Introduction: The Stanley Show

Stanley Matthews turned matter-of-factly, his stare fixed to avoid eye contact. His expression, washed of emotion, accentuated the slightly sunken, careworn look that made him appear at least as old as his thirty-two years. Time had already gone to work on his hair. It was combed back and still dark but was in the first stages of retreat. In close-up, something seemed to shadow his features, a sadness possibly pleated in the corners of his mouth. No one could have guessed that here was a man at the soaring peak of his powers who had just brought a packed arena to a ferment of excitement.

As Matthews turned, gently hitching the elastic of his loose-fitting shorts on to his hips, the sellout crowd of 75,000 at the Heysel Stadium in Brussels had started to applaud. Moments earlier, England's outside-right had completed a run that even by his standards was exceptional, bewildering Belgium's defence and electrifying the spectators. And that was not the end of this particular piece by Matthews on a pitch made treacherous by a violent cloudburst soon after kick-off. Having wrought havoc with the ball on the turf, he dipped his head, cocked his right boot and lifted the ball over the oncoming keeper. One reporter likened it to a golf shot, Matthews seizing a wedge and lofting

the ball in a meticulous arc. All that was left for Tom Finney to do to collect his second goal of the match was to deflect his header into an unguarded net.

Four-two to England, all four goals heavily dependent on Matthews – and a fifth goal would also bear the winger's mark.

'It is Matthews's Night in the old town tonight,' John Macadam wrote in his dispatch to the *Daily Express*, 'and they do say that some more progressive manufacturers are going to make a special lace to the pattern that Matthews wove around the Belgian defence to help England's 5-2 victory at Heysel Stadium today.' Macadam said of the build-up to Finney's second goal: 'Matthews meandered in and out among the defence until the 70,000-odd of the crowd and the other 21 players were hysterical.'

Even Walter Winterbottom, the donnish and pragmatic manager of England who was not alone in regarding Matthews as flawed, particularly as a team player, was unreserved in his admiration when, years later, he reminisced to me about that fourth goal. After England scored three goals early on, Belgium pulled back to 3-2. 'We were looking a bit thin when Stanley decided to put on a show,' Winterbottom said. 'He made a run from the centre of the field. Their centre-half made a dive at Stanley, bringing his shorts down around his knees, but he still went on dribbling through the Belgian defence and finally chipped the ball over to lay on the goal for Finney. It was so spectacular that as he walked back the whole crowd started a rhythmic handclap in time with his walk. Then the VIPs joined in and in the end so did the players of both teams.'

Charles Buchan, the Sunderland and Arsenal player who turned into a prolific writer on the game, said: 'Never was a goal more brilliantly or opportunely made.'

Matthews's own response to the goal was as muted as it was to anything else that he ever did or had done to him on a football field. It was as if self-possession was what nourished him. Naturally introspective, he had allowed his containment

to harden because of recent events: the degradation of his relationship with Stoke City, the club that had nurtured him, to a point where in early summer he had moved to Blackpool; and the easing of another bond, that with his first wife. Was this the sadness, rising from deep within him, that was snared in the creases of his face?

He had become the most intractable of competitors. Defenders, even those highly practised in the art of intimidation, grew tired of trying to provoke Matthews, before, in his imperious final years as a professional player, to do so was an act tantamount to treason. Teammates grew to understand that he preferred to celebrate with no more than the merest inflection of his facial mask.

The Heysel match, England's first international of the 1947–8 season, took place on Sunday 21 September. Not so long ago German tanks had been parked on the pitch, their iron-toothed, articulated tracks churning the surface. Repairs had taken longer than expected and England's visit marked the official reopening of the stadium after the war. Little wonder the visitors' fourth goal so enraptured the crowd. Their delight evinced not only their appreciation of a player who by now enjoyed worldwide renown but also their relief that football had so royally reclaimed the national arena.

And Matthews was the gleaming star of the show. When Finney looked back on his own career, he said: 'It would be foolish to try to list all the great things I saw Stan do on a football field – I can't recall a game in which his magic didn't play a key role. If I was to select one game, though, it would have to be the England fixture against Belgium in Brussels in the autumn of 1947. I called it the Matthews Match because he was responsible for putting the fear of God up the Belgians.'

No one suffered more than the left-back, Joe Pannaye, who, Macadam reported, 'took a merciless beating pretty much until

the end when his patience wore thin and his elbows began to wear hooks.'

The entertainment in a match that could hardly have risen more spellbindingly to the occasion started early. The England centre-forward, Tommy Lawton, kicked off to Wilf Mannion. The ball then went back to Lawton, on to Tim Ward, on to Matthews, back to Lawton, back to Mannion and then once again to Matthews whose cross Lawton headed into a top corner. England's travelling press corps agreed the goal took twelve seconds and that Belgium's first touch came after they were already a goal down.

After twenty minutes, England were three ahead. Matthews crossed for Mortensen to volley in from twelve yards and then, having been fouled, Matthews looped the free-kick into the goalmouth where Finney's header bounced out of the goalkeeper's grasp and into the goal. Increasingly, said Finney, Belgium 'resorted to tactics of an unpleasant nature' to try to stop Matthews. For a while this altered the course of the game with the home side scoring two goals, one either side of half-time.

Pannaye, of the hooked elbows, was one of those who tried to impede his merciless tormentor however he could. But he and Matthews both knew that this was a capitulation and Pannaye was one of a legion of players who over the years, with intended irony, spoke of the privilege it had been to spend an afternoon or evening being Matthews's dupe. The defender had done reasonably well against Matthews when Belgium lost 2-0 at Wembley in January 1946 but admitted to having been made to look ridiculous by him on this occasion. Pannaye was among those scattered by Matthews as he conjured the fourth goal after, in Finney's words, deciding to break their hearts by waltzing past three challenges. 'He was the best player I've ever seen. A ghost,' Pannaye said, and added: 'I asked some of those close to me to help, but they could do nothing.'

England's fifth goal followed yet another foul by Belgium's

desperate defence on Matthews, who this time played the free-kick short, and tellingly, to Lawton. 'In all his career Matthews has never dominated a game so completely,' Frank Coles told readers of the *Daily Telegraph*. 'He made every one of England's five goals and ran the left flank of the Belgium defence dizzy. The crowd loved the performance of the game's greatest star.'

The year of the Heysel match was the sixteenth of Matthews's career as a professional footballer, which meant it was not even halfway through. He was forty-two when he made his final appearance for England in 1957, more than twenty-two years after his first, and fifty when he played his last Football League match, for Stoke City, in 1965. By then he had long passed into football lore as the game's first player of international renown, a reputation he went on to reinforce with a number of overseas assignments playing, coaching and managing. In 1970, Matthews, at the age of fifty-five, very nearly turned out for the Maltese club he helped to manage, Hibernians, against Real Madrid in a European match in the Bernabéu stadium.

Not all the reporting from Heysel was an unmitigated paean to Matthews. A discordant undercurrent accompanied the eulogising, one that was ever-present during Matthews's playing days but has long since lost its tow, submerged deep beneath the golden reminiscences. Roy Peskett's report from Brussels that appeared in the *Daily Mail* stated: 'Once again the old complaint could be raised that Matthews held up Lawton's attack by not getting rid of the ball until he had beaten one or more men and that he did not come into the game until he was given the ball.'

Despite this recurring theme, Matthews remained on good, if distant, terms with most of his fellow professionals. But his refusal to make concessions, in the way he played and, in some cases, in the way he conducted himself in a wider context, did not always suit the managers he played under. Two of those he encountered at Stoke had had enough of him – and he of them

– by the time he departed; and when he left Blackpool in 1961 he said he no longer saw eye to eye with the manager, Ron Suart.

At international level, too, it seems, fans found it easier to admire Matthews than managers did to manage him. Walter Winterbottom was often exasperated by Matthews's persistence in deploying his gifts as he wished, a privilege of ownership as the player no doubt regarded it, irrespective of the needs of the team. On his side Matthews was irritated by Winterbottom's didacticism. 'I felt Walter Winterbottom never really appreciated my style of play,' Matthews said. 'He wanted a right-winger to track back, tackle and help out in defence. It wasn't my style.'

The sweet-natured Finney would never publicly criticise Matthews. Many tried to goad him into doing so and he was entitled to feel aggrieved given that his own game could be affected by his fellow forward's mode of play. In his report from Brussels after the Heysel match, Frank Coles had written 'as long as we have Matthews I do not think we have room for Finney among the forwards . . . We need a more direct left winger to balance the line.' In other words, having two players who procrastinated on the wing was unacceptable. Finney, grudgingly on a few occasions when he was with close friends, accepted that Matthews's excellence placed him above the expectations that governed others.

This was the dilemma all his critics had to confront eventually. Having upbraided Matthews for aspects of his performance against Belgium, Roy Peskett added: 'But how can you judge by ordinary standards a man who not only gave the crowd and the Belgian defenders something they won't forget in a hurry, but figured in all the goals, four of which were headed from his passes?'

What distinguished Matthews was his speed and skilfulness, which he unleashed with deadly synchrony. Arthur Hopcraft, an outstanding writer on the game, said: 'Matthews did not

invent dribbling with a football; he raised it to its highest degree.' He added that before Matthews and throughout his career other players did the same kind of thing, but at a lower level. Dribbling then died after Matthews retired, Hopcraft maintained, until George Best resurrected it nearly a decade later. At times Matthews seemed to be playing in a different dimension from those around him, rendering the game's old formulas meaningless. Regardless of the criticism, his nickname, the Wizard of the Dribble – in Germany they called him *Der Zauberer*, the Magician – was entirely appropriate with his sorcery forever bemusing opponents and bedazzling crowds.

The numerical evidence of Matthews's appeal is staggering. From very early on in his career he would regularly add upwards of 10,000 spectators to a gate. In 1934, during his first spell at Stoke, crowds averaged more than 66,000 during a run of six matches played by the club. The lure of Matthews helped to secure what survives as the highest attendance for an international match in Britain – 149,547 for Scotland v England in 1937 – and for a game played at an English club ground – 84,569 for Manchester City v Stoke City in an FA Cup tie at Maine Road in 1934.

They are numbers that make it almost inconceivable that, for all but the very end of his career, he earned no more from playing than £20 a week, the most allowed just before the upper pay limit was scrapped in 1961. He was quite worldly enough to appreciate the imbalance between his reimbursement and his worth and astute enough to do something about it. One obituarist noted: 'Self-effacing but shrewd, Matthews knew how to market himself at a time when professional players were restricted to a maximum wage.' For some this translated into an unacceptable acquisitiveness; for others it meant no more than a proper claim on his due.

Throughout virtually the whole of Matthews's time as a Football

League player his life was sombrely backlit by a marriage that did not work. This must have had an impact on the way he was, as a footballer and public figure, but, hitherto, has been largely unexplored. It was not something he discussed either with acquaintances or with those close to him.

Soon after he stopped playing his life underwent a dramatic change. In 1967 he met the Czech lady, Mila Winterova – 'the true love of my life', he called her – who would become his second wife. It was a romance that would make Matthews's later years every bit as fascinating as his early ones. Throughout more than three decades together, starting with an elopement that a much dozier media than today's failed to register, Mila kept from Matthews a dark secret from her past – one that I happened upon only towards the end of writing this book.

Matthews's thirty-three years of work as a professional footballer is, though, what stands as his monument, an unrivalled body of achievement that, while rooted in England, enhanced many thousands of lives around the world by opening people's eyes to what was humanly possible.

Chapter 1

'Our father never raised his hand to us. He never swore'

Children's excited voices rise and fall in the sweet air of a spring morning. Every so often the sterner tones of a grown man take over, stilling the chatter. The party of four – a father, trim and upright as a Grenadier, and his three sons – arrive at a gate, climb it and set off across the next field. After about twenty yards the father makes them all stop. He gestures the smallest of the three boys towards him and, from a bag, produces a pair of shoes. Spikes protrude from the soles. The other three stand patiently as the boy changes into the running shoes. The father then points to a spot some fifty yards ahead of him and moments later, on a shouted command, the boy, who is no more than four years old, sets off at a sprint. He moves easily over the grass that has been cropped by grazing sheep. The party regroups and again the father and his two older sons look on as the small boy takes off on a second sprint, once again quickly gaining speed on pale, skinny legs.

The walk from Hanley to the village of Werrington and back – a round trip of some ten miles – was a Sunday ritual for the Matthews family. They would do most of the outward journey along the main road before, with a mile to go, cutting up across fields. Sometimes Ada Matthews, who had grown up in

Washerwall Lane, Werrington, went with her husband, Jack, and their three boys: Jack, Arthur and Stanley. So, later, would a fourth son, Ron. He was the youngest by eight years – a span of seventeen years covered the four sons – and sometimes later on he alone would accompany his father on the walk to and from Werrington, a village of just a few houses, much smaller than it is today. Jack had once walked there when he was courting Ada; now the visits were to see Ada's widowed father, Henry Hewitt, and her sister Emmy, a spinster who ran a shop. Ron remembered the old man, who had worked in the now extinct local coal mines, sitting in a rocking chair sucking on a clay pipe.

Jack Senior had detected Stanley's sprinting potential at a very young age. A former professional boxer with firm – cranky, some thought – ideas about physical wellbeing, he observed his sons closely, not simply to discern whether they had athletic ability but also, if they had, to classify what it was. Thus Arthur was spared doing any exercise at all although he later became a keen sprinter; Jack and Ron were simply made to run in ordinary plimsolls; and Stanley alone was coached to sprint. In spiked shoes, what is more. Finding a pair to fit someone as small as Stanley must, at that time, have required a difficult search.

But then Jack Matthews had never been one to take projects lightly, as his lives as a professional boxer and barber testified. The trajectory of his fighting career suggests success based on a strict fitness regime and perseverance rather than the quick realisation of an exceptional talent. He fought at a time when records were kept erratically and often included the results of fights in fairground booths, which were mentioned in British boxing legislation as late as the 1950s. Stanley said in an early autobiography that his father had 350 fights, losing just nine of them, but boxing historians have traced only fifty or so – between 1909 and 1921 – of which he lost at least eighteen. What is certain is that his wins comfortably outweighed his defeats and

he achieved a level of proficiency that placed him well above that of 'crowd pleaser', a boxing euphemism for jobbing fighters served up as fodder for those making their way in the sport.

Jack Matthews laid claim to two unofficial titles, the Midlands featherweight championship and the Potteries featherweight championship, and shared the ring with national and European champions. He might well have challenged for a national title himself had not the 1914–18 war interrupted normal life across Europe. When he was much older he was the modest, grey-haired little man who owned a barber's shop, Stanley said, 'but old-timers would address him with the air of folk proud to be familiar with a celebrity'.

Harold Alderman, the boxing historian, described Jack Matthews as an all-round action fighter who was very speedy, had good footwork and hit hard with either hand. He must have had a reasonable defence, too, because photographs show that he emerged from his boxing career virtually unmarked. This was quite an accomplishment considering he was active for so long and his bouts lasted up to twenty rounds. What he lacked in natural ability he made up for in time spent on physical conditioning and in training. His son Jack remembered in later life that he watched with wide-eyed amazement as his father performed one of his party pieces, lining up six chairs and clearing them with a standing jump. His athleticism may help to account for why he avoided the boxer's hallmark, the squashed nose. And his nose must have been quite a target given that just beneath it he sported what was reckoned to be the last waxed moustache worn in the ring by a pro. Many a riled opponent must have wanted to spoil its defiant symmetry.

His greatest fight was undoubtedly the first of his three contests against George Mackness, a renowned scrapper from Kettering, that fifty years later was still being talked about as 'the greatest fight ever'. It was held at the National Sporting Club, the prestigious members' club just off London's Covent Garden.

Founded in 1891 by the 5th Earl of Lonsdale among others, it is credited with having had a huge influence on establishing professional boxing in the form we know it today. Matthews's first bout against Mackness took place there on 13 May 1912.

How Jack Matthews came to be in the ring at all was just one of the remarkable aspects of a fight that *Boxing* magazine said was 'simply astounding from start to finish'. Mackness had been due to box Albert Hough of Stafford, whose manager had been pressing for some time for his man to be allowed to showcase his skills at the NSC. But Hough failed to appear and Matthews, who was there 'to hurl challenges at various featherweights', took his place.

The fight lasted only until the fourth round. The fury with which the two men went at each other must have tested the NSC's tradition of requiring its members and their guests to remain silent during rounds. Both men, eschewing all but relentless aggression, narrowly beat the count on at least two occasions. In total there were seventeen knock-downs, Matthews suffering eleven of them. Matthews, though, triumphed in a climax that turned *Boxing*'s prose a vivid purple: 'Still his [Matthews's] bolt seemed shot, and probably would have been, had it not been determined that the last stage of this miraculous contest would transcend even all the miracles which had gone before. Matthews reeled up weak, and looked a beaten man, but covering well and keeping his head, called up his old guard. Mackness charged in like a tidal wave, and might have got home with a finisher had he not allowed Matthews a clear glimpse of his uncovered chin. This was enough, and the fatal right hook whizzed through the air to connect with the angle of the chin. The punch lifted Mackness from his feet, and, spinning him over, dropped him on the back of his head with a thud which sent the last of his senses to oblivion.'

Neither of the Mackness–Matthews rematches, in November and December of the same year, produced quite the same

drama, although both did end eventfully. Matthews dominated the first but was disqualified for a low blow after the ringside doctor 'humanely grasped the situation, and ordered the contest to cease' in the fourth round. Matthews won the final fight, held at the Shelton Drill Hall in Hanley, where in due course he would present himself to enlist in the 3rd/5th North Staffordshire Regiment before going off to war for three years. In the second round Mackness missed with a right uppercut, fell through the ropes and landed heavily on the back of his head. Mackness being unable to continue, the referee awarded the fight to Matthews.

After the war Matthews was no longer the fighter he had been. In September 1919 he and the Scotsman Bob Donati left a bad odour in Manchester's Free Trade Hall. One account said that Matthews, who used 'to hit like a horse', had lost his power. Donati was even worse and his corner threw in the towel in the seventh round, sparing the crowd, as much as their man, unnecessary punishment. Jack Matthews fought only a handful more fights before packing it in in 1921 to spend more time in his barber's shop.

Two stories Stanley Matthews passed down about his father's boxing career are worth retelling even if neither contest is in any official record. Soon after he started fighting professionally, Jack Matthews was approached by a promoter who had accepted a wager to find a novice capable of beating a promising young Manchester fighter called Chambers. The Manchester publican who offered the wager was so unimpressed by Matthews, whom the promoter had spotted in a Hanley gym, that he said he would not pay him for the fight. The publican was further discouraged about the quality of the contest about to take place when Matthews stripped off to reveal a concave, etiolated body with no obvious source of power. Matthews proceeded to dominate the fight, knocked Chambers out in the fifth and so dazzled a group of Mancunians that they offered to set him

up in a hairdressing business in the town. 'But Dad loved the Potteries,' his son said, 'and could never be persuaded to leave Hanley.'

The other story concerned a bout at Liverpool Stadium. After it, Matthews spent the night at a police station while his beaten opponent battled to regain consciousness. Fortunately for all concerned he did. If he had died, Stanley said, his father would have been charged with manslaughter. The fact that the police became involved and no record exists of the fight suggests the contest may not have been officially sanctioned.

Jack Matthews's *nom de guerre*, 'The Fighting Barber from Hanley', was apt given that it was with his fists that he secured the capital to set himself up in business. With purses and side stakes, even fighters of Matthews's weight and ranking could make tidy money. Information about the exact amounts is scant – inevitably, much of the dealing, particularly in small halls, was done in dark corners – but enough can be gleaned to get a good idea of the sums involved. In 1911, Matthews himself 'challenged any 9 stone man in England, for any amount up to £200'. A few weeks before his second bout against Mackness, Matthews fought Tommy Mitchell of Chesterfield at the NSC, standing to win a £75 purse and £50 side stake, but lost despite a strong finish in a fifteen-round contest. He was more successful a year later when he beat Billy Gerkin of Newcastle under Lyme in another fifteen-rounder at the Hanley Skating Rink, this time picking up £85 – the purse was £60 – for his points win. Considering how often he fought and won, these sums would have mounted up to a significant total.

Matthews, whose father Henry had worked as a potter, was as assiduous in the business of tending heads with scissors and razor as he was when preparing to belabour them with his fists in the ring. His shop at No. 7 Market Street – now Huntbach Street – was a shortish walk from the family's terraced home in Seymour Street. 'It was quite a big place: four basins, hot towels, the lot,'

Ron Matthews said. Opening was six days a week, sometimes seven: weekdays from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., except Thursdays, when it shut at 1 p.m. in line with early closing, and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. On some Sundays he would open from 9 a.m. until noon for Jewish customers, whom he would also serve on Christmas Day. A press photograph taken in his later years shows Matthews Senior standing in the doorway of his shop in a white overall coat, buttoned down the front, and with an immaculately knotted tie. He is still handsome, distinguished even, with strong features and incorruptible expression, the picture of an honest proprietor. His premises shared space with a tobacconist's, which is why the shop window is filled with a range of pipe-smoking paraphernalia. A clearance sale is advertised: 'All pipes, pouches &c in the window 5D. each. Pick which you like. Must sell.'

As well as employing a full-time apprentice, Jack Matthews received varying levels of assistance from each of his sons. Jack Junior eventually opened his own shop, while Arthur stayed on as his father's number two. Before football monopolised Stanley's life, his tasks included sweeping up, brushing the hair from coats and preparing customers for a shave by lathering their chins. He said he enjoyed the work mainly because he liked listening to the yarns his father exchanged with customers. These were invariably about boxing. One tale involved a threat of violence against Jack Matthews unless he threw a certain fight. Stanley said that when he first heard it he was chided by a customer for paying more attention to the story than his lathering, which became increasingly wayward as the plot unwound. In 1964 the BBC made a documentary about Stanley called *Saturday Hero* and filmed him armed with shaving brush lathering up Billy Thompson. Four decades earlier, Thompson had been the first customer the nine-year-old would-be footballer had made ready for his father's cut-throat razor.

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John 'Jack' Matthews and Ada Hewitt had married on Tuesday 10 July 1906 in St Mark's, the parish church of Shelton in Hanley. He was twenty-one and, as the marriage document certifies, already a 'hairdresser'; she a year younger and a slight figure even beside her featherweight husband, although a little less slight than usual, possibly, on account of her being nearly six months pregnant. It would be hard to imagine someone further removed from the popular image of a pugilist's wife – several degrees of separation existing between her and the boxer's moll beloved of American fiction – and she lived in a state of suppressed anxiety whenever he fought.

The addresses of the bride and groom were given as, respectively, Nos 77 and 88 Mill Street, which was in an area that in the recent past had been described as 'very unhealthy'. A local history talks of 'open middens', or refuse heaps, draining into Mill Street, which soon after the couple married would be renamed Etruria Road. The first son, Jack, was born at No. 77 on 26 October 1906 and by the time Ron arrived in 1923 the family of six fitted rather too cosily into 89 Seymour Street, a small terraced house with no garden. They stayed there, though, until 1934, shortly before Stanley married, when they moved a few doors down to No. 63. This was a superior property with a small garden and greenhouse but still with an outside lavatory.

Seymour Street could have passed for one of many thousands of streets that grew up in manufacturing towns in central England during the country's industrialisation. They had little to commend them bar the fact that the closeness of the rudimentary terraced houses fostered a sense of community, of which, in the case of Seymour Street, impromptu games of twenty-a-side street football were a good example.

Seymour Street is in the heart of Hanley, originally one of the separate towns now joined under the title Stoke-on-Trent. Arnold Bennett, the author who was born a short distance from Seymour Street in 1867, changes Hanley to Hanbridge in his

novels and refers to it as one of 'the Five Towns' that make up the Potteries. In fact there are six, Bennett having omitted Fenton apparently because he preferred the literary ring of 'Five Towns'. Bennett's novels gave a romantic, if not necessarily flattering, sheen to the sort of setting in which Stanley Matthews was raised: 'The rows of little red houses with amber chimney pots . . . all netted in flowing scarves of smoke.'

A rather grittier view of Stoke in general and where Matthews grew up in particular comes from Derek Hodgson, who was in charge of administration and publicity at Stoke City Football Club in the 1960s: 'Stanley came from a pretty poor background and of course money has always been tight in Stoke-on-Trent. It's one of the most plundered areas of Britain. When you think of all the craftsmanship that has always gone into the product of the Potteries and how little has come back it's scandalous, absolutely scandalous.'

This heartfelt assessment would have horrified the most famous founding father of Stoke's pottery industry, Josiah Wedgwood, an abolitionist associated with the 'Am I Not A Man And A Brother' anti-slavery medallion. But Hodgson received support for his view after helping to redesign the football club's logo so that it honoured the town's heritage by incorporating a pottery kiln. 'A lot of the supporters won't like that,' he was told. 'It will remind them of being sweated to death for very low wages.' After Hodgson left, the kiln disappeared from the logo.

Jack and Ada Matthews fitted a stereotypical image of working-class parents: he very much in charge, she the homemaker who, although possibly coming across as submissive, was quite capable of mounting effective resistance if she felt it was needed. They were the staunchest of couples. 'My father was devoted to my mother,' Ron Matthews said. 'I don't mean this in the sense that they went around holding hands. Simply that his life was devoted to her.' Among other things he relieved her of some of the household chores by paying for

the laundry to be done and employing a Mr Holland to clean twice a week.

Ron Matthews described the barber's shop as his father's second devotion, which was why, given the long hours he worked, the family did not see much of him. Unfailingly, Jack and Ada would go out together on Thursdays, after early closing. A day at Uttoxeter races, a short train journey away – they never owned a car – was a particular favourite. They would always be back around seven o'clock. When Ron was still young, Stanley would be detailed to look after him on the afternoons their parents went out. 'When I returned from school, Stanley would always be there. He told me that all I ever wanted to eat was custard.'

'I've heard people talk and you would think my father was a Victorian or Edwardian type . . . everything black and white,' Ron said. 'It wasn't like that. There were grey areas. He never raised his hand to us; he never swore. But he was of a firm disposition. And not one for jokes. If he cracked more than one I can't remember it.'

When Ron started saying 'Crikey!' in imitation of the comic-book character Billy Bunter, his father admonished him: 'I want a word with you. I'd like you to stop using the word crikey.' Later Ron plucked up the courage to seek an explanation. 'Because it's worrying your mother and me that every time you say it we think you're going to say something else,' his father said. Even in a non-churchgoing household an exclamatory 'Christ!' would certainly have been forbidden.

Apart from boxing and managing his own business, Jack Matthews's only other occupation that we know about was his brief stint as a conscripted soldier in the First World War, when his starting pay would have been a shilling a day and would not have gone much higher.

In March 1915, soon after his third son, Stanley, was born, Jack

Matthews joined up with the 3rd/5th North Staffords. It was a territorial force with headquarters first at Shelton and then at Stoke Drill Hall. The men often trained in Hanley Park. The Victoria Ground, home of Stoke City Football Club, was also used for training and as a parade ground on Sundays before the battalion went to church.

Jack appeared in an exhibition bout in May and, a few days later, refereed two bouts at a professional show in Longton. *Boxing* magazine said at the time: 'By the enlistment of Jack Matthews, the Hanley feather-wt, who now holds the rank of corporal, and his brother, [Private] George Matthews,* the cream of the boxing talent here are serving in His Majesty's Forces.' Jack then fought two bouts at Hoxton in London in February 1916 just days before the 3rd/5th moved to hutments at Catterick Bridge near Richmond in Yorkshire. He did not box again until September 1919 when the war was over.

Apart from this, records of Jack Matthews's wartime activity are not easily found. Nor was it something he talked about at home. 'Looking back, fighting in the Great War did have an effect on my father,' Ron said. 'When I was small I asked him how many Germans he killed and he told me firmly never to talk like that again. He came through unscathed, but he always said that they should have put the generals in the trenches.'

Stanley's birth was at a time when the hostilities were coming perilously close to home and the weapons of war were getting ever nastier. Germany had just carried out the first Zeppelin raids on Britain, while on the Continent the forces of Kaiser Wilhelm, trying to dislodge the Russians from positions west of Warsaw, had introduced poison gas. Delivered into this fracturing world, Stanley could hardly have had a more contrastingly peaceful

* Jack's brothers Charlie and George also boxed professionally. George, the youngest of the trio, was reckoned to be the best of them but was seriously injured fighting in the trenches at the Somme.

arrival. Ada was on her own at 89 Seymour Street when the contractions began. Not until Stanley had exercised his lungs for the first time did assistance arrive. The event is recalled by a small black plaque with gold lettering fixed to the front of the house, which reads:

Sir Stanley Matthews CBE
Footballer and Gentleman
Born here 1 February 1915.

Stanley himself remembered a serene early childhood. In later life, he acknowledged how difficult it must have been to raise a large family when the privations of those stringent economic times, particularly for poorer families, were considerable. But there were no signs of hardship that he could remember. 'All I can recall is the support my family gave me,' he said, 'all the help and encouragement a kid could ever wish for.'

His father's influence was what Stanley remembered most vividly; his mother's contribution was also substantial but was not the sort that would have registered with a small boy who led an outdoors life. Several members of the family have attested to how, in the days before there was a cookery book in every kitchen, the untutored Ada improvised and experimented to great effect. 'She was lovely,' Jean, the older of Stanley's children, said, 'and a terrific cook. There was a fireplace with the oven next to it – you can imagine in the summer how hot it got – and she used to make fantastic meals in this oven.'

The Sunday walks to and from Werrington provided Jack Senior with the perfect opportunity to preach the tenets of his philosophy on fitness. Respiratory exercises were what underpinned everything, in particular standing and taking deep breaths, which was central to early morning PE sessions. Generally one son at a time took part in these supervised sessions, which included a series of physical jerks in addition to

the breathing. On the weekend walks Jack would elaborate on his theories. He told Ron on one occasion that different types of breathing were needed at different times. 'He said to me, "When you play sport and are tired you shouldn't take deep breaths. You should go like this . . ."' Ron then demonstrated a series of fast, shallow breaths. 'I thought he was telling just me this but when I started to tell it to Stanley he interrupted me and said, "I'll tell you what he told you – he told you to take short breaths when you were tired." He had told us all the same. He also said never squat because it will hurt your knees.'

All the boys led sporting lives, although none came even close to emulating Stanley. Jack was the one in whom his father invested the greatest hope that the family's boxing tradition would be continued. 'Jack was a good boxer and I watched several of his fights at the Palais de Danse in Hanley,' Stanley said. These were amateur bouts that Jack continued with until his mid-twenties, but he disliked the training and admitted he lacked the driven attitude to sport possessed by his father and Stanley.

The evidence suggests that Jack boxed as long as he did only to please his father. Like Arthur, he preferred athletics to any of his other sporting interests. Stanley remembered that both his older brothers were fine sprinters who frequently brought home medals from athletics meetings. Ron came nearest to following Stanley into a life of professional football although he was always amusingly dismissive of his ability. 'I was on the Blackpool staff when I was fifteen. I was in the A team with Stan Mortensen. I reckon I would have been the greatest player in the world if it hadn't been for one thing: I couldn't kick the ball.'

Stanley was comfortably the outstanding athlete of the family, his ability not simply confined to running fast and playing football. He grew up to be at least competent in other sports, including tennis and golf. Jimmy Vallance, the Stoke City trainer who became Matthews's father-in-law, was a keen golfer and

he introduced Stanley to the sport while he was still a teenager. Matthews liked the game so much that, once he joined Stoke, he said he occasionally ignored the club rule that the golf course was out of bounds on Thursdays and Fridays. This was to conserve energy for Saturday's game. 'When the club got wind I was breaking this rule,' Matthews said, 'they soon put a stop to it.'*

He liked cricket, too. He might even have made something of himself in that sport at a time when playing both professional cricket and football was possible. The story goes, though, that the promising young wicketkeeper fluffed his chance to progress when, aged twelve, he walked the four miles to Longton for a schoolboy trial. As he approached the ground he saw all the others in white flannels and, overwhelmed by shyness, fled the scene – and that was that. He also became very proficient at tennis, a game that both his children, particularly his son, would play far better than most.**

Under his father's watchful eye, Matthews had little chance to abandon sprinting as he did cricket. It is unlikely he would have wanted to, anyway. The sessions on the walks to Werrington helped to foster a deep love of running in Stanley. He ran everywhere as a kid, he said. 'I never walked when I could trot and never trotted when I could run flat out.' He took to running around the track at Finney Gardens, a recreation ground near

* Vallance's tuition and years of practice helped Matthews achieve a handicap of ten in his late thirties. Whether his handicap went any lower is a matter of some conjecture. It has been written that he played off scratch, which was not the case. A report that appeared in the tribute edition of Stoke's local paper after his death may have been a mite more accurate, but still sounds overdone. It said he could have been a top golf professional, having 'once reached a handicap of two, often playing with Bobby Locke and Henry Cotton during his time in South Africa'.

** Matthews, partnered by Jim Westland, once beat Freddie Steele and Frank Soo in the final of a doubles tournament played among Stoke City players at the home of a friend of a club director. And when the England football team toured Europe in 1938, Matthews won a table tennis competition involving all the players, beating Frank Broome of Aston Villa 21-14 in the final.

Seymour Street. His father came along, too, when he could afford to leave work, and brought with him a stopwatch. He secretly timed his son and established that he was exceptionally quick, as fleet-footed as boys nearly twice his age. The next step was to enter Stanley in the August Bank Holiday races at the Victoria Ground, where there was a 440-yard running track made from brick-red cinder around the outside of the football pitch. These races were a popular feature of the late summer in Stoke, with large crowds milling around stalls that sold toffee apples, candyfloss and sweets for the children. Many of the older spectators turned to the bookmakers lined up by the track as the place to fritter away their money. At senior level, international-class athletes were among those who took part, but betting was not confined to their races.

Stanley dissolved into tears the first time his father took him along, overawed by the prospect of performing in front of so many people. A year later, aged six, he conquered his nerves and, with the help of a generous distance handicap for one so young – forty-five yards in front of the older boys on scratch – came first in the under-fifteen 100 yards. The local paper reported he won by 'many yards' with older brother Jack among those panting in his wake. 'On the time this six-year-old winner accomplished – 11sec – an adult champion could not have beaten him off this mark,' the report added.

According to a story passed down by the family, Stanley's father, acting on the evidence of his stopwatch, to which no one else was privy, had backed him to finish first. With some of his gains he bought two goldfish for his son as a reward, conceivably in a lopsided exchange for the watch that was the race winner's official prize. Stanley ran in the 100 yards for the next eight years, coming first four times, including on his last appearance when he was fourteen and had a scratch handicap.

By this age, though, Stanley no longer dreamed of an Olympic gold medal on the running track.

Chapter 2

'If you play the game of life as you played football this afternoon your success in life is assured'

By the time he reached his teens, Matthews's obsession was football, a game that embraced his two great sporting attributes: exceptional speed over a short distance and heightened foot-eye coordination.

The latter was not a concept that was talked about in the 1930s and is still not fully understood. The evidence is pretty convincing, though, that areas of the brain respond to repetitive activity and can be enlarged or diminished depending on how much you use them. Research has shown, for example, that inner-city taxi drivers' grey matter enlarges and adapts to help them store a detailed mental map of the streets they work. As a rule, the area that controls the arms and hands is larger than the one that governs the legs and feet, but in Matthews's case a predisposition, compulsion even, to dribble a football meant that over time he transformed his aptitude into an extraordinary skill. Even Arthur, who, Stanley said, rarely had a good word to say about his younger brother because 'he found me a bit of a nuisance', was sufficiently impressed to tell friends admiringly that 'I had trained the ball to obey me'.

Sport, football in particular, had towered over any academic

considerations during Matthews's time at Wellington Road School, which was just around the corner from where he lived. While he described himself as a model pupil who was never the source of any trouble during the nine years he was there from the age of five, he also confessed to studying the clock more attentively than books. He reckoned he could be out of the door almost before the fourth chime marked the end of the school day. No doubt he would have been staggered if he had known then that some sixty-five years later a stained-glass window dedicated to him would be installed at the school, now known as Hanley St Luke's CE Aided Primary. The window has eight panels depicting the various stages of his life from schooldays to retirement.

Ada Matthews would admonish her son for a lack of commitment to his studies. She was understandably unaware that his habit of kicking a paper ball, stone or other object in front of him as he hurried home for tea, bread and jam, wolfed down before heading out to play on a patch of ground known as Meakins' Square, was in fact more relevant than any homework he might have done. One particularly touching story, told by Stanley, about his obsession with practising ball skills concerned the time a septic toe kept him away from school. The frustration of not being allowed to kick a football eventually became too much. When his mother went shopping, leaving him alone, he wrapped his foot in a tea cosy and hopped into the garden to do what he liked doing most. His parents chided him for jeopardising his recovery from what could have developed into a dangerous infection – these were the days before the use of penicillin in everyday medicine – but Matthews claimed that from then on his toe healed rapidly even though it was permanently disfigured.

Disfigurement was also a peril of playing on Meakins' Square, which was right opposite the Matthews home and littered with the sharp-edged detritus from a nearby pottery. Matthews

believed that despite the dangers, responsible for a lifelong scar on his brother Jack's knee, he learned invaluable lessons from the endless games that up to forty children at a time would play on their make-believe Wembley. Not only did it help to develop his ball control, it instilled in all of them the sense that a good game of football depended on accepting decisions, which in these games they made themselves. Those who continually argued about the self-imposed rulings were made to feel unwelcome until they changed their attitude or went elsewhere.

Matthews's rapid advance as a footballer came to the attention of the local education authority – and landed the school in trouble. Officials felt his promotion to play for an older age group, while still in an infant class, threatened to impede his academic progress. The headmaster received an instruction that Matthews should return to playing with his peers. When, eventually, he was old enough to play for the school's senior team, Matthews's height was regarded as a greater asset than his ball control and he played at centre-half. But he was encouraged by the school's enlightened games master, Jimmy Slack, to push forward whenever the team fell behind or were so dominant that the defence was underemployed. On one occasion he scored eight times in helping to turn a 2-1 deficit into a 13-2 victory, for which the headmaster, Mr Terry, gave him sixpence; on another he contributed eleven goals to an 18-0 victory.

His speed and goal-scoring prowess were what eventually led Slack to play him on the right wing and it was in this position that he was chosen, aged just fourteen, to play for the North against the South in an England schoolboys' trial at Nuneaton. Evidently he did not, initially, like the isolation of being on the wing but he made enough of an impression to be selected in this position for England against the Rest at Kettering Town's Rockingham Road ground on Saturday 6 April 1929. This match, played in warm sunshine, attracted a record crowd for a schoolboy trial of more than 4,000. Matthews responded with

a conspicuous performance in a 4-2 victory. His contributions included the first goal after four minutes, when he cut in from the right to put away a cross supplied by West Ham's A. G. Hooper, playing on the opposite wing, and a near miss in the sixteenth minute when he hooked a ball on to a post. He received praise for being, with Hooper, the main threat. The Rest's two goals were scored by Ted Fenton, who went on to play for and manage West Ham. One other feature of the game was commented on by the referee, Captain Linnitt. He noted that 'not a single foul was committed all afternoon'.

After such a performance, Matthews's inclusion in the schools international against Wales at Dean Park, Bournemouth, two weeks later cannot have been a great surprise. Even so, hearing confirmation that he had been picked to wear the England shirt in an international match for the first time gave him almost as big a thrill as any subsequent honour. Years later he recalled the mixture of shock and mind-spinning excitement that overcame him when his headmaster passed on the news. The trip to Bournemouth entailed his first visit to London and his first stay in a hotel. Taking in the size and grandeur of the buildings in the capital was another overwhelming experience. Being waited on by grown-ups in the hotel produced more confusion.

Wales turned the match into an overseas trip by taking a ferry across the Bristol Channel to Weston-super-Mare before travelling on to Bournemouth. It proved a smoother passage than England experienced in the build-up to the game. On the eve of the match, news reached the Grand Hotel, where the England team were staying, that the West Ham players Fenton and Hooper, who had done well in the trial at Kettering, had been in contact with smallpox suspects. The disease was now a rarity in Britain, with endemic cases close to being wiped out, but the unfortunate Fenton and Hooper had to be withdrawn from the team.

One footballer's misfortune is invariably another's big

opportunity and on this occasion Cyril Dean was the beneficiary. A local player disappointed not to make the original selection, Dean came into the side and did not waste the chance to make an impression in England's three-goal win. Matthews caught the eye only occasionally. His main contribution was combining with Dean to lay on the first goal for the centre-forward, Jack Smith of Huddersfield. The second goal was controversial. The visitors claimed it should have been disallowed because the ball struck the higher of two crossbars, which should have meant a goal kick. The lower bar, fitted to reduce the goal to schoolboy size, was the one that counted, but play continued and Dean scored from the rebound.

The occasion also introduced Matthews to the sort of peripheral activities that were part of playing international football. The agenda included a tour of the town and lunch and dinner at the Town Hall, where the deputy mayor greeted the teams. A local paper quoted one of Matthews's teammates as saying: 'Well, we're having a jolly time – but, golly, fancy going to lunch with the deputy-mayor.' The speeches also rang with folksy sentiment. An after-dinner speaker told his young audience: 'If you play the game of life as you played football this afternoon your success in life is assured.'

Matthews received his first England cap, made from red silk with a gold tassel, but it was the only one he collected as a schoolboy. After his so-so performance in Bournemouth, he was not picked for the next match against Scotland schools at Hampden Park. He had not known such rejection before and said that the disappointment he felt was immense.

The first major change brought about by Matthews's facility for playing football was an end to the idea that he might become a bricklayer. His father had found Stanley work with a builder friend, who took him on as an apprentice when he left school in 1929 at fourteen. 'It was hard work but I enjoyed it,' Stanley said. He never lost his fascination for the trade, claiming he

always regarded pointing brickwork as his fallback profession, a task about as far removed as it is possible to imagine from the nimble-footed trade that would give his life such content.*

Having instigated the idea of his son entering the building trade, Jack Matthews then took the decision that he should abandon it, reckoning it was foolish for Stanley to risk injury on a building site so close to turning fifteen, the age at which he could join the staff of a club. 'Health and fitness come first. This work will kill you,' he told him. While he waited for his fifteenth birthday, Stanley filled his time subjecting himself to the fitness regime devised for him by his father and playing for Stoke St Peter's, a club that supplied Stoke City with a number of players.

The decision to put aside one set of muddy boots for another could not have been difficult, despite Stanley's professed liking for manual labour. His prospects of making a decent living as a professional footballer were by now pretty obvious. His selection for England schoolboys had given substance to local tittle-tattle about his ability. Around the time of his appearance in the schools match against Wales, Stoke City invited him to join in training sessions at their Victoria Ground where he took part in what the local paper called 'private trials'. Simultaneously, Tom Mather, who was halfway through his twelve years as City manager, started to pay regular visits to Jack Matthews's barber's shop.

Not unusually for a manager in those days, Mather, from Chorley, Lancashire, where he was born in 1888, had an administrative rather than a playing background in football, having been assistant secretary at Manchester City and then

* Although he unquestionably enjoyed certain aspects of his recognition, Matthews retained a strong residual yearning for the sort of uncomplicated life led by those close to him during childhood. A first-team colleague at Stoke told of sitting next to Matthews, by now a national figure, in first class on a train. Matthews said he had been watching a porter putting suitcases in a compartment, sweeping the platform, going off to have a smoke. Arguably the world's greatest footballer then turned and said: 'There's something in that normal life, isn't there.'

Bolton Wanderers. Bolton was where, notionally at least, he started out as a manager. Appointed at the start of the First World War, he was called up by the Royal Navy almost immediately and remained manager in name only until 1919. He then went to Southend United where in 1923 he achieved the unflattering distinction of being the first manager to be sacked by the club.

After these two false starts in management, Mather served Stoke well. He still looked more bureaucrat than football club manager, although, again, this was not uncommon in the 1930s. He rarely left his house without first donning a bowler hat. When he entered Jack Matthews's shop he would put aside the bowler for a trim or shave before turning to the real reason he was there, to make the case for young Stanley joining the club. Mather was well aware that Port Vale were also interested in the local lad. At that time Vale still played at the Old Recreation Ground in Hanley, which was even closer to Seymour Street than the Victoria Ground, and were Stanley's initial preference. As a small boy he regularly attended their home matches. Bob Connelly was his favourite player, a Scottish centre-half who was one of those sturdy, pragmatic types whose lives were soon to be tormented by the young Matthews. Despite their different styles, Stanley had an instinctive affinity with Connelly's devotion to the game and the club. 'He carried them on his shoulders for many years,' Stanley said admiringly.*

There was no question that anyone but Jack Matthews would have the final say in which club his son joined. He responded cautiously – brusquely, even – to Mather's preliminary offers. He was far too canny to reveal his preference early on, if indeed he had one. He recognised that Port Vale, who were on the brink of returning to the Second Division from the Third Division North as the 1929–30 season unwound, had their attractions.

* Connelly's commitment was indeed impressive. Between January 1927 and November 1929 he did not miss one of a sequence of 127 matches.

Not least Stanley's support for the club, which would survive his decision not to join them.

In the final account Jack Matthews gave high marks to the solicitous way in which Mather had pursued his son's services and so it was that he bestowed Stanley on Division Two side Stoke City FC. With apprenticeships not being introduced until the 1960s, Matthews's employment in the first instance was under a loose arrangement whereby he would work as an office boy while being given time to develop his football. This was agreed without Stanley's knowledge and news of his engagement by Stoke ostensibly to do a clerical job was broken to him by Mather when he visited Seymour Street on the eve of his fifteenth birthday.

Matthews also did menial tasks such as cleaning the dressing rooms. On match days he would help the visiting team carry kit from their bus and run water for the post-match baths. Any sign of familiarity or cockiness by an apprentice, however slight, was liable to be punished by senior players, who would have learned to their own costs during national service the perils of being too confident. On one occasion Matthews's reward for having the temerity to say 'Good morning' to the first team was to be thrown into a bath fully clothed. On another, playing in a match while still a junior, he was told by a grizzled old pro that he had a big head after he beat the full-back, rounded the keeper and then side-footed his shot against a post. 'Young players were not expected to try to be clever,' Matthews said. He was paid no more than a pittance for doing chores in Mather's office and there was only a slight improvement after he started playing regularly in the reserves in 1931, having signed as an amateur for Stoke on Saturday 27 September 1930. His older teammates boosted the meagre earnings he received for his office work by giving him two shillings from their £1 bonus whenever they won. This minimal remuneration early on prepared him for the reality that players of his generation could

not expect to gather great riches from playing professional football. Throughout his long career Matthews never earned more from playing in the Football League than a reasonable living wage.

Club boardrooms in the 1930s had priorities other than making players rich. Self-interest may have been one but the money simply did not exist in the game to make anyone wealthy. Football was an entertainment industry with working men representing the vast majority of the fanbase. Admission charges had to be pegged at levels they could afford and this remained the case well after the Second World War.* Even with a maximum wage, not much was left over after paying backroom staff and meeting the general expenses of running a club.**

The only thing that could be said for what players received was that they would not have earned nearly as much in any other job. Football's maximum wage in the mid-1930s meant players could earn £386 a year, not quite such bad money when you consider skilled workers were lucky if they earned £200 over the same period. Matthews recognised he was better off than the vast majority of those he lived among in his early pro days. 'Football cushioned me against the stark miseries of the depression,' he said. 'I earned five or six pounds a week at a time when an unemployed man with a wife and children to support was drawing less than thirty shillings on the dole.'

His father's reaction to the small amount his son earned as an amateur at Stoke underlined his attitude that this was precisely what a working-class lad should expect. 'He would not let me

* Receipts for an FA Cup tie at the start of Blackpool's 1953 FA Cup run, when they played Sheffield Wednesday at Hillsborough, were £7,700 for a gate of more than 60,000.

** This is not to say the game's management always acted honourably when it came to wages. After the First World War, the maximum in a player's weekly pay packet was £10. When in 1920 strike action was threatened after the Football League proposed reducing this to £9, a number of players, fearful of the damage withholding their labour might do to their futures, withdrew from the Association Footballers' Union. Not long after this the League drove the wage down still further to £8, where it remained for many years.

handle my own pocket money,' he said, 'and refused me money for my fares.' Quite apart from the cost, Jack Matthews reasoned, taking a bus denied his son the physical benefit of walking the two miles between Hanley and the Victoria Ground four times a day. The journeys included his return home to Seymour Street for lunch. His mother occasionally took pity when the weather was bad and slipped Stanley the bus fare behind her husband's back. 'She was a wonderful ally,' he said. But he said also that although he thought his father was hard with him he was grateful for his lessons in thrift.

Matthews made two appearances in the reserves while he was fifteen. The first of these, against Burnley reserves at the Victoria Ground on the day he signed as an amateur, would be 'forever green' in his memory. He had been surprised and excited to see his name on the team sheet that was pinned to the noticeboard two days earlier. He was apprehensive, too, but acquitted himself well in his first proper examination in the adult game. He liked to recall particularly that he provided the pass from the right wing from which the former miner Joe Mawson scored the first goal in Stoke's 2-1 win. The *Evening Sentinel*, the local newspaper, reported that Matthews had excited the crowd with 'some pretty movements', while suggesting that Stoke would have won the Central League match more comfortably with better finishing by the inside-forwards.

Jimmy Vallance was the greatest influence on Stanley's life in his early days at Stoke. Within a few years Matthews would become a member of the Vallance family, after he formed an ultimately ill-starred alliance with the trainer's daughter. The more immediate impact the disciplinarian Scot had on him was how he conducted himself. Jack Matthews had cultivated in his son a lifestyle that was bordering on ascetic and Vallance did nothing to persuade Stanley that forsaking this would bring any rewards. Whether it was in directing

Matthews to scrub the dressing rooms or in overseeing the players' training and exercise, Vallance was a man who preached extreme rigour.

Vallance had played for Scotland's oldest football club, Queen's Park between 1906 and 1908. He married the twenty-one-year-old Elizabeth Wilson when he was twenty-six and employed as a postman.* Elizabeth Hall Vallance, the future Mrs (later Lady) Betty Matthews, was born the following year.** He had been a reasonably successful athlete, winning 'lots of silverware' and passing on his athlete's genes to his daughter, according to a family member. He was a keen golfer who would eventually give up working in football to become manager of the course at the club near Glasgow where his daughter and Stanley married. By the time he arrived in England in 1920 to start his fifteen years as Stoke City trainer, Jimmy Vallance had an immeasurably wider horizon than Stanley Matthews. When their paths eventually crossed, Vallance started the process of unravelling his young charge's homespun outlook.

Matthews always acknowledged that Stoke had in Vallance a trainer who was a little different from the archetype of the day, the kind who would routinely order players to run laps of the ground before joining them for a few deep drags on a Woodbine. Vallance, Matthews said, was serious about fitness and would tailor routines for individual players, which was particularly relevant to Matthews. He also introduced a lot of ball work into practice, which, bizarrely, was quite a novel idea. 'I was happy to

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* Some sources have stated that Vallance was the son of Tom Vallance, the first captain of Glasgow Rangers Football Club. This is an error based, almost certainly, on the coincidence that two marriages took place in Glasgow in the first half of the twentieth century between a James Vallance and an Elizabeth Wilson. The second was the one that involved Tom Vallance's son. It was held in 1930, by which time Stanley Matthews's future father-in-law would have been married for some years. Jimmy Vallance, the man who became the Stoke City trainer, was from the Dennistoun district of Glasgow.

** Some years afterwards the Vallances had a son, Tommy, a useful footballer who spent six years from 1947 at Arsenal. Here his main role was filling in on the left wing for Denis Compton, of cricket fame.

be at a club that didn't have a lackadaisical attitude to training,' Matthews said.

Vallance could hardly have been a better mentor for Matthews, whose progress was such that at sixteen he played twenty-two games for the reserves, steadily enhancing his reputation.

This promising start meant that the pressure Mather felt under was increased as the time approached to sign Matthews as a pro. 'Never have I known more anxious days than those preceding the lad's seventeenth birthday,' he said. He resumed his regular visits to the Market Street barber's shop and put in place what he called 'a plan of campaign to repel invaders'. 'I knew, and far too many other managers knew, that Stan was no ordinary footballer,' he said. 'It was obvious he was going to become a genius.'

Huddersfield made the only known firm offer, for £1,000, to prise Matthews from Stoke in the days before his birthday. Others took a stealthier approach. Port Vale remained interested and Birmingham and Aston Villa were among those strongly suspected of casting blandishments Jack Matthews's way.

Mather's plan of campaign included calling up 'spotters' who would pass on information about cars seen in the town with Birmingham number plates and posting 'sentries' in Seymour Street. In addition Arthur Sherwin, the Stoke chairman, a local businessman who would always maintain he was the real mover behind securing Matthews for the club, took an active role in manoeuvres. His contribution at this point was to station himself in a window seat in a pub from where he could keep an eye on visitors to the barber's shop.

The operation to sign Stanley Matthews as a Stoke City player ended at 10.30 on the morning of his seventeenth birthday, Monday 1 February 1932. Tom Mather said he went to the barber's shop in Market Street, where Stanley was waiting with his father. 'I wished Stan many happy returns and got him to sign on the dotted line.'