

'If you want to know exactly what happens in the real football world,
Chris Hargreaves is the man to tell you.' Jim Rosenthal



WHERE'S



YOUR



CARAVAN?



MY LIFE ON FOOTBALL'S B-ROADS



CHRIS HARGREAVES



Chris Hargreaves

**Where's Your Caravan?: My
Life on Football's B-Roads**

«HarperCollins»

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Forget Torres, Rooney, Beckham and the like. This is what football is really about. One man's story of a career in the lower leagues. Chris Hargreaves has been a professional footballer for twenty years. Having started out as a youth team player at Everton he made his debut for Grimsby Town in 1989 and was earmarked as their first million pound sale. It never happened. Instead he went on to play for Scarborough, Hull City, West Brom, Hereford United, Plymouth Argyle, Northampton Town, Brentford, Oxford United and Torquay United. Where's Your Caravan? is the sort of football memoir we don't see enough of these days - an account of life in the lower leagues. It takes us from his wild youth - lots of sex and drugs and drink - through to domesticated family man - school runs and flatpack furniture with plenty of football in between.

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Chris Hargreaves
Where's Your Caravan?



Dedication

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

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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 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 aboard 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-art 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 almightily 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 Liverpoolian 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 crocked 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.)

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