doing? I'm trying to sign that lad; I want him to help us get promotion.'

In case you were wondering, he was talking about me – Torquay United had been relegated the season before and were really going for it, trying to get out of that league at the first attempt. This was no mean feat considering how former league clubs had fared in a notoriously tough division.

We laughed about that incident, and as soon as I chatted to Bucks on that first day, I had a great feeling about him, and about the club. My family and I returned to Northampton, and, as usual, we had a lot of thinking to do. I wanted to carry on playing, but I also wanted to really push on with the soccer school I had started, and Fiona had just started a very good job as head NVQ assessor at the local college, which paid well. After a lot of chatting though, we decided that we would go for it; Fiona wanted to have more of a stress-free life and to be able to spend more time with the children, and after speaking to Bucks a bit more I was really up for a new challenge. The children were excited and apprehensive about it at the same time – we had made a great life for ourselves in Northampton, and they had good friends at a good school. Fiona and I also had a great circle of friends and a really comfortable life, but the lure of Devon and a change of life was the clincher – telling the children they would be getting surfboards won their approval. It just so happened that the Hargreaves family would be returning to Devon with friends of ours, Carl and Ange, only a couple of weeks after I had first seen Bucks. I tied this trip in with seeing him again, and signed on the dotted line, after the inevitable last minute haggling and negotiation.

After saying my goodbyes to Northampton, I headed down to the English Riviera. I say I, as Fiona had to see her work commitments through, and I had to find us a house and the children schools in Devon. This was no mean feat, and would take a bit of time. In the meantime, the first thing I had to do was meet the lads, and gear up for a new season ahead.

I met up with a few old mates straightaway; the links to my past seemed never ending. Lee Mansell had signed for Torquay United after Oxford United (I didn't mention to him *much* the fact that Torquay United was the second team he had taken down in two seasons!). Lee Philips had been at Plymouth Argyle at the same time as me, and was a good lad. Tim Sills had signed from Hereford United, and Kevin Nicholson, who was at Northampton Town with me, had also

signed. Kenny Veysey was employed as the club's goal-keeping coach/kit man/odd job man (his words); we had been at Plymouth Argyle together and he was a real diamond.

'Lucky Eddie', as Kenny would call himself, had opened up a golf shop just before I had left Plymouth Argyle, and, after meeting up again, I asked him how it was going. He said it had gone under, and that he had lost all his money. I asked him what had happened, to which he replied, 'Well, the thing is Greavsie, no fucker played golf!' Say no more. Along with Kenny on the staff, we had Damien Davey, who had been signed up as the club's new physiotherapist. Damien was a huggable demon-drinker, and a joke-telling, story-weaving, bed-wetting (sorry mate, I'm sure you've grown out of it now), foot-shuffling injury-solver of the highest order. Shaun North, the new assistant manager, formed yet another link to my past. I was delighted that Bucks had given Shaun the job; he was a good bloke who loved the game and would be great for the club. He was also a mental England fan with a bulldog tattooed on his calf, but let's not get bogged down with minor details.

The club had also signed Chris Todd, a lionheart of a centre-half from local rivals Exeter City, and goalkeeper Martin 'Oasis' Rice, also from Exeter City. Martin was the keeper who had kept them in the tie against Oxford United a couple of seasons ago. As well as this motley crew, the club still had three old stalwarts on their books – Stevie Woods, a good ball-playing centre-half, Matt Hockley, a bite-your-legs-and-tackle-your-granny midfielder, and club legend, Kevin Hill, who had played hundreds of games for the club and who bounced up and down at around forty bounces per minute. These lads added to what was now a decent-looking squad.

For the first couple of weeks I stayed in a hotel along with Kevin Nicholson and Chris Robertson, another new signing. Kev was looking to get out as soon as he could, as he had been put in the hotel dungeon, and although I was up on the top floor (in a small suite overlooking the bay), the hotel was a bit tired, to say the least. Chris Robertson, one of the tightest men I have ever met – he was a quarter Scottish and a full ginger – decided to stay for the full three months allowed and, although he was a top lad, we were happy to leave him with his money box in room 101.

I got on with Kev straightaway; we had been at Northampton Town together, but Kev swears I never talked to him. He claims I just used to walk around all day talking about Vivienne Westwood clothes and fast cars, and lifting weights. For the record, I did talk to you Kev, but you were far too busy drowning your sorrows in Jan's bosom – Jan ran the club shop and was our own special football agony aunt – to hear anything I was saying. Perhaps you also couldn't hear me

because you weren't in the team!

Enough banter, and back to the tale. After searching for a few places to stay it turned out that Chris Todd's house was vacant; he was selling it, but it would be five or six weeks before it all went through, so we agreed to give him forty pounds a week each to stay in it till it sold.

It was a great laugh in the house with Kev. He was so easy to wind up, having a mass of OCD issues himself. What with him not liking alcohol and hating chocolate (he wouldn't allow himself to enjoy it, in case he liked it too much), being obsessed with cleanliness, loathing swearing, frowning upon any nakedness (but particularly me being naked while doing press-ups), and despising fast driving, it was always going to be fun. He couldn't bear any lights being left on, any doors being left open, dangly jewellery (odd I know), or late nights, and he had to shower at least three times a day, and definitely last thing at night. I was, therefore, his perfect nightmare for the entire time we stayed together.

We both needed to find houses for our families, so after thrashing him at head tennis after training we would head off to house-hunt most afternoons. It was like taking your ninety-five-year-old gran for a drive. I saw nothing wrong with map reading, eating a tuna baguette and hurling abuse at my fellow drivers while driving along, whereas Old Mrs Nicholson sat next to me would be having a heart attack and grabbing onto the dashboard every two minutes saying, 'Too tight, too tight, going to die.'

It was even better in the house; we would do our shopping together like an old married couple, with Kev leaning over my shoulder every time I picked something up saying, 'No, no, we don't need that, it's the enemy.'

One afternoon Kev even suggested we go for an afternoon coffee. I replied jokingly, saying, 'Kev, I know we get on, but at this point I'm not prepared to take the relationship any further; I'm a northern bloke and I don't do afternoon coffee.'

Five minutes later we were sat down in a lovely little coffee shop having a cappuccino, and I have to say I thoroughly enjoyed it. For, one, I didn't normally ever drink coffee, two, I rarely had time, with three children, to sit down, and, three, I would only ever go for a drink with a bloke to the pub! With Kev being teetotal, he didn't like pubs and clubs, and so going for a coffee was a good shout. To be honest, I am now obsessed with the stuff.

Kev's own obsession was with showering, and the degree to which he took it was incredible. All the lads would have a shower after a night game, Kev included, and yet no sooner had we driven our short twenty minute trip home, than old water boy Nicholson would have shot upstairs with his Matey (shower

gel, not man friend) to shower again. He physically couldn't get into a bed without having just showered. I soon learnt that he wouldn't even let his girlfriend, the lovely Jenny, get into the bed unless she had just showered. It used to drive Jenny mad – this she told me when we had met one evening at the house. Incidentally, Kev was in the shower that time as well. Kev swears that the first time I met Jenny I came in semi-naked having done around three thousand press-ups. I hadn't; it was three hundred, and I had a towel on.

When the doorbell rang that fateful evening the two young lovers hugged and stared longingly into each other's eyes. It's a shame Kev was there really! We all had a good chat and laughed about my and Kev's living habits, and when Kev went upstairs for his normal hourly rinse, Jenny and I hatched a plan. I managed to turn off the cold-water tap under the sink in the kitchen so when Kev turned on the shower it would be running at around ninety-five degrees. He shouted down straightaway, panicking, 'The shower is red hot. I can't get in it, Greavsie! Greavesie, is the water turned on? Can you check it?'

I shouted back up, 'Yes, mate, it's all OK down here.'

As we held the laughter in, Jenny ran up saying, 'Oh dear, you might just have to have a quick duck under it darling, or leave it for tonight.'

Kev was beside himself though. 'Leave it? Are you crazy? I can't do that!'

After about ten minutes of screams and shouts of pain, we witnessed Kev trudging in looking as if he had spent a week on a sunbed. He was a sore shade of red. The sight that greeted Kev was even worse though – Jenny had brought some strawberries and chocolate sauce with her, and while Kev was screaming away, we had got to work on the forbidden food. It was Kev's worst nightmare – me and his lovely girlfriend Jenny in close cahoots, chocolate sauce and no shower facility. It was hilarious, as over the course of the next few days Jenny or I would quickly switch the cold-water tap back on, run up for a shower ourselves and then shout back down to Kev, 'You're not going to believe it, it's working now.'

He would shoot up and take his gear off, ready and waiting for his turn, and when eventually he got in, I would then run back down and turn the cold-water tap off. He would have a few seconds of normal water and then he would be out, shouting down, 'No, no, it's gone again! I'm burning.'

I swear I saw him close to tears one night. He ran a scalding hot bath only to have to wait forty-five minutes for it to cool down while doing doggies with a pan of cold water. He came downstairs a broken man, looking like an overheated Phil Mitchell, saying, 'And now I have missed the football.'

I couldn't carry it on much longer; it was too cruel, and so after a week I eventually turned the cold water back on without him even having a hint of

suspicion. I told him over a coffee about a week later, and, although he saw the funny side of it, he was deeply offended by Jenny's involvement – hell, you should have seen her go with the strawberries and chocolate sauce when you were upstairs, mate!

We both learnt quite a lot from those few weeks of living together. I learnt that being a nice person, turning lights off, closing doors, driving sensibly, not using foul and abusive language, and being fully clothed most of the time, was actually possible. And you will be pleased to know that Kev can now sometimes be seen late at night gorging on chocolate, swearing like a trooper at the TV, and drinking red wine, all this while completely naked with the house lit up like a Christmas tree. As you can see we both gained tremendously from the experience.

The season started incredibly well; we were winning plenty of games and things were great around the club. Because Torquay was, and is, so far away from most players' and their wives' or girlfriends' families, the friendships formed were pretty strong – they had to be a bit deeper than the normal football 'ships-in-the-night' friendships. We all got on very well and I'm sure that helped us on and off the pitch. The club provided a family room on a match day where the children could watch DVDs and play (and the mums could drink wine!), and on the field the players had an incredibly strong team spirit.

Torquay United is also almost unique in that you can run from the ground down to the sea to have a swim. Most clubs have ice baths, whereas we could swim in beautiful waters down at Babbacombe Bay for free. It also gave us the chance to see the effects the cold water had on poor old Kev. To be fair to him he did offer to show us, and the sight that we saw convinced us he'd never be able to father children. (Sorry Kev, it's just too easy!)

Let me just get back to what I was talking about – I had to leave the laptop, and this, in a rush three days ago, and I haven't returned to it since; my head has been buried in paperwork for sports shop suppliers, as well as wholesalers, designers, solicitors, accountants, and, not forgetting, the bank!

We eventually left Toddy's, mainly because there was nothing left in the house. Sky TV was the first thing to go, heating was the second, and the actual TV was the third thing removed. We declined Toddy's kind offer of a couple more weeks in a cold room staring at the wall, so while he walked out with the sofa, Kev and

I moved out ourselves. Fiona and the children were now ready to come down, and, by this time, I had sorted my family a nice apartment to stay at in Topsham, a lovely little port outside Exeter. I had also met the head teacher of a local school, Karen Hadley, who had been really helpful in getting the children places. The fact that she supported Torquay United didn't do me any harm at all.

Playing week in, week out at my ripe old age was enjoyable but painful, it required a lot of TLC, and, to be honest, it also requires a fair amount of will power to grind out a season in the Conference. With my back still occasionally playing up, through Stevie Woods, a fellow teammate who was also in need of the odd MOT, I met a brilliant chiropractor by the name of Richard Carr-Hyde – I have mentioned him earlier, in the context of AC Milan.

In the two and a half years I was at the club I saw Richard nearly seventy times. These visits would not be funded by the club, but I saw it as well worth the money. It meant I was able to play football and earn money, and the mission I had given myself, to see Torquay United promoted, was still in sight. It is the same at any level and at any club. More often than not, the club physio doesn't really want you seeing anyone outside the club. For one it makes him look bad (when really it shouldn't, if these people are specialists in their chosen fields) and, second, the physio finds it very hard to persuade the club to fork out for any 'outside' treatment. Some players have the attitude of 'well, fuck it, it's up to the club to get me fit', and that is fair enough if they are willing to rot in the treatment room for weeks, if not months on end. However, most players want to play and to get fit as quickly as possible. For me, Richard was instrumental in that.

He wasn't your conventional back cruncher, as his CV indicated, and with his involvement at AC Milan and their brilliant rehabilitation and fitness record, the depth of knowledge he had was excellent. He was also a man who understood football's ups and downs – of which he reminded me every time I saw him; it must be hard being a Bristol City fan. I still need to see a cheque come through the post from Richard though, namely for all the commission I should have had for recommending him to friends, players and family alike, never mind the fact that I persuaded him to learn Italian and to move out to Italy to work in Milan full time. Richard, if you are reading this while sat by Lake Como drinking your cappuccino and soaking up the atmosphere ... I hope you fall in!

Everything is a hundred miles an hour in the Conference, and time on the ball is at a premium. It may sound unbelievable, but playing against a Premiership or Championship club sometimes feels like a training session, where you can spend time on the ball and actually enjoy playing. The crucial

difference in the higher leagues, from the Conference, is in the finishing, and with the speed of the players when attacking; it is also in the fact that any mistakes made are pretty much always punished. The Conference is very different, for most of the time anyway. Unless it was a game between some of the top teams who really liked to play football, such as Exeter City, Aldershot Town or Burton Albion, the ball would spend a lot of time in the air.

Torquay United were also quite direct in that first season, but we could play when called for, and for us, most of the 07/08 season was spent in first or second spot. Aldershot Town were pushing us all the way, and a home game against them was the decider as far as the title was concerned. The game was televised – the introduction of Setanta Sports GB was brilliant for the Conference, and for a club like Torquay United. In the two years that Setanta covered the Conference, we were the featured game around twenty times – incredible when you consider that many Championship clubs didn't get half as much coverage as that. I got on really well with the Setanta gang and commentated on a few games myself. It's a shame that part of Setanta went into administration, especially considering I had just been offered a job as a presenter!

We played really well against Aldershot Town that night; it was actually an excellent good game of football. Unfortunately for us our keeper, newly recruited on loan from Reading, had a 'bit of a nightmare', to say the least. After drawing level early in the second half, and then really pushing for the victory, we ended up losing the game. They scored the winner in the last minute of normal time. I was a bit harsh after the game; I went mad at the keeper, calling him 'chocolate wrists' and telling him my twelve-year-old son could have saved the last minute strike that he let in. Although that was very true, I should have been a bit more understanding; he obviously hadn't meant to make a mistake, and me telling him wouldn't change that fact, but I was just so tired and pissed off that I just let rip. I then had a go at Mark Ellis, our young centre-back, for being too weak, and not talking more. Mark, or Dingle, as we affectionately called him, was a really good lad, but I wanted him to know that these opportunities didn't come up very often in football, and that he had to realise how fucking important it was. Dingle used to get some hellish grief from the lads, mainly for looking like Sam Dingle from *Emmerdale*, but also because he was very quiet and would just sit at the front of the coach playing *Football Manager* for the entire journey, and very occasionally talking to our coach driver, also called Dave, and also a proper space cadet.

I came down for dinner late one evening at the hotel, and could see straightaway that the lads had stitched me up. They had obviously left Dingle and the driver together, with one seat remaining at their table, and no seats

anywhere else. With the lads chuckling away, after my saying that the lads were wankers, and that I was more than happy to spend dinner with them (this while the rest of the lads laughed away even more), I sat down with Mark and Dave the driver. We sat there in near silence, broken only by my saying the odd thing and getting no response. When I asked Mark if he wanted any water, he didn't really respond, but Dave the driver piped up with, 'There's plenty out there', while pointing at the sea outside and laughing. We were in a hotel by the sea as we were playing Weymouth or Eastbourne at the time. I just looked at Dave in despair, while Dingle responded with, 'Oh well, better see how my team are doing.'

Fucking hell, he had only been down to dinner for five minutes, and was having withdrawal symptoms from his laptop. Dave was sat there in bits, laughing at his own joke, and when Dingle tried joining in with, 'The jug's empty. I'll just nip over the road and fill it up.' – which made Dave the driver nearly piss himself – I had to abandon ship. I got up and said, 'I can't do it, I've tried, lads.'

While the rest of the lads were laughing away, I got up and walked over to an empty table at the other end of the restaurant.

Joking aside, Dingle has been a really good player at Torquay United, and as much as he still doesn't talk, I sort of took him under my wing a bit, partly because of the stick he got, and partly because he was a decent young player.

The young lads probably got bored with me telling them to spend as long as they could on the training ground and not in the pub, but with the experiences I have had, I knew I was right. It always amazed me how quickly the lads wanted to get away after training; I had three kids and a wife, but I would still be last off the training field or out of the gym, because I knew it would help me. (OK, and I was a little obsessed.) The message did get through in the end though and, to be honest, the lads were brilliant. I hope that with me being so full on, it did help them. It was a breath of fresh air to be with such a good group of lads who both wanted to do well and were also a great laugh. I used to love playing head tennis after training, with Stevie Woods, Kev and Lee Mansell, or any other pretenders to the head tennis throne (Stevie and I were never dethroned by the way!), or hammering away in the gym with the lads. With Damien's help in the gym, with boxing equipment, weights, and with his constant and hardcore banter, we had a really good place to work. In what was a pretty isolated training ground – we were right in the middle of Newton Abbot Racecourse, with a wind-chill factor of minus ten and a duck shit quota of almighty proportions – the feel of the club was spot on. I used to bring my boy Cam in to have a kick about with Paul Buckle's lad, Johnnie, and it just felt right, how a club should be.

The type of crazy gang spirit that saw Wimbledon to incredible success cannot be underestimated, and we had something similar. Now, we were never going to win the FA Cup, and as much as I have gripped a few balls on a football pitch (not for enjoyment before you say it, more as a defensive tactic at corners), I was no Vinny Jones, but we did make the most of our team spirit. We got up to all sorts in that first season. Tim Sills arrived for training one morning with a horrendous pair of trainers on show, and I just couldn't resist the temptation. When all the lads had left for training, I hung back, and, armed with some paper and a box of matches, I set to work on the offending trainers. I managed to light those bad boys, but it was as if I was burning three hundred tyres, and within minutes it looked like Hiawatha was at work. Sillsy soon smelt a rat (and his burning trainers) and ran over, and while we were all in pieces laughing, Tim was desperately trying to dampen the flames with his energy drink. The tread on those things was thicker than on some tractor tyres, and, incredibly, despite burning for around five minutes they survived. Not only did they survive, but Tim wore them for the rest of the season, burn marks and all!

As well as hanging any of the lads clothing that we deemed unacceptable (usually Kev's or 'Lamb' Mansell's) from the ceiling, we also wore some of the more gruesome clothing on show underneath our training tops. We managed to get through an hour and a half session one morning while swapping over one of Toddy's many vile jumpers, each taking a turn to put it on. By the end of the morning it was soaking, and had stretched so much that Toddy could have worn it as a dress. He was gutted when we eventually revealed it, but we did him a favour really. It's just a shame we couldn't get hold of his purple velour tracksuit, or one of his diamond-encrusted 'designer' belts. All the old tricks that go on up and down the country in changing rooms are just part and parcel of football banter, and Torquay United was no different. You just had to keep on your toes. If you had a pair of dodgy trainers on, you were well advised to put them in your bag, because if you didn't, nine times out of ten you would return to find the tongues cut off or the laces gone. The same applied with socks, which could be cut up or filled with shower gel.

Showering was also a risky process. If you were ever having a serious discussion about football while showering, there was always a high chance your leg was being pissed on by the lad asking the 'caring' questions. Add this to the loosened salt and pepper pots at pre-match meals, and who needs enemies, hey? The physio wasn't safe either, so for us Damien was a great target. The car park at the racecourse was being used as the start for the Devon rally one morning, with lots of car enthusiasts revving around and admiring each other's cars. While Damien was treating one of the players, I took his keys and drove his car right

into the middle of the waiting cars. With Kenny Veysey as my right hand man, we got hold of some blank paper, and carefully put the number 69 on both sides of the car and on the back, and with some of Damien's white treatment tape we made up 'Davey' signs to stick on the car. We then left the keys in the ignition and waited. Kenny was nearly on the floor and I was having stomach cramps, we were laughing that much. The stewards then began walking around, checking out the cars, but when they got to a ten-year-old silver battleship of a Merc, with Davey 69 plastered all over it, they didn't know what to make of it.

The boys had all gathered around and we got one of the lads to go and tell Damien that someone was injured outside. It was truly hilarious when he came rushing out, to see his car missing, and then spotted it in the middle of a grid. The best bit was that when Damien eventually got his head round the situation, he ran back into the treatment room, to reappear five minutes later in an old all-in-one sub's suit, and a homemade racing balaclava – made out of Tubeyigrip pulled over his head, with the eyes, nose and mouth cut out. He got into his car, revved the engine and shouted to the stewards, 'When does it start? Come on, I'm ready, let me go!'

At this point, the stewards ordered him to move his car. We quickly presented Damien with a mock award, in the form of a silver tray, for best car in show, then ran off to train. It was a brilliant time to be at the club, and, I have to say, a brilliant stage of my career.

Here we all were, playing at Torquay United for whatever reason, and we were giving it a right good go. Towards the end of the season we signed Stevie Adams, a great lad who had been a youngster at Plymouth Argyle when I was there, and who fitted in straightaway. The only problem for Stevie was that after being nicknamed 'the ghost' at Plymouth Argyle, due to his translucent skin and skulking demeanour, we nicknamed him 'the ghoul' at Torquay United (without even knowing his previous nickname). From a ghost to a ghoul in the space of a couple of days, how's your luck. He was also on the receiving end of one of Bucks's rants (all managers do them). As usual, Stevie was totally innocent but as Bucks was shouting away, the morning after a home defeat, Stevie tried to butt in with something along the lines of 'Yeah gaffer, but that's not your fault. We have got to do better.'

Poor old Stevie only got to 'but', when Bucks stopped him in his tracks and shouted, 'Shut up Stevie, just shut up and do your fucking job would you? You're so fucking negative.'

The lads couldn't help but chuckle away. It was even funnier knowing what a good lad he was, and that he was actually trying to stick up for the manager a bit. That's what you get for arse licking – we didn't mention that much

afterwards either. Suffice to say he didn't bother again.

We had good runs in both the FA Cup and the FA Trophy, the latter a competition that at first we dismissed, but, as more games were won and with Wembley in our sights, we then took a little more seriously. The season was coming to an end, and we were still in with an outside chance of automatic promotion, but the reality was probably going to be more play-offs, and for me, the fourth I would be involved with in the last five seasons. Football has a funny way of throwing up the inevitable, and with our local rivals Exeter City finishing the season really strongly – this after trailing us by nearly twenty points at one time – our remaining results meant that we would have to meet each other in the play-offs. It was an incredible situation for the team, as not only were we to play Exeter City over two legs, but we had also reached the final of the FA Trophy. This meant that we would be playing at Wembley once, if not twice, in the space of a few weeks. We had beaten York City over two legs in the semi-final of the cup, which was a great achievement for Torquay United, and had been a great chance for the players and fans to go to the national stadium – we had also flown to York, which saved us a ten-hour journey.

Before the last game of that season I also had the honour of being presented with the fans' Player of the Year award, as well as the players' Player of the Year award. It capped a pretty good season for me on a personal level, but it would go on to be a bittersweet few weeks. It had been a tough but enjoyable season, and a lot of people had put a lot of work into helping make it successful – from Pete Morgan and his team of masseurs, including Gareth Law, a good local footballer who could so easily have made it as a pro (your words Gareth – get that cheque in the post for the mention), to the staff in the offices, who had kept faith, even after the relegation. Even Andy Ryan, the club doctor, went through the mill for the team, what with the players' personal problems, and the amount of drugs it took to keep us all going. He was also tasked with saving my hair, when a nasty gash to the head during a game had meant a quick trip into the treatment room for a few stitches. As the game was going on, and the management were telling him to hurry up, he said to me, 'Chris, I'm going to have to shave off part of your hair to get these stitches in.'

I replied, 'No, you're bloody well not Andy! Stitch the lot together; I'm not going out there looking like one of the Bee Gees.'

We laughed, he did exactly what I'd asked, and, although I looked as if I had dreadlocks in for a week, the hair had survived.

The first leg of the play-offs went well; it was a great advert for the game at that level, with over ten thousand fans packing into Exeter City's St James Park. We won the first game 2–1 and felt pretty good about the second leg. Bucks had

wanted to be solid in the first leg, which was the right move, but, with hindsight, we were too defensive in the second leg, and it ended up costing us. I still thought we had the game in the bag in the second leg, as we had extended our lead with a goal from Kevin Hill and were comfortable. My old mate Steve Basham, who had signed for Exeter City after Oxford United, and who was sat in the stands that day, said to his fellow teammates that Exeter City had run out of ideas. Even Paul Tisdale, the Exeter City manager, had apparently nearly given up hope, but a couple of substitutions by the away team, and a bit of sloppy defending by us, saw us concede a poor goal. Our keeper, Paul Raynor, then gave away a dubious penalty which was dispatched, and we were well and truly on the rails. Bucks took our then captain Stevie Woods off, and we changed our shape, but the damage was done; trying to break forward to get a winner we were caught out, and they scored a third goal, and settled it with a fourth in the final minute. For the second successive year I had been fifteen minutes from a play-off final, only to be mugged in the last few minutes. I was in a daze on that pitch as I watched the two thousand or so Exeter City fans celebrating.

I knew some of the Exeter City lads well, and they came up to shake my hand, themselves in disbelief at having turned the tie on its head. Football can be a cruel game, and meeting my family after the match, with the children's eyes very blurry, was tough. I was big enough and ugly enough to handle the shit that would hit the fan, but for my wife and children, especially Cam who, ironically, was and still is at Exeter City's academy, it was hard to take.

If there was a funny moment in a day of such disappointment, it came as I was walking off the pitch. One of the local radio stations had situated a presenter by the side of the pitch ready for interviews, and, as I walked off the field of play, disconsolate, the woman concerned asked me one of her normal crap questions – she would often come to the training ground and start the interview with, 'Is there anything you would like to say?'

'Yes love, I am worried by nuclear weapons testing in Iran, and the rising price of a barrel of oil, oh and your questions are shit.'

She pushed the mike in my face, minutes after this bitter loss, while smiling, and said, 'How do you feel about that then?'

Jesus Christ, talk about employing someone with no idea whatsoever about sport – what did she expect me to say?

'I feel magnificent, get the champagne out, I can't believe how much I feel like partying, I cannot wait to see the kids' faces, and our fans must be delighted.'

I actually replied with, 'Oh yes, I feel great, now get that ferret out of my face!'

I saw Steve Basham after the game and he was at a loss for words as well; he was obviously delighted that he was now off to Wembley, but he said he felt terrible that this had now happened to me two years in a row.

Only thirty-six hours after that devastating defeat, we were back at it, holed up in a hotel for four days before playing Ebbsfleet United in the FA Trophy final at Wembley.

Not only were we still gutted about the loss in the play-offs, we were now stuck in a hotel away from home dwelling on it. It was worse for me as I was sharing with Lee Philips. Lee is a great lad, but is also the biggest worrier out there. I had to endure three days of him saying to me, ‘Greavsie, surely I’ll play in the final. I have to play, what do you think, I should play shouldn’t I?’

I think you should leave me alone, as I want to be at home with my family, preparing as normal in a relaxed way, not being questioned by a nutter of a teammate in a hotel with no air conditioning, and a squad of pissed off footballers. Again, with the benefit of hindsight, we should just have travelled up the night before, and in the first tense chat I had ever had with Bucks I did stress that we were going too early, but he was adamant that we should go up and train for a few days beforehand.

Ebbsfleet had done some sort of club shares sale in the previous couple of weeks, so that each person part-owned the club, and it swelled the attendance on the day to just under fifty thousand, which was a great sight. Even though the play-off defeat was fresh in our minds, it was nice to walk out at Wembley. The weather was incredibly hot though, the hottest so far recorded at Wembley, and the pitch was all over the shop. With all the rumours and hearsay about the state of the pitch, it was still a genuine surprise to find out that it was actually giving way underfoot; the lads were changing their boots quicker than Steve McLaren had thrown his brolly away. We played OK that day, but nowhere near our best, and unfortunately at one point Chris Todd misjudged the pace of the ball, and, as he tried to let the ball run out for a goal kick, their striker nicked it off him, crossing the ball in for an Ebbsfleet player to score what turned out to be the winning goal. ‘Could’ve, should’ve, would’ve’ is a saying that epitomises that season. But for a few bad decisions, and a few twists of fate, we could have gone up automatically, we should have gone up through the play-offs, and we would have won at Wembley against an inferior and very average team, but we did none of these, and what was a high-achieving season, in so many respects, ended with nothing.

I met my family after the game and their disappointment was obvious; I felt so mad that I had let them all down that I found it hard to even talk that night. I remember hugging the children and saying to them, ‘I will get you back to

Wembley, kids and I will lift a cup, I promise.'

It was a bold statement for someone who had now lost five playoff semi-finals! Now you may read this and think, 'Jesus, it's only a Conference play-off game' and you may be right, but to our fans, our families, and to us as players, it was as important as any cup, or any competition, in any league in the world. It was also a bastard of a league to get out of.

As disappointed and angry as I was, I spoke to Bucks a few days later and he said, 'Do you want to give it one more go?' and, after agreeing that we needed a few more players, I said, 'I'll see you at pre-season.'

I had played fifty games the previous season, and it felt like a hundred and fifty, but with Devon giving us the escapism that only it can, I recharged the old batteries on one of the many beaches on offer, and thought about nothing but surfing, eating, and ... having my heart ripped out with ten minutes to go against Exeter City!

And that really is all I thought of for about three months. They say that you sometimes take your work home with you, and when it comes to football they are most definitely spot on. There may be a common misconception that footballers play a game, and then forget about it, but for most the game is always on your mind. As usual, with the summer break rapidly vanishing, we were soon reporting back for pre-season training.

I am back at the laptop this morning after what seems an eternity. It is all systems go for the sports shop; I have made the owner of the shop an offer for the current stock, which we will take on for reasons of goodwill as much as anything. I am currently planning the refit and the orders. The two guys I am going in with are good people who have had, and still have, good businesses themselves. I have turned down quite a few offers to play part-time. For one thing I want to finish football on a (relative) high, having had a couple of promotions, and second, I don't want to listen to the bullshit any more. I need to decide my own destiny and the sports shop is the first part of that process.

It is actually really exciting to be planning the look of the shop, designing the website, and getting used to the hundreds of products we will be stocking. I keep nipping in to see the current owner to look through the different rackets, bats, sticks, studs, bags and whistles, and whatever else is tucked away in there; it's like being a kid in a sweet-shop, although the romance part of it will no doubt soon be gone after we start trading. I want to turn it into a really fun place to visit, and to bring back a bit of cool to the sports shop. We will have wooden floors and really good props for each sport. I'm not saying I will spend all day

shooting baskets in there, but with the addition of a few hoops, goals and posts, it will be a little bit different from the average sports store. Chris Hargreaves's SPORTS REPUBLIC – shit it really is happening.

To get some ready cash in the old skyrocket I have also revisited the jungle to trim Carol's bush (oi oi!). I have spent the last few days chopping, sawing, and strimming, all while answering the mobile to agents and managers wanting opinions on players. Yesterday was deadline day, and if I had a pound for each call and text I received from managers and agents all desperately clambering for late purchases and loans, I would have just about enough to buy a ticket to watch Chelsea – and they may need the money after shelling out a mind boggling fifty million quid on Fernando Torres.

It is definitely the busiest deadline day I can ever remember, the desperation for last minute acquisitions was massive, and, as far as the Premiership was concerned, it was as if they were using Monopoly money. Around the other leagues a few of my old teammates also got moves to various clubs – no need to thank me lads for giving you all glowing references – I'm sure many more were waiting by the phone and hoping.

It did make me smile as I spoke to the various football people on the phone yesterday. They would be asking about the various attributes of a certain player they were interested in, and then suddenly ask, 'What the hell is that noise in the background?'

As much as I wanted to say, 'Oh, I'm doing a bit of cash-in-hand, part-time landscape gardening, and that's the sound of the strimmer I'm using to get through the fifteen feet of hawthorn bushes I'm currently attacking; it's a bastard to start so I leave it running. I have just nearly killed myself with an axe, which flew back off a granite-like tree stump and clocked me right in the face. I don't think my nose is broken but I have definitely drawn a fair bit of blood.'

It would have been much too long, and none of it would have actually been digested by the listener, and so it was far easier just to say, 'I'm in a park.'

When you are in the game, and at a club, transfer deadline day is important, but when you're knee deep in shit in the middle of a small forest, it doesn't seem that relevant. Still, my detachment meant that at least I gave honest advice!

2008/09

With the previous season having had such a disappointing end, we turned up for the new season a little jaded. There were soon a few new faces in the camp though, which always brightens up a football club. Wayne Carlisle joined us from local rivals Exeter City, Lee Hodges arrived from Reading, and Nicky Wroe from York City. The ‘Bunionater’, Tyrone Thompson, arrived from Crawley Town, and six-foot-six inch giant Scott ‘The Bevanator’ Bevan, from Shrewsbury Town. Tyrone always managed to kick the ball with his bunion, and Scotty Bevan was a tattoo-loving, weight-lifting obsessed, protein-eating giant, who openly advertised the fact that he hadn’t had sex for over a year! They were all good additions to the squad and, as so many players I’ve got to known have been, great lads with it.

Wayne was a proper Irishman complete with ‘so it is’ after every sentence, and Nicky was a proper Yorkshire man with ‘down pit’ in every sentence. Lee was, like me, an old-school veteran and was, like myself, as stiff as a board. The final in this list of new signings was Michael Brough, who had cheeks like Thomas the Tank Engine, and who could sweat at an international level. Again, the squad looked great, and again, we would give it a right good go.

Paul Buckle pulled me to one side after another immense ‘beasting’ during pre-season and said some very nice things. He said I epitomised what he was about, and that he wanted me to lead the team and be the new team captain. He said he had wanted to make the change sooner but that Stevie Woods had been the captain when he arrived. Stevie was a good mate of mine, but we both knew the game and he was fine about it. While Bucks was telling me what I meant to the club and the team, he also told me about his new plans: ‘I’m going to play you centre-half this year, Chris. I want you to lead from the back.’

I had finally arrived in the back four after twenty years of playing the game!

It didn’t last too long, however. Although I really enjoyed playing there, and felt pretty comfortable in that position, I did do my best to get myself back in midfield. I was trying to let the ball run out of play one game when the same lad who mugged Toddy at Wembley did it to me and scored, so my days as a centre-half were numbered. To be fair, the manager was far from happy with his new midfield, which meant that I would be stepping back in there to solidify things.

At least that's what I tell myself, and others who will listen.

We had an awful first few months of that season and without the last minute penalty scored by Tim Sills against a team at the foot of the table, Paul may well have been sacked. However, after that we got ourselves together, found the right formation, and team, and went on one hell of a run. We were unbeaten in seventeen games, winning the majority of them and pushing ourselves right back in the frame in the league. During this time though, the whole club was rocked by something that came as a total bolt out of the blue.

I happened to find out the news totally by chance. I had been to a show in Plymouth and was returning home. I phoned Chris Todd to see what time we would be meeting for the normal morning car share, and he was very quiet – something very rare for Toddy, as he usually sounds like he is either on the set of *Gavin and Stacey* or an extra in the film *Trainspotting* – I asked him what was wrong and he replied, 'I think I've got leukaemia, pal.'

My roommate, and the lad that epitomised your typical 'run through a brick wall' centre-half, had cancer. I have to say it was a pretty traumatic time at the club. A press conference was given a few days later, and he spoke to the whole team the day after he had been given the diagnosis. It was before a home game, one that he was due to be playing in. Toddy bowled in with his dad, Steve, and broke the news to the squad. It was pretty emotional stuff, and on such a highly charged evening, it was very fitting that his shirt was raised when the first goal was scored by Tim Sills. In true Chris Todd fashion though, he was very upbeat, his jokes remained horrendous, and his gear was still shocking. Seeing how he handled the situation was truly inspiring for all at the club.

We didn't see him for a couple of months, as he had to go on a long course of drugs, but, after recuperating fully, he rang me and said, 'Greavsie, I think I will play before the end of the season.'

It was fantastic news for him and his family that the treatment had worked, and tremendous for us that our teammate, and friend, would be returning fit and healthy. Chris Todd is one hell of a lad and it was a real pleasure to have been with him during my time at Torquay United. He never failed to make me laugh, and anyone who knows him would agree that he may not know what the capital of Iceland is, but he certainly knows how to pull off a diamond-encrusted fake Armani belt!

The team were playing really well and it felt like we now had a plan B in games. Again, we had a great FA Cup run and again, we found ourselves in the fourth round. We had beaten Championship side Blackpool in the third round, and were playing Coventry City in the fourth, very confident that we could beat them and get to the fifth round for the first time in Torquay United's history.

The Blackpool game had been a great day; even before the whistle had been blown I knew we would win. I remember seeing their captain waiting in the tunnel to go into the ref's room before the game – for our 'meet and greet' pleasantries and the 'do's and don'ts' chat – I left our disco-like changing room and strolled down the tunnel, and, as I shook his hand I said, 'Fucking Hell! I thought my hair was bad, but you can't be serious going out there with that barnet.'

He laughed but I think the old psychological trick must have played a part, walking out with very bleached blond hair suddenly mustn't have seemed like such a good idea.

We went on to beat them with the help of a great goal by Matt Green. Although we were disappointed with the fourth round draw, playing Coventry City at home represented another great chance to progress. The atmosphere in a changing room on a match day is always electric, and Paul Buckle had done his best with the funds at his disposal to give the team as much help as he could. We had a video room where goals scored by the lads would constantly be shown, and, as bad as it was under the old stand where the changing rooms were, we did have a few rooms to stretch in and have a much-needed rub. It was a really relaxed atmosphere in our changing room, so much so that we had the sons of both the manager and the captain (me) in there kicking a ball about – although when the post-match rants started, they soon made themselves scarce.

I think Cam has seen more than most as a young lad. He has been in a changing room before big games and after devastating losses, and I'm not sure whether that is a good or bad thing. One thing for sure is, he has certainly heard plenty of swear words!

We played Coventry City off the park in the fourth round ... but lost. Chris Coleman, their manager at the time, said he was very relieved, and shocked, that they had eventually won, and that we had deserved the win on the day. Regardless of whether we deserved the win, we didn't get it. Coventry City scored from a corner in the last minute of the game, and our cup run was over. I also broke my nose pretty badly in that game and decided to reset it myself. It wasn't some sort of Bear Grylls moment, more the fact that when I showed my fellow midfielder, Nicky Wroe, the old hooter, he turned away and said, 'Jesus, I think you need to go off.'

The other contributing factors were that the game was televised, and I didn't want to look like the Beast of Bodmin Moor, and that coming off for treatment may have meant staying off for it. So, I gripped it hard and snapped it back to some sort of normal positioning. It was crazy really, and as I sit here and type away, I cannot believe the lengths I went to to play. I was having an injection

before every game for around two months, for a rib injury; I had lacerated my head, and broke my nose a further time before the season was over. Was it all worth it? Well, put it this way, I desperately wish I was still playing.

The FA Trophy was pushed to one side that season; after our exploits the previous season in all the competitions and having only a small squad, trying to do well in everything was unrealistic – we only wanted promotion. The injections before almost every game were just an inconvenience in what *had* to be a successful season.

The pivotal moment came in a game against the unlikeliest of opponents, Barrow Town away, on a typical cold Tuesday night.

We had travelled up the previous day, on another epic journey onboard the fun bus, one which saw the lads have a quiz, strip to their boxers due to the heat, play cards to the death, eat sweets until sick, tell Elliot Benyon to stop farting for the fiftieth time, and abuse the driver around a thousand times. As well as the dreaded man-flu and my rib problem, my back was also all over the place, but it was the groin pain that had returned at that time that was a real killer. The seats like breezeblocks we had been sitting on for eight hours didn't help, and, when we arrived at Farnborough Town to do a bit of training on the Monday afternoon, I could hardly walk, let alone train.

We had actually used some great training grounds over the course of the season, including Aston Villa, Leeds United and Wigan Athletic (perhaps not so good in comparison to the first two!) but Farnborough's groundsman was either on gardening leave, or there was a hosepipe ban in place. The club's car park had more give in it than the pitch, and as we practised a bit of team shape on this moonscape, I had to say to Bucks that I couldn't move, and would have to stop. When we got back to the hotel I was in a right mess; I asked Damien for some tablets and he told me to come up to his room.

I went up to Damien's room and he just laughed at me and said, 'Christ, Greavsie, you're done in. I think you will be struggling.'

I was not only in tatters with a bit of flu, but I hadn't managed to get to see Richard for my weekly clunk and click, so my back and groin felt as if I had been riding a horse for a week. Damien's statement didn't really sink in though – the day before, the Sunday, I had received some devastating news that had shocked me to the core, so much so that I had to be alone for most of that trip, and little else got through to me.

That Sunday, I was in the kitchen of my friends Jason and Sarah. While there, I took a phone call from my mum. Not long before, my cousin Rebecca, who along with her sister Isobel had spent a lot of time with Mark and me as children, had phoned my mum. Rebecca's seventeen-year-old son James had

died; he had been hit by a train. James was a brilliant boy with the world at his feet, and it is incomprehensible what Rebecca, her husband Paul and James's sister, Hannah, must have gone through. James hadn't come home the Saturday night at the usual time, and the family immediately knew there was a problem. A search party was sent out and early the next morning his body was found by the side of a train track. A tragic accident for a young man, and a moment I simply cannot imagine for the family.

James's death had a major impact on the whole family. My thoughts and feelings after his death definitely changed; I was so angry that a life with so much promise could be taken, and my resolve to succeed was now even stronger.

That Tuesday was a surreal day of pain and sadness. I didn't even eat the pre-match meal with the lads; I was so preoccupied with thoughts about James, and about how Rebecca, Paul and Hannah must have been feeling. I played that night with so many thoughts running through my head. The game itself was as expected, Barrow Town were fighting for every ball, needing a point to survive, and with us requiring a point to get into the play-offs and keep the chasing pack off our backs, the writing was on the wall when they took an early lead. A few of our players really didn't rise to the challenge that cold Tuesday night, and on any other night I could have had a minute bit of sympathy for them, such was the team we were playing and the surroundings we were playing in – for anyone who has never been to see Barrow Town (most people), their football ground is in the middle of nowhere and is overlooked by the biggest graveyard you can imagine. However, that night I was so highly charged with anger and emotion that I exploded in the changing room afterwards.

We had actually drawn the game – I had managed to score with ten minutes remaining, but it could so easily have been a loss, and I was on the warpath.

‘You were fucking shit. Do you want to fuck it all up again, the chance to go up? Why don’t some of you just fuck off if you haven’t got the heart for it?’

Clearly they did want to go up, and, of course, the lads did have the heart for it, but I think I was so emotionally drained, and relieved to have played and scored, that I just blew. I felt a responsibility, as captain of the team, to get us promoted. I know it sounds silly, but it was the same with Oxford United, I felt responsible for us being relegated, so I knew how shitty it would be for us not to go up. It simply had to happen.

To be fair to Paul Buckle, he was on at the lads as much as I was that night. He said, ‘Your fucking captain has got you out of the shit tonight, and I am just wondering how many of you actually want this.’

The coach was pretty silent on the way home for so many reasons, but, football being as it is, the camaraderie was as strong as ever when the coach

eventually rolled back into Devon, after another epic return journey.

Our last game of the season was against Burton Albion. As it stood, they needed a win to guarantee promotion, and we needed one to guarantee a place in the play-offs. Again the Setanta cameras were present, and again it was a great game; Burton Albion took the lead early in the first half, much to the jubilation of their fifteen hundred away fans, and it looked as if it could have been one of those days, particularly after what had happened in the previous season. Much to our relief though, their lead was short-lived. Pretty much straight after the restart our diminutive little winger, Danny Stevens, wriggled past a few Burton Albion players and crossed the ball in for me, and I curled a shot past their keeper to draw us level. I was delighted to score in what was another tense day, and as I ran to the fans clutching the old armband (and yes I did get plenty of stick for that) it was great to see my family and friends in the crowd. Elliot Benyon then duly scored what was to be the winner, but right up until the final whistle both teams had no idea how the other results in the league were going, and so we were both desperate to win. Soon after the final whistle had been blown, the Burton Albion players and fans celebrated, as news had filtered in that Cambridge United, who were the only team able to pip them to automatic promotion, had lost. We were obviously pleased, as we had reached the play-offs, my sixth in total and fifth in the last six seasons. While Burton Albion started their promotion party, we still had work to do.

We were drawn against Histon in the play-offs, a team notorious for their long ball game, but also one that had done brilliantly to be where they were in the league. They were aided by a certain John Beck, who had been the Cambridge United manager back in the early nineties, and I certainly remember playing against Cambridge United for Grimsby Town back then. Cambridge United had had a decent team, with Dion Dublin and John Taylor spearheading a formidable attack, but hell could they shell it. The pitch was always full of sand, which was used to kill the ball dead as it landed in the corners, usually from a great height. And it didn't get much better off the pitch – the showers were always freezing cold in the winter, and the radiators were turned up full pelt in the summer – all the oldest tricks in the book. Still, credit has to go to Beck, at one point that Cambridge United side actually threatened to get into the top flight.

We beat Histon 2–0 at home in the first leg, and now only had to avoid a 2–0 loss in the second leg to reach Wembley. The away trip was pretty special, mostly because my roommate had returned. Chris Todd, together with his knock-off clothes and horrendous banter, had beaten leukaemia, and was well and truly back. He had returned to the team in a game against Northwich Victoria a few

weeks earlier, and in true Toddy fashion had scored a really important goal. Together with me and Tim Sills, he had also joined in with, what could loosely have been called, a ‘scrap’ in that game. Tensions were high as Northwich Victoria were on the verge of relegation, but with what we had been through in the last couple of seasons, both on and off the pitch, the fight was only going one way. Toddy loved a good old-fashioned scrap, and after one of his many fancy dress outings with his brothers and mates in his hometown of Swansea, one which had obviously gone a bit wrong, he once had me in stitches telling me how the bouncers were last seen brawling away with a Smurf, an ape, Mr Blobby and four of the seven dwarfs.

The away game against Histon was as expected – I have never headed so many balls in one game. It was real tin-helmet stuff, especially in the last ten minutes, after they had pulled a goal back. We were camped in our own penalty box for the remaining few minutes receiving Scud missiles at an alarming rate. We managed to hold on though, and it was an incredible feeling when the final whistle was eventually blown. Massive credit has to go to the Histon players who, although gutted, were gracious in defeat.

I was overjoyed. We had finally done it, and I had finally reached a play-off final at the sixth time of asking. Helen came over to give me a hug, which was great, and I told her I would see her at Wembley with the cup. To be fair to Helen Chamberlain, she has been brilliant for the club, and she has no airs or graces about her at all. I did find it quite painful though when she pointed out the Aston Martin in the car park, but hey, we can’t all be good at poker, have our own show, and knock about with a bunch of actors and Premiership footballers. (Helen, please do not find the constant texts asking to go to film premieres, and to plug the book, offensive – it is all meant in good spirit!)

We were pretty low key in the changing room after the win; the cameras were waiting for us to shower everything and everyone in champagne, but we didn’t bother with all that. Bucks was relieved, but also didn’t want to get too carried away with it, and I just sat there dead pan while doing the old pec dance for the camera. The cameraman was chuckling away, and the lads found it funny, but Fiona said I looked like a complete tit, once I got home. Honesty is always the best policy.

Along with the annual naked dip, the pec dance had become a bit of a regular occurrence; it was just a bit of fun, and after all, I did have to live up to the Tarzan nickname. It was a bit of a party piece when our games were televised, and I did get some stick for it. Televised games had other perks – I also happened to look down the camera after a night game against York and, knowing my children would be watching, I stared down the lens and said, ‘Get

to bed, kids.'

You can't believe how many people were coming up to me in Devon saying, 'Our children thought you were speaking to them, and went straight to bed, can you do that more often?'

My playing up to entertain children wasn't a one-off. It was hilarious on holiday one year; somehow I had been seated two rows behind my own family on the outward journey (that wasn't the funny bit), but the family I was temporarily sat with had a young boy who actually did think I was Tarzan. I spent most of the journey banging my chest and saying, 'Me Tarzan, King of the Jungle.'

Even more incredible – and as a result my wife swears I could talk to an alien and not feel out of place – was that after getting on famously with this family, I invited them over, and we went on to spend most of the holiday with them. I had to do a type of swan dive everyday and fight with a pretend snake (we found an old piece of house pipe at the villa) so that little Johnny could shout 'Tarzan'.

The Tarzan madness continued in the build up to Wembley. The club had printed all the lads' faces onto famous characters to sell on T-shirts, and, yes, mine was on a picture of Tarzan swinging on a rope, with the message 'Chris Hargreaves as Tarzan, swinging into Wembley.' Cringe factor ten! A good laugh all the same and they sold out, all ten of them!

I will have to clock off until tomorrow which is a bit frustrating, but, what with Arsenal playing Barcelona tonight, and my wife Fiona trying to get back on the laptop to fill out a dreaded tax return online, I will have to concede defeat. It is a cross between a youth club and an office in the living room at the moment. Cameron has started yet another project for school, this time it is to make an authentic Roman coin in twenty-four hours. All the dining table chairs are set up for a show, as Hattie has just finished her twenty-minute play involving a tutu and her toy dog – she has now got hold of the glue and is sticking down everything in her path. Isabella has decided to clean Flopsy Peppa Marley Pip's hutch. She has brought in a bale of hay. The rabbit is now stuck behind the fridge, the hamsters are kicking off, the TV is on full belt, and my wife is demanding that I get some alcohol on my return home from getting the boy from football. Bloody hell! – I am trying to write a decent book here, and I might as well be on the set of Crackerjack. I will find a slot tomorrow and crack on.

Although it wasn't the FA Cup, or the Champions League final, the excitement was pretty high for the play-off final. Again, we would be playing in front of around fifty thousand fans and this time I would be leading the team out. OK, my career hadn't exactly gone to plan, but to have played at Wembley twice in two years in the latter part of my career was great. It had also been a mission to help Torquay United get their league status back. My Torquay United career also seemed to have created a lucky number for me. I was given the number fourteen as a squad number, the last house we rented was number fourteen and the guy who sorted out my lease car also put a plate on it with fourteen on. From then on I seemed to notice the number all the time, and now I still look at signs or work out equations that inevitably lead to the number fourteen.

The family went up to Wembley in convoy. The previous year we had all stayed at the Wembley Plaza, but losing at Wembley is not a nice experience, so I told everyone that I would be heading back after the game on the coach with the boys, whatever the result. The family all stayed in a different hotel to me the night before the game, superstition and all that, and, as usual, Fiona entertained everyone with her drinking and dancing escapades. It must be down to her nervous disposition, because no matter what the event (and it is usually a presentation night, a player function or, in this case, a final) she always gets absolutely and completely blind drunk. It's always the quiet ones!

We travelled up the day before in our tracksuits, as we normally would for an away game – this is what we should have done the first year, instead of dressing up like a load of tits in our club 'gift' of a forty pound M&S suit. Again, rooming with Toddy was great; we had been through a lot together in the last few years, and for him to be there was very special. On the morning of the game I spoke to a few of the lads. I remember Chris Robertson saying to me, 'Jesus, do you think we will win Greavsie? I'm fucking nervous here.'

He was just being honest, and I'm sure most lads would feel the same before any cup final, whether it was the World Cup or the eggcup. I replied, 'Robbo, just imagine your hands lifting that cup, because that is what's going to happen today, big boy.'

We both laughed, and I think he kind of believed it.

I had been so relaxed in the build up to the final, I think I just had the mentality of 'You know what, what will be will be.' I couldn't help but think of James, and how this game wasn't life or death. I also knew that losing was not an option – I had promised my kids that I would lift the cup, and by Christ I was going to fucking lift it. No one had been given new contracts, no one knew their destiny, including me, and when you are backed into a corner like that, as most of the lads were that season, it does funny things to your mind. The old 'fight or

flight syndrome' is a phrase many people use, and I can see why – we were buzzing with adrenaline.

On the morning of the game I spoke to my wife, and she texted me some pictures of the children. Kerry, the assistant who had first directed me to the manager's office when I had initially gone to Torquay United, had given the children Torquay United shirts, and we had had Harriet's printed up with 'BEAST' on the back. I had written a blog for the local paper, the *Herald Express*, for the whole of that season, and in it I had spoken about the day-to-day football, but also about my day-to-day life involving my family. At the time, we had nicknamed Harriet 'Beast' as, although she was very cute, she ate like an adult and battered everything in sight. We had to stop calling her Beast though, as the first day she arrived at pre-school she burst through the doors and said, 'Hello, I'm Hattie Beast.'

However, seeing her pictured on my dad's shoulders walking down Wembley Way with Beast on her top was hilarious. I laughed even more when Fiona told me that a few hundred Torquay United fans had spotted her, and had started shouting, 'BEAST.'

Harriet laughed away and said, to my dad, 'That's me, granddad!'
Fame at three, eh!

The writing I had done for the paper was really enjoyable, and together with Andy Phelan, the editor, Dave Thomas, the sports writer, and Guy Henderson, the web guru, it was great fun charting the progress of the 'Captain's Blog'. As has proved with this book, after speaking to Scott Pack, my publisher, my mind is always racing away at a hundred miles an hour, and the old grammar can suffer a little, but hey, it's hard to concentrate when I am trying to help with the building of a medieval house for a school project, or I am failing miserably trying to cook a beef stew.

We were in the away changing room the second time around, which was great. I don't know why, but the whole feel of it was different and we were immediately more relaxed. We had music blasting away and Damien and Pete had a production line of massage beds set up. I went through to speak to the FA people about where to go before and after the game, and I saw Steve Bower, then the main Setanta presenter, along with Rebecca Lowe, who had both been real stars for us that season. I gave them both a hug and said thanks for all their help. I then quickly nipped out to see the family and then ran back in to get ready for the game.

I had kept the pair of boots that became my 'lucky boots' right up until the final. They had seen me through a trip to Barrow Town, a last day win at home to Burton Albion and a missile attack at Histon, and they were almost falling to

bits. For the last three weeks of the season I had to use No More Nails after every game just to keep the things together. I do smile to myself thinking about those boots in the utility room at home, and Fiona saying, ‘Get those things out of here.’

Hell, was she mental? Did she not know the importance of these things? It was like a surgical procedure, what with the six pegs I had positioned on each boot end to help the glue set. I remember as a young kid at Everton seeing the apprentices painstakingly taping up the boots for the first team lads. Once a pair of boots become ‘lucky’ it can have a big effect on your game and this applies to all players, in all leagues. It’s obviously all a load of bollocks, and all in the mind, but try telling that to someone who has a piece of heather underneath the insole, or a cross scrawled on the tongue. It all goes on.

I did the usual pleasantries before the game, introducing Martin O’Neill, the Wembley guest for the day, to our players. He is a nice fellow and wished me luck. It was then time. I ran round to each player and gave them a pat on the back and said, ‘It’s your day today. Go and get what you deserve.’

For the record, the team that day was as follows: Pope, Mansell, Robertson, Todd, Nicholson, Carlisle, Wroe, Hargreaves, Stevens, Sills and Benyon.

Cambridge United started the game really well, popping the ball about and dominating the first thirty minutes or so. We had a few half chances, but were not exactly firing on all cylinders. Our keeper Michael Pope, on loan from Southampton, pulled off a brilliant save which could well have turned the game even more in Cambridge United’s favour. A minute or so after that save was a moment I will never forget. The ball had arrived at Elliot Benyon’s feet, just outside their eighteen-yard box, he laid the ball into my path and I took it past a defender and swung the right foot (I am left footed, the right foot is mainly used for holding myself up and occasionally spanking twenty-yard shots into the goal!). The ball flew into the net in front of the thirty thousand Cambridge United fans. Our fans went ballistic and I ran across to them and held up the armband again. I don’t know why; it was just a symbol of what it had all been about. The lads were laughing as we ran back to take the centre; Nicky Wroe turned to me and said, ‘Fucking hell pal, where did that come from?’

I looked up to the sky and just said, ‘Thank you!’ We got ourselves in at half time and were all just pacing about, repeating to ourselves that it was our time.

The second half couldn’t have gone any better. We played really well, and when Wayne Carlisle put in a brilliant cross late in the second half, it was a magnificent sight to see Tim Sills plant his head on the ball and send it into the top corner of the net. It was then time to see the game out. As the end was nearing, I asked the referee how long it was for the final whistle to be blown and

his words were like a dream.

‘That’s it Chris, you’ve won it.’

I told him I loved him!

The final whistle went, and after commiserating with the Cambridge United lads, we ran to our supporters and families and celebrated. It had been an almighty effort but after fifty-seven games, about as many injections, a few tears and tantrums, and a lot of ifs and maybes, we had done it. Torquay United would be back in the league. It wouldn’t mean a lot to many people, but it would mean a hell of a lot to a few. A moment I had dreamt of as a kid was happening, and, although on a smaller scale than I had hoped for when setting out as a youngster, at the ripe old age of thirty-seven, I had lead a team out at Wembley, scored, and was now walking up the steps to receive the cup. It was pretty damn special.

I reached over to the family and gave them a big kiss. Fiona was in tears and the kids were screaming and laughing. I shouted to the children, ‘I told you I would get you the cup’, and, as I reached the final few steps, I saw Helen Chamberlain, who gave me a big hug and kiss, and said well done.

Here we were on the gantry at Wembley, and as I looked across to the lads I felt very proud that they had all played so well. Martin O’Neill then handed me the cup, and the rest, as they say, is history. Should I have left it there and retired then? Maybe. Should that have been my last game? I don’t know, but at that time, despite the aches and pains, I still felt as if I had a few games in me and I wanted to lead the team now we were back in the league. Before any of that though, we had the journey back and, after celebrating at the hotel with all of our families and hundreds of fans for several hours, we jumped on the coach and headed back to Devon.

I had missed out on the celebrations in the changing room because, lo and behold, who did the FA drug testing people ask for after the game? – Chris Hargreaves and Kevin Nicholson. Poor old Kev couldn’t pee for around an hour after the game – it’s not easy peeing on demand and in front of an FA drugs tester. It was a bit of a pain in the arse going through this long-winded process when all the other lads were celebrating. Still, it could have been worse; Lee Philips had also been chosen and he was on the losing team!

Kev and I made up for missing the changing room celebrations on the way home. The cup was filled with a cocktail of the most ridiculous drinks you could ever imagine, and for five hours we just laughed and joked. It was a brilliant feeling. My wife still had to contend with a four-hour train journey back with three small children, but I knew that she would be smiling away. I also knew that the children would be very, very happy.

I was delighted for the lads; seeing them laughing away and holding the cup

on the way home was fantastic. I sat at the front with Bucks for a while, and he asked me, ‘What’s it like to score at Wembley then?’

‘Not too bad,’ I replied.

When the dust had settled and the bus tour and civic reception had been milked, it was again back to business with the new season ahead. Before that, however, I had a long conversation with the manager about whether I would actually be playing at all.

We had all travelled to Majorca for our end of season celebration, and, although at thirty-seven, having been there many times over the last twenty years, Magaluf wasn’t on the top of my wish list of destinations, it was still a great break. Seeing Martin Rice give the best rendition of ‘Wonderwall’ that Spain has ever heard, and witnessing him blagging the most free pints in history, was worth it alone. Kev refused to go and Sillsy wasn’t allowed (sorry Hannah, but you do wear the trousers) but the majority of the players and staff made the trip a memorable one. Scott Bevan achieved the impossible for a single guy in Magaluf: he still couldn’t find a girl.

The first hint that Bucks might have a different plan for me the next season came on that trip. Kenny Veysey pulled me to one side and said, ‘Greavsie, it may be time to think about hanging the old boots up. Just think about the youth team role.’

I did indeed think hard about it, and had a chat to Bucks, but when I heard what the money on offer was, I was shocked. I knew that a coaching role would involve far less money and I was fine with that, but, combined with the fact that I would have to give up playing, it was just too much of a change. I turned the offer down and said that I could still play, and that I wanted to lead the team back into the league.

It was eventually agreed that I would take a drop in wages and that I would be turning up as a player, and remain as captain for pre-season. I was under no illusions whatsoever that our promotion and my scoring at Wembley gave me a bit more bargaining power. I knew that Bucks wanted a different team, but I was trying to look after my family as well as trying to keep playing as long as I could. I was thirty-seven and maybe had passed my best days, but as far as fitness was concerned I was still one of the fittest on the team and wanted to keep playing. I also couldn’t afford not to. It is a ruthless game though, and the fact that I had to fight for that contract did disappoint me a bit. As it was, I turned up for the pre-season and after another slog we lined up for our return to the football league against Chesterfield at home.

Sat here now, part of me regrets the decision not to take the youth team role, as I know how hard it is to get jobs in football. However, a player has to want to play for as long as he can, and I was no different. I also thought that the offer of four hundred quid a week was a bit of a smack to the old chops, considering how hard I had worked to help the team go up.

2009/10

I led the team out against Chesterfield on the first day of the season; we won, and I picked up the Man of the Match award, but I knew that things were changing. I was still playing and scoring the odd goal – one being the winner against my beloved Northampton Town. There was a great moment in that game – when we reappeared after half time I jumped over the hoardings to talk to ‘Muzzi’, an old mate, who was in the Northampton Town section. The Cobblers’ fans gave me a big clap which was great. Mustapha and his dad were massive fans of the club and although Muzzi was confined to a wheelchair it was no disability, as he was one of the most active and vocal fans at the club. I gave him a hug and said, ‘Apologies if I score the winner mate.’

What happened? ... I scored the winner! I apologised with a wave to the Northampton fans, and I could see Muzzi laughing away.

Before long, I was in the office again and being asked once more about the role coaching the youth team. It became clear that Paul Buckle and Colin Lee wanted me to stand down as captain; that was fair enough, but the manner in which it was done was odd. Soon after the season had started I had chatted to Bucks and the chairman Alex Rowe, and said that although I was still playing I would help out with the youth team by taking the odd afternoon session. This would mean that I could maintain my morning training with the first team. They agreed to this, and said that would be great. I also told Colin Lee, the then chief executive, what we had planned. It was at this point that there was obviously some confusion. Imagine my surprise when the following Monday morning, Colin turned up with full training kit on in his new capacity of Youth Team Coach – Chief Executive to Youth Team Coach in a weekend, not a bad effort. I don’t know where the message had got confused, but, for the time being, I just continued as I was.

A few months later, I was offered the role again, but this time with both Colin and Paul deciding that I would be given it on a four month trial basis, until the end of the season. This would be on a significant pay drop. This is when it became clear to me that the captaincy, and my playing for the club, would be coming to an end. The truth was, I knew that I couldn’t play for ever. I would have loved to have taken on the coaching role in some capacity, and, if it had

been for a year, I would have accepted it. However, the club and Bucks were asking me to stop playing, give up the captaincy, have my wages cut to a third, and take it on a trial period with no certainty of being given the role in the summer.

I accepted that it was an opportunity to prove myself as a coach, but I had already been coaching the under-16s at Exeter City for two years, so I clearly could do it. I got on really well with the young lads who wanted me to do it, and I hadn't exactly been a bad player for the club.

I know there is no sentiment in football, and I am absolutely fine with that, but even I had to laugh about the predicament I was now in. I am still amazed that Colin called me back into his office and offered me a small amount more, in acknowledgement of the fact I had a family to support. The increase meant that I would still be voluntarily giving up over fifty per cent of my wage. How generous. I already had a football league contract up until August, so who in their right mind would give up more than half their wage for a trial run at something they weren't remotely guaranteed to get? I suspect it was really just an exercise to free up my wages, fairly common in football. However, I think that I deserved at least a year in that particular role, to work with the boys on a day-to-day basis, to get the best out of them. I would have sacrificed the money, no problem, but sacrificing the money, the captaincy and the contract was a problem. It was just too much to give up all at once. Principle can sometimes take over your thoughts, and may cloud your judgement, but, rightly or wrongly, I have always stuck to my beliefs.

I don't think either my writing or the local TV stuff that I had started helped, as it seemed to alienate me from club management somewhat, though it had all been with a view to promoting Torquay United. Even when I had the honour of being presented with the BBC South West Footballer of the Year award (no mean feat for a Torquay United player!), I had to drag two of the lads with me to the ceremony, as no one from the club was available. With the help of Andy Phelan, the editor of the local rag, I had also published a book called *Captain's Blog* charting the progress of that season. I suppose the whole thing just ran away with itself. Maybe the Torquay United management felt that I had become too big for my own boots? I don't know, but it certainly was the beginning of the end.

The whole thing came to a head after a cup game on a Saturday. It should have been called off because of the weather, but Colin desperately wanted it to go ahead, so the referee was persuaded to play it, and we went on to lose. It was like playing football on an ice-skating rink. Paul phoned me after the game and said, 'I think it's time for a change.'

He seemed to think that some of the lads' attitudes had not been right, and he wanted changes. He told me to tell the lads to be ready for change. Before long, Tim Sills had gone, as had Chris Todd. A team does have to evolve, but the whole thing felt a bit rushed and messy.

Eventually, Paul phoned me and said that he had a club on the phone, and that they were really keen to sign me until the end of the season. When your manager tells you that, you know that the writing is on the wall. After the earlier part of the season, it wasn't that unexpected. However, it couldn't have been more of a shock when he told me who the team was – Oxford United. I was now in turmoil; I had wanted to see my career out at Torquay United and really felt that I still had something to offer, but clearly the club wanted me to play less, and now Oxford United, a club that had been a huge emotional rollercoaster for me, wanted me back.

I procrastinated for far too long really, but after a massive amount of soul searching, and a pretty heated debate with the manager, something I think we both regret, I decided that I would go. The last game I played for Torquay United was against Burton Albion. The fans sang my name, I won Man of the Match, but we lost, and after speaking to Paul after the game he felt that my move to Oxford United would be appropriate. I am a proud man and, although I could well have stayed and seen out my contract, and although I still had a great relationship with the fans and players, I couldn't do it.

However it ended, it doesn't really matter. I have to say that my time at Torquay United was incredible. At my ripe old age (for a footballer) and in the latter part of my career, I had enjoyed some fantastic times with the club and met some brilliant people. I also got on really well with the management, and still do, and if it didn't end as positively as it could – as 'they' say 'football is football'.

And you know what, it doesn't really matter, does it? Whatever was said or done, and whatever the outcome for me, the job was done – Torquay United were well and truly back in the league. And after all, how can I be bothered about all the ifs, buts and maybes of all that now, when, as we speak, the car is packed, the surfboards are attached (just), the children are starting their pack-ups, and we have a date with a beach and some surf. Carpe diem, I think it is.

Another huge deciding factor in my move to Oxford United was what had previously gone on there. I still had a problem with us having gone down and not

got back up. Chris Wilder, the Oxford United manager, had phoned me several times and asked me to sign, and Jim Rosenthal also phoned me saying that I *had* to come back. He said that even old ‘Bald Eagle’ Jim Smith had been on the case about me coming back. It was almost farcical – as well as the two Jims, at one point I even had Timmy Mallet on the phone telling me to get back and do it for the boys. I told my mate Jase that Timmy had called me, and he thought I was taking the piss. He only believed me a few months later when I mentioned that I was due to be playing tennis with Timmy Mallett and Chris Evans.

‘Listen, Timmy is a top bloke, and I intend to thrash him at tennis.’

Now, I may have a vivid imagination, but playing tennis with Timmy Mallett and Chris Evans cannot be made up. Him playing with his mallet, now that is another thing entirely. Incidentally I never made it on that occasion, as my fucking groin was no good for tennis either!

Oxford United had led the division for most of the season but was now having a bit of a wobble, and they wanted me back to steady the ship. A lot went through my mind at that time, and it was a bloody hard decision, but in the end I came up with a pretty strong conclusion. I had done my bit for Torquay United, and I had had a brilliant time at the club and no one could ever take that away. But I honestly felt that if I turned Oxford United down, I would feel that I had let them down. I felt that I would look back and say to myself, ‘You shithouse.’

It was definitely a case of unfinished business at Oxford United, and if I could have even a smidgen of a hand in getting them back in the league, I could then rest easy about that stage of my career.

The next four months turned out to be as testing as they could possibly be. My wife was going in for an operation the week I left, which was a bit stressful, and I had to spend the next four months in a hotel room and a car – a pretty lonely existence. But, to cut a very long story short, Oxford United were promoted and I am proud to have played a part in that promotion.

It started as crazily as you could imagine. I went from being the captain of Torquay United to the captain of Oxford United in the space of that first week, and my first game back at the club would have tested even the most optimistic of players. And this takes us back to where this book started, to the game against Luton Town, when the referee added on vital minutes which contributed to our defeat, and my unfortunate angry kick of a ball smashing John Murray’s laptop.

We recovered and won three quick games on the bounce; the ship was eventually steadied, and I felt very positive about our promotion chances. As I described earlier, it was the last ten minutes of that final game that did it for me. I had torn my groin and, after driving home to Devon late at night after the game, my body just seemed to stop functioning. As so often in my career, I had

been doing a hell of a lot of driving and it had taken its toll. My body was again saying, ‘enough is enough’. It was so fucking frustrating. I still felt that it was my mission to get Oxford United promoted, but the more I tried to get fit, the worse my injuries got. I saw Richard Carr-Hyde almost every day, I took more tablets than Shaun Ryder in his heyday, and I even tried the injection lark once more, but even that was to no avail. We had a night game against Hayes & Yeading United, and before the game I had an injection in my groin as I was really suffering with it. I played the first half, but was absolutely off the pace. Of all people, Steve Basham turned up again, and bagged a couple of goals, and we were all over the shop.

I came off at half time and sat on the treatment table. I said to John, our physio, that I couldn’t feel most of my right leg – the injection had worked too well. I clearly couldn’t feel a thing, because, as I pulled my sock down, I realised I had a two-inch gash in my shin. The doctor stitched it up, and as I walked back into the changing room I felt gutted that my body had finally let me down.

The rest of the season was a washout for me as far as playing was concerned. I was in and out of the club and the hotel like a yo-yo, and even though I tried my best to get my body fixed, I think the efforts of the previous two years had finally caught up with me.

When the lads clinched their play-off place, I drove down to see the boys and the manager. Along with Mickey Lewis and Andy Melville, Chris Wilder had done a great job at Oxford United, and if the only help I could give now was going to be with my voice, I was going to bloody well give it. I trained with the lads before the first play-off game, and I could sense the tension. Chris had hammered the lads in training, and, to be fair, he was feeling the pressure. He pulled all the lads in for a chat, and after asking Mickey and Mel to say a few words, he asked me what I thought. I remember clearly what I said, because it was pretty much what I told Chris Robertson the day of Torquay United’s play-off final. I said, ‘Don’t think of anything other than lifting that trophy, because this is your year, and this is the year Oxford United are going up. Just smile and stick to the game plan, and you will do it.’

This relaxed the manager, never mind the players, and if that was all I could do, it turned out to be enough.

There were some really good lads at Oxford United, and whatever they thought of me as a person or as a player, I wanted to help them get promoted. The same went for the fans; some liked me and some didn’t, but for me it was about the club going back up, no matter what. It hadn’t all gone according to plan, but so what, the club going up was the main objective and that was again, as far as I was concerned, what *had* to happen.

The play-offs were duly won, in no small part due to the fact that Matt Green was on top form. It was then to Wembley again and although I wouldn't be putting my boots on, I had a good chat to the boys before the game. I told lads such as James 'Beano' Constable and Mark Creighton to take what was theirs, and to enjoy lifting the trophy at the final whistle. They were awesome that day, and both Beano and Matt Green scored. I took my turn in lifting the trophy since I had played ten games in my second spell at the club. It didn't feel the same as the win for Torquay United the previous year, but it didn't matter, I felt that some sort of previous wrongs had been righted at the club, for me anyway. After the game I spoke to Jim Rosenthal and Timmy Mallett, who both thanked me for having the balls to return and to help. I turned up at the civic reception to join the lads, but as they went on to party to enjoy their success I said my goodbyes to Chris Wilder, and returned to Devon.

Oxford United soon announced that I had been released, which was odd, as both myself and Chris Wilder had known that my involvement at the club was a short-term one, and had already finished at the end of that season, but clubs like to have the final say. Though it was poor that they announced it in that way, I had to smile to myself because, by now, I knew as well as anyone how the game works. When you are needed, your phone is white-hot and the desperation for you to sign and play for a club is huge, but when you have served your purpose and are surplus to requirements, that changes ever so slightly. I wasn't bothered; I was just delighted that Oxford United had returned to the football league.

Another highlight of 2010 came at the end of the 09/10 season. After snagging/grooming the lovely Jenny, Kev Nicholson then managed to persuade her to marry him. Tim Sills, who had moved on to Stevenage, Lee Mansell, who was still with Kev at Torquay United, and I were chosen as best men – Kev didn't like one of us quite enough to have just one best man!

With Kev an occasional drinker, and afraid of any wrong doings on a stag do, he decided that we would all go to Alton Towers for an 'exciting' few days.

I actually travelled up late on a Friday night, after an interview for a Tiverton Town job – I handed my CV in on that Friday (having decided that I would be probably be retiring from playing) and I was offered the job the following Tuesday, but although the directors were a fantastic bunch of people, and it was a decent little club, I knew that the league, and the small budget, were too much for me to take on. By that, I mean that the budget was extremely tight, and that I had no experience of the players in that league. For the record, they were relegated that season.

On arriving at the hotel at Alton Towers late, I soon found out that the lads had already gone out, but had found it dead, and were already heading back. The

next part is hilarious. The boys (including Nicky Wroe, a great northern lad and Torquay United player, all the best men, and Kev's mate from back home in Nottingham, Mark Stallard, who had also been a player at Notts County) all sat down together in the very quiet hotel bar.

We were hammering on Kev for bringing us on the worst stag do ever, when the unthinkable happened. Some Torquay United fans recognised us, and we invited them over for a drink – it was then that the fun and games began. Kev was feeling a bit rough, so I 'kindly' suggested that he have a fruit juice from the bar. He was chuffed at the care shown by Mr Hargreaves, and I was only too happy to order a 5 Alive orange drink. The fact that I asked the barman to put a double vodka in it is really neither here nor there, but, as Kev had lost his sense of taste, he gulped it down, and I quickly got him another for the Vitamin C that he so obviously needed. To cut a long story short Kev was soon in a great mood, and really enjoying the 'fruit juices'.

One of the Torquay fans then happened to tell me that he had a camel costume in his room. (Come on, seriously, what are the chances of that?) I saw an opportunity that could not be missed, and, before long, a mild mannered, teetotal, quiet lad, called Kev Nicholson, was being ridden around the hotel bar dressed as a camel.

It was truly a sight to behold. Kev, all dressed up in a furry suit, on all fours, being ridden by Torquay United fans at Alton Towers. I don't think I have laughed that much in a long, long time, and when Mark hurled the line of abuse, 'Take it like a bitch, fur boy, that serves you right for being a total gaylord', I knew that the trip had exceeded any of our expectations.

The fact that Kev was sick three times the next day, and had to change his T-shirt for a very tight-fitting pink number, kindly bought for him at the gift shop by the boys, made it even more memorable. The final insult for Kev was being dressed up as Jimmy Saville that night, and being severely manhandled by a lady boy/girl in a spit and sawdust den of iniquity. It was the least we could do!

I recently bumped into one of the fans we met on that fateful 'camel' night (it was the lad who lent/gave me the suit), and he said that it was the best night of his young life, so far. Admittedly, the lad probably didn't expect to see one of his footballing heroes dressed as a desert animal shouting, 'Yee Haa!', but he was right, it was one hell of a sight, and one hell of a night.

The wedding itself went without a hitch, Jenny looked amazing, Kev looked hot, and I wore a T-shirt under my suit, which I revealed after my speech, that simply read 'Tarzan and Jenny for ever' (my nickname at Torquay United was Tarzan). What are friends for?

Anyway, whether it was the end-of-season injury at Oxford United or the

way I had left Torquay United I don't know, but that summer at the end of the 09/10 season was different. I suddenly realised I wasn't prepared to go to a club on a 'maybe'; I didn't want to drag the family anywhere else, and I certainly wasn't in the mood for more bullshit. For the first time in my twenty-two-year career I had my doubts about carrying on. On one hand, I wanted to keep playing, but on the other, I knew I had to retire at some point. It has been ten months now since my final game, and you know what, I'm still not sure whether I have retired. As I said in my introduction, I certainly don't like to say it. I half want a manager to phone up and say, 'Give me a season, and see how we do.'

But it would only delay the inevitable – and the phone hasn't exactly been ringing off the hook.

As I mentioned earlier, I did speak to an ex-player turned successful businessman, Steve Massey, about playing for his local club. He even offered me five grand as a signing on fee, which was mental, but I just couldn't do it, I didn't want to drag myself around the local leagues. Fiona choked on her Pinot Grigio when I told her, but she understood.

I still coach the under-16s at Exeter City's academy with fellow ex-pro Shaun Taylor, and I join in as often as I can. I still love playing football and that will never change. I talk to the boys a hell of a lot about their efforts in trying to make it in this game, and I hope my advice helps. These boys are so refreshing in that they really want to learn and, as a result, really listen. They have no agenda whatsoever. It is a very rewarding job; it just doesn't pay very well.

I have found it incredibly difficult to finish playing and waves of disappointment still hit me every so often – but that's life. I knew it had to happen one day, I just didn't know when, or what I would replace it with. I get quite a lot of calls from old teammates who are in the same boat as me, asking for advice. I try to give them the right advice for their own situation, when really I don't even know how my own will pan out. What I do know is that I have already been one incredibly lucky boy to do a job that I have loved doing for twenty-two years. I may not have played at the top or earned big money, but I have some great memories, and, as I don't play golf, I don't need to have a couple of million in the bank to be able to 'retire' now. I do have a few plans in place and one is to cycle to the ninety-two football league clubs, to raise money for hospice care with Mickey Taylor, a local fireman. (I was originally thinking of running it, but with the state of my knees, and the time it would take, I thought better of it.) The second plan is to sell plenty of football boots, tennis rackets and ping-pong balls. The third plan is to do the second best thing in football, become a manager.

I didn't make it to the top and I didn't play for England; maybe I wasn't

good enough after all, but as we all know, 'God loves a tryer.'

And where is my caravan? Well, it has been taken to a nice little field with a lovely view of the sea in Devon, where it has been unhooked, and it will definitely not be moving, as my family are staying here. I, on the other hand, may well be seen very soon, flying, driving or training to a club near you, as the last few months have told me how much I love this game. Maybe this time, though, it'll be as coach, and I will be the one with the whistle.

Epilogue

It's 11.45pm and I am writing the epilogue to this book on my daughter's laptop, having left mine at the shop. The keys are tiny, and my fingers are big, so you can imagine my frustration (and the language I'm using to express it!). I was at the shop at 7am this morning, ready for the first day's trading of Chris Hargreaves, SPORTS REPUBLIC, Sidmouth. After a big, late, push at the weekend, helped by big Mr and Mrs Hargreaves (my parents), Mrs Hargreaves (my wife) and the baby Hargreaves (my children), I opened the shop this morning and gave it a go. I fumbled through the card machine and chip and pin instructions, smiled, and opened the doors at 9.30. I sold trainers for walking, running and watching, I sold tennis balls for a dog, racket tape for a pushchair, and a whole host of weird and wonderful items. I wrote down the things I didn't have in stock, but were being requested. I trained a young lad in the ways of the shop (and of me!). I cleaned up, put another display in the window, cashed up, ordered some stock, and returned home at 9.59pm, having not eaten or sat down all day. A fifteen-hour slogfest, with the best of them. On a quiet day in sunny Sidmouth the till rang out to the tune of seven hundred and sixty-seven pounds – not a bad first day for a shop that people still think is under a refit; so fingers crossed, signs are good.

Still, the future is, as ever, unpredictable. Over the last seventy-two hours, I have been a Sky pundit (Torquay United v. Shrewsbury Town play-offs), a writer and a shop owner. Over the past year, I have been a footballer, a coach, a cash-in-hand gardener, a shop refitter and a football coach. Who knows what else the future will bring?

I have enjoyed writing this book (at all hours of the day and night), and the process has certainly brought back a lot of memories. I am indebted to all the people who have read the draft of this book to give me some pointers (my mum!), and to all the people mentioned in the book who have advertently, but more often inadvertently, given me such great material. I must thank my wife Fiona for being very, very, very patient, my children for being very, very funny, and I must thank myself for writing the best football book this year (OK, probably the best football book this year). Finally many thanks to the Stout clan for their help with the business, their laughter and their red wine!

Good luck to all you players, managers, coaches and fans out there for the season ahead. I cannot wait to join you again.

I will finish with the only motto that my mind will allow at 12.20am: 'Do not ask, just thank if you receive.'

Copyright

The Friday Project
An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
77–85 Fulham Palace Road
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

WHERE'S YOUR CARAVAN?. Copyright © Chris Hargreaves 2011. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the nonexclusive, nontransferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse-engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins e-books.

Chris Hargreaves asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-00-736414-5

EPub Edition © AUGUST 2011 ISBN: 978-0-00-737125-9

About the Publisher

Australia

HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.
Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street
Sydney, NSW 2000, Australia
<http://www.harpercollins.com.au/ebooks>

Canada

HarperCollins Canada
2 Bloor Street East - 20th Floor
Toronto, ON, M4W, 1A8, Canada
<http://www.harpercollins.ca>

New Zealand

HarperCollins Publishers (New Zealand) Limited
P.O. Box 1
Auckland, New Zealand
<http://www.harpercollins.co.nz>

United Kingdom

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
77-85 Fulham Palace Road
London, W6 8JB, UK
<http://www.harpercollins.co.uk>

United States

HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
10 East 53rd Street
New York, NY 10022
<http://www.harpercollins.com>

'If you want to know exactly what happens in the real football world,

Chris Harcreaves is the man to tell you.' Kim Rosenthal

WHERE'S YOUR CARAVAN?

MY LIFE ON FOOTBALL'S B-ROADS

CHRIS HARCRAEVE