

I AM THE SECRET FOOTBALLER

Lifting the Lid on
the Beautiful Game



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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	VII
THE WIFE'S TALE	XI
CHAPTER 1 FIRST STEPS	1
CHAPTER 2 MANAGERS	17
CHAPTER 3 FANS	37
CHAPTER 4 THE MEDIA	55
CHAPTER 5 TACTICS	75
CHAPTER 6 THE BIG TIME	93
CHAPTER 7 AGENTS	115
CHAPTER 8 MONEY	143
CHAPTER 9 BAD BEHAVIOUR	165
CHAPTER 10 THE END LOOMS	189
AFTERWORD: EXTRA TIME	223
INDEX	231

INTRODUCTION

Paul Johnson, Deputy Editor, Guardian News and Media

“I am the Secret Footballer” is both a declaration and a device. Since he wrote his first column for the Guardian two and a half years ago, there has been a sustained effort to unmask the Secret Footballer. Jigsaw identification has been attempted through forensic analysis of his pieces using names, games, clubs and matches. Fans’ forums debate in a knowledgeable and thoughtful way. There is a dedicated website at whoistheseecretfootballer.co.uk. Dozens of players have been identified as him. According to those who think they have cracked a code, he plays for Blackburn, Sunderland, Fulham, Bolton, Wolves, Burnley, Newcastle, Leicester, Liverpool, West Ham, Everton, Spurs, Birmingham or Celtic. And a few others.

On his Wikipedia page the entry says he is English and has turned out for at least two Premier League clubs. The argument and search for clues are fun and understandable – and it may be that some day he will decide to reveal himself as the author. But to write as he does, in such detail about the game and the people in it, would be impossible out in the open. His club(s) wouldn’t like it, and would probably cite breach of contract. His agent wouldn’t like it and his manager(s) would be somewhere on the other side of incandescence.

He tells us what it is like to score against Manchester United; about John Terry and his own reaction to being whacked in the face with an elbow: “I kicked him as hard as I could across the back of the

I AM THE SECRET FOOTBALLER

legs and he crumpled to the ground.” He describes vividly the impact on life of a £1.4m-a-year contract (along with a £19,000-a-month mortgage) and how, in his words, it “opens up a host of recreational possibilities”. The sharks, the brown envelopes, the deals, the convoluted bonuses; malicious managers and understanding managers; supportive team-mates and those tortured and fearful of the end; the media, the women and the drink are all here, in a range that goes from the amusing to the terrifying.

But the Secret Footballer is different, and those differences that mark him out started early on in life. He describes his working-class background, playing in hand-me-down trainers. He came out of a loving and supportive family with his father encouraging him to read classics – Shakespeare, Dickens, Joyce etc. He didn’t get into football by the usual route and has struggled with the paradox of living a dream playing football but having to deal with the aggravations and frustrations off the pitch. The same tension shows with his continued determination not to leave his roots behind while developing a taste for fine wine, art and luxurious holidays. Those pressures built up to the point where he became insecure, reclusive and volatile; seeking help and put on medication after finding himself coming home from training and sitting in the same chair until it was time for bed. All of it is told as the reality of his life.

Some years ago, reading the Financial Times at weekends, the Secret Footballer enjoyed a column written anonymously by an estate agent that opened up a world many buyers and sellers have extensive experience of, but that, to those in the know, is very different: far more complex, potentially dangerous and duplicitous. The comparisons with

football were only too obvious. Football, a game watched by millions, is digested and dissected in fine detail in print, on the radio, on TV and on the web. Managers and players give interviews, ex-pros write columns. Tactics, personalities, money and motives are debated endlessly. And yet what do we really understand? The Secret Footballer's answer to that is simple: not that much.

So he had the idea for a column. We (Ian Prior, the Guardian's sports editor and I) were approached and thought it had amazing potential. But we were worried: would he write honestly, what would he hold back, could he sustain themes, could he write at all? All those thoughts disappeared the moment the first piece arrived – and he has got better and better ever since. This book, which originally saw the light of day in 2012, was his idea. It is all his own words, his own experiences, his own thoughts, his own emotions. He is a remarkable man.

Paul Johnson

London, August 2013

CHAPTER 1

FIRST STEPS

When I started playing football for a living, I vowed that I would never turn out like the embittered older professionals that my new club seemed to have made a point of collecting. Far from offering any advice or guidance, they took every opportunity to rub my face in a mistake or faux pas. In those days I had no idea that footballers started training at 10am and finished at midday. I remember hanging around in the changing room after my first session waiting to be told that I could go home. Nobody sits you down with a “how to” guidebook and fills you in on football etiquette. You’re either what managers refer to as “streetwise”, or you’re too naive for your own good. In my case, I was as raw as my football.

I still think that I am incredibly lucky never to have gone through the youth system, for two reasons. Firstly, I have always had huge problems with anyone in authority, especially if that authority is abused for the purpose of making the rulemaker feel more important than they actually are. Secondly, I much prefer to play what has become known as “street football”. You can spot a manufactured footballer a mile off but the players who are naturally gifted and are almost uncoachable nearly always offer the most excitement. For example, Lionel Messi and Wayne Rooney do not need to be coached: they play like they did

I AM THE SECRET FOOTBALLER

in the street as 10-year-olds. Granted, they may need integrating into a style of play or formation but on the whole they are playing off the cuff. I am no Messi or Rooney – let’s make that absolutely clear – but for the best part of my career I played as if I had nothing to lose. I loved going up against players who had been given everything on a plate, and walking off to collect a bottle of champagne for man of the match. Not because I like champagne – it just felt like a victory for all the people back home who never made it to the big time.

As a newcomer, I immediately made a beeline for the corner of the dressing room, far enough away from the dominant players and close enough to keep my face in the manager’s eyeline. Unfortunately, on my first day as a professional, a Scandinavian player, who was one of the embittered old pros, took exception to my choice of seat and threw my clothes all over the changing room while I was having lunch. I came back to find my belongings strewn over the corridor and in the shower room. This was a shock for me: I’d assumed that a team was exactly that – a team, a group of people who looked out for each other, helped each other and fought as one. How wrong I was. If there is one thing that I have learned, it is that every single player in every single dressing room has an agenda. It doesn’t matter if they are your closest friend or your sworn enemy – everyone is in it for themselves. The realisation that some of these players were playing football because it paid the bills and, worse, that many of them were terrible, was an eye-opener for me. But at the same time it gave me the most enormous confidence boost.

As a kid I played football day and night – I used to take a football to bed with me so that I could do keep-ups as soon as I woke up, before school. Every day after it I’d go through the VHS version of 101 Great Goals (the

one with Bobby Charlton on the cover), crossing off each goal as I recreated it either in the park, with the swings wrapped behind the metal posts, or “down the back”, where there were two perfectly proportioned chestnut trees that provided more space to pull off the long shots like Emlyn Hughes’s screamer for Liverpool (I can’t remember the number now but it was a personal favourite because you could hear Hughes yelling wildly as he celebrated the goal).

That’s why I wanted to play football: it held the possibility of so much glory and happiness and an escape from the mundane life that came with growing up in a small town. My ambition was to win the World Cup. I had a 1986 Panini sticker album that my dad bought for me, and looking at all the foreign players in their different-coloured strips was so exciting – players like Socrates and Russia’s Rats, Rummenigge and, of course, Maradona. It offered a doorway to the wider world and I was hooked. Years later one of my team-mates was called up to play for England; he was the first player I knew to be selected for the squad. It was an exciting time for everybody and I couldn’t wait to ask him what it was like. “Oh, it’s quality, mate,” he told me. “They give you 50 grand just for your image rights.”

I can’t tell you how happy playing football made me as a kid. It was just the best thing in the world to be able to go outside and kick a ball around for hours pretending to be Ian Rush or Glenn Hoddle. But although I was immersed in football, my dad took it upon himself to educate me, and not only in the game he loved. The small group of people who know I’m the Secret Footballer have all asked me the same question: where do the bizarre, and sometimes leftfield, hooks to the column come from? The answer is Dad’s vast collection

I AM THE SECRET FOOTBALLER

of literary classics, including Shakespeare, Dickens and Joyce, and original vinyl from greats such as the Beatles, Pink Floyd, Dylan, the Stones etc. While some of my friends went for the traditional beach holiday, Dad would think nothing of driving to Denmark for two weeks on a farm, listening to drug-inspired rock'n'roll while we were made to read literary classics in the back seat. For a 10-year-old, I'd argue that's not normal. But I wouldn't change it for the world.

Not that I was an academic. I found one of my old school reports that reads, "***** does not listen and so misses key instructions, leading to his falling behind." The subsequent improvement in my attention only highlighted a startling inability to care about what was being said. Football was all I wanted to do: it was morning, noon and night and I was convinced I'd "make it". My parents encouraged my football career and every weekend drove me to my next match. I played for the best local teams, the county and district sides, as well as my school, and was known in our area as one of a crop of very talented players who were emerging. Some of these players did go on to become professionals, some drifted into respectable jobs, and others, like me, didn't have a clue what to do if a football career never materialised. And as the years went by the prospect of playing professional football began to seem as likely as my getting any further up Kate Brookes' inside leg during our science lessons.

Around the age of 15 and 16, a few of my team-mates were picked up by professional clubs, the pinnacle of which was when a lad signed for Tottenham's academy (he was released two years later). I had trials myself and generally performed well but my situation wasn't helped by the fact that scouts in this country are not coaches or managers.

Whenever I went along to one of these trials, the lads who were 4ft nothing would immediately be put out on the wing to rot, while the ones who were a foot taller than everyone else were put in at centre-back, despite telling their scout that they were a centre midfielder or a target man. Time and again this happened. It used to piss me off but, more than that, it used to piss off my dad, who'd had to drive to the end of the country to see his son played as a right-back for an hour and then at left wing for 15 minutes.

In fairness, scouting for kids at the top hasn't improved that much. At the very top of the game, the trawler net has never been bigger and it has never been easier to land a prize catch. A friend of mine who has been a scout for a leading club for more than 10 years told me that if he were lazy, he'd never even have to leave his office because clubs further down the footballing pyramid regularly call him up to offer their best youngsters. "Every year those phone calls come a little earlier and the kids get younger." And he should know.

In early 2012, Chelsea paid £1.5m for Patrick Bamford, an 18-year-old striker who had played only 12 minutes of first-team football for Nottingham Forest. Frank Clark, the Forest chairman, explained how things have changed. "We used to be able to hold on to players for a couple of years into the first team, but now the real big clubs are paying fortunes for kids of 13, 14, 15, 16." The scary thing is that my friend admits he doesn't even have to get it right. "If I beat off the competition from the other big teams I've done my job. If the player doesn't become a first-team regular, then that's the coach's fault, not mine."

When bigger names are involved, it is easier still. A few years ago I was talking to another friend of mine who at the time was the

I AM THE SECRET FOOTBALLER

chief scout for one of the top clubs in the Premier League. We were having coffee and I casually asked how life was. His team had just won the Premier League title and I expected it to be all sunshine and happiness. But his answer caught me completely off guard. “Every year it’s the same, mate. After the manager and the coaching staff get the budget through from the owners, we all sit down to run through the possible transfer targets. They’ll look at me and say: ‘We need an attacking midfielder.’ And I’ll say: ‘OK, well, there’s Totti, Kaka and Ronaldinho.’” I have no experience as a chief scout but, if the day ever comes when I’m offered this position at a top club, I can’t see it being overly demanding.

In terms of my own attempts to break through, it was pretty hard seeing some of my team-mates picked up by professional clubs. I didn’t feel they were as skilful as me – stronger maybe, and certainly better-built at the age of 15, but definitely not as good with the ball. Unfortunately, at that time clubs were more interested in physical attributes than in technical ability.

Thankfully, while a lot of my friends were “experimenting” in the drugs scene of the late 1990s, I’d managed, mentally at least, to escape. I had made the decision that whatever I was going to do in my life, a good proportion of it would not be spent wasting away in my home town, where precious little of any interest ever happened. It was while I was planning my getaway (a week before I was due to leave the country) that my mum took a telephone call from a scout asking if her son would like to come for a trial match next week with a team he was working for. At the time, I was playing non-league and picking up about £30 per week. As I later found out, the scout

had been contacted by one of my old managers, who had told him that I had enough potential to warrant a second look, provided the club felt it could commit to enough extra coaching to turn me into a polished professional.

I don't remember an awful lot about that trial match. My head was still filled with the possibility of what I was starting to think of as freedom, so at half time when the manager collared me in the tunnel and said, "Cancel your holidays – we're going to sign you," any joy that I may have felt was tempered by the fact that I had paid for a one-way ticket to San Francisco and was only really thinking about what I still had to buy from Superdrug.

I have thought about that moment almost every day since. I wonder what would have happened if I'd had the strength to turn him down. Despite wanting to play professional football since I could walk, I had seen enough of life to realise that once you are tied into something, it is often very difficult to get your liberty back. I wonder where I'd be now. Would I have won medals and enjoyed 15 minutes of fame and recognition for doing something well? Would I have had those intense moments of sheer happiness after scoring a goal or winning a crucial match? The real questions to ask are: would I have more "real friends" if I'd been around for just one weekend in the last dozen years? Would I have been able to make my best friend's wedding, where I was supposed to be best man, rather than getting turned over at Arsenal? Would I have been able to attend the funerals that I have missed, and where my absences have mostly never been forgiven? Would I be on anti-depressants, as I am now? Would I have pissed off the amount of people I have because I just don't want to be like

I AM THE SECRET FOOTBALLER

them? And would I know how to measure my life in real terms, rather than by money and success on a football pitch? Again, who knows? As somebody once said, football was my favourite game.

But I did sign (£500 a week, which was a fortune to me) and I set about my new-found career with the overriding feeling that they'd let someone in the door that perhaps they shouldn't have, an outsider into the inner sanctum. And now that I was in, there was fuck-all anybody could do about it. That feeling has never left me.

If I'm honest, my first impressions were that I'd made a massive mistake. The standard was poor, some of the players were detestable and the lifestyle was something that was completely alien to me. I'd sit at home for hours in the afternoons wondering what to do, and when I came into train the next day I'd get abuse for being "different", whatever that means. Because I had no experience of player "banter", some of the more vocal members of the squad would hammer me every day for their own amusement. Pastimes included saying "Shhh" every time I tried to speak until eventually I'd have to give up, or trying to get me to remove my hat when we had lunch, claiming it breached club rules. Then there was the time they stole my phone and texted the manager, thanking him for "last night".

I remember one day sitting in the changing room before training, when some of the senior pros were talking about a "third man run". Having never heard this term, I innocently asked if they could explain it to me. They just looked at me in utter disgust. The silence was only broken when one of the more bitter players, who wasn't getting a game at that point, said: "And we wonder why we don't win many games when we're signing this sort of shit."

There were other incidents that stick in my mind. A few of the senior players would pass the ball at me as hard as they could in a weak attempt to make me miscontrol it, which was pathetic, although I've since found out this sort of initiation test happens at every level. On Dwight Yorke's first day as a Manchester United player, Roy Keane fired the ball into him deliberately hard so the striker would be unable to handle it. "Welcome to United," Keane said. "Cantona used to kill them." As much as I resented what the senior players were doing to me, in some ways it worked because I always arrived at training before anybody else, and left last. It strengthened my desire to be better than them and leave them behind.

After about six months, I had demonstrated that I was more than capable of playing at this level. I was performing consistently and regularly winning the man-of-the-match award (we couldn't afford champagne, so it was just a photograph with the sponsor and an acknowledgment in the next home programme). I was beginning to make a name for myself, which meant that those who had made life difficult for me initially began to ease off. Around this time, the manager was able to move a good number of the older players on and my standing in the changing room went from zero to hero. I had certainly come a long way from my debut, when I remember hearing one of the away fans call out my surname. Stupidly, I thought that somebody I knew from back home had come to watch me, so I turned to look. With that, the whole stand shouted "Waaaaanker!" before laughing uncontrollably. I'd completely forgotten that playing football at this level meant you had your name plastered on the back of your shirt.

I AM THE SECRET FOOTBALLER

I still didn't particularly like the day-to-day life of a footballer. I enjoyed the games, even though we were by no means world-beaters, but during the week there was absolutely nothing to do apart from sit at home and read or watch TV. Often I'd try to stay at the club for as long as possible just for something to do. I'd spend hours hitting the ball against a wall that had numbered squares on it. Sometimes we'd play against each other – you had to hit all six squares in order and the first to do it won a fiver. But there was only so much you could do at the club on any given day. The facilities were fairly basic: we had a head-tennis court that was a death trap as it was surrounded by razor-wire, and a car park that doubled as a space to practise long passing until I smashed the manager's window and ruined it for everyone. My long passing has since improved but the £180 bill for a single pane of glass still strikes me as steep.

On a normal day we would meet at the stadium before travelling to the training ground. I didn't have a car so I would grab a ride with a player who sat next to me in the changing room along with his circle of friends. They were a very tight group of black players and I'd have to put up with some pretty awful R&B on the ride over, but for some reason they warmed to me and christened me an "honorary brother". The title meant that they had my back; if I was in trouble, they would look after me, and if I made a mistake, they would tell me. And when it came to the point when I was on the verge of leaving the club for pastures new, they made phone calls to some of their old clubs on my behalf. I owe them a lot for their grounding.

The difference between bullying and banter is best illustrated by something that this group of players used to do. Once a week, one of

them would come in early and set up a sort of makeshift barber shop. Then, one by one, the other black players would come in and have their hair clipped and styled while reading magazines. I was always the first player to arrive from outside this group and felt that they had warmed to me sufficiently for me to start engaging in banter of my own. So I would say: "Fuck me, Desmond's here again." Or I'd nick the scissors and pretend to cut the hair of whoever was sat in the chair, while playing the barber from the movie *Coming to America*. "Every time I start talking about boxing, a white man gotta pull Rocky Marciano out they ass. Fuck you, fuck you and fuck you. Who's next?" I think they laughed out of pity, as my impressions were average at best, but it was great for race relations. One day, however, I walked through the door and was jumped by five black men wielding a set of clippers, who then set about shaving off all my hair. And I do mean *all* my hair.

As I became better known, I began to taste the benefits that came with being a professional footballer. By this time, I'd left home and moved closer to the ground and was living near another player who I travelled in with. As our club had next to no money, we'd have to travel to away matches on the day of the game, which is unheard of higher up in football. We'd arrive back late, sometimes 2am or 3am, depending on where we'd been playing, before getting in the car and driving the 20 miles or so back home. At that hour the streets are almost empty and we'd generally go through red lights and get up to a fair speed as we made our way out of the city. One day, however, we were pulled over by a policeman on a motorbike and, fearing the worst, we got our excuses ready. In the event we needn't have bothered. As soon as the officer saw the pair of us in our club tracksuits, he began

I AM THE SECRET FOOTBALLER

to congratulate us on the result of the game before escorting us out of the city.

From that moment on we had a police escort to the nearest A-road after almost every away game. He would wait for us to arrive back at the stadium and have a quick chat about the result, the club and football in general before seeing us safely out of town. I suppose that would be the highlight of the graveyard shift for a policeman in that part of the world, and we were certainly grateful. I do remember that we used to beat ourselves up about whether we should give him something for his help besides the kebab we always offered when we'd stop for some late dinner. We eventually decided on a club pin-badge (money was tight back then) and to our delight he wore it on his police jacket for the rest of our time at the club. And he probably still does.

Thinking back to those days, though, there are many reasons why being a virtual nobody made playing football so much more enjoyable. There was little pressure on the club or me to do well but I was very hungry to succeed anyway; that is a fantastic combination, and something I'd give a lot to experience again. The manager expected me to make mistakes, as did the fans, but I always wanted to be perfect, and so long as my performances fell somewhere in the middle I knew I was doing OK. Very often, though, they were excellent and pretty soon I became a big fish in a small pond.

To see this same situation played out today, with me being the elder statesman, does not make me unhappy, or bitter, or jealous. Instead, I try to help where I can to improve the next generation of players, even if sometimes it is incredibly frustrating when they can't do something that senior players take for granted.

A few years ago, I gave serious consideration to giving up football altogether to pursue my other passions, only to have a moment of clarity that prompted a complete rethink. Sometimes when the games are coming thick and fast, and you don't see your family, you aren't playing wonderfully well and the results are poor, things can get on top of you. I would later come to realise that this was depression knocking at the door, and my answer to it was that I'd be much happier doing something else. Standing in the tunnel before a match against Liverpool at Anfield, I had a brush with something that Marcel Proust describes as "a remembrance of things past". As our coach gave each player a ball, I lifted mine up to my nose and sniffed it. Don't ask me why – I had never done it before as a professional, or since. The ball was brand new and looked so inviting. The smell took me right back to my council estate and the moment when my mum and dad bought me one of my first full-size footballs, an Adidas Tango. Everybody knows that smell of a new football and at that moment it suddenly filled me with all the reasons I had ever wanted to play the game – it smelled of happy times and familiarity. As the noise outside grew louder and the familiar opening notes of *You'll Never Walk Alone* made their way through the tunnel, I told myself to keep that moment at the front of my mind for as long as possible.

It is often said that 95% of what happens in football takes place behind closed doors and, believe me, the truth is far stranger than fiction. You might see us for 90 minutes on a Saturday and form many of your opinions about football purely on that fleeting appearance. You might watch analysts drone on about tactics without realising what they are saying is predesigned to fit a narrative and

I AM THE SECRET FOOTBALLER

barely scratches the surface. Perhaps you've read about the infamous Christmas parties in the tabloids and wonder if they are as crazy as they would have you believe. Maybe you simply don't understand how young, seemingly healthy athletes, who appear to have it all, can be depressed. Maybe you have seen a couple of the so-called Wags on TV and wonder what their lives are really like. Perhaps you've always wondered how a player can perform poorly for one club and yet blossom at another. Is there really a racist undercurrent in the modern game? How important is the manager or the captain? Are the officials biased towards the big teams? What do players really think of TV pundits, the FA and Fifa? What are the benefits of the foreign players or a top agent on transfer deadline day? How do player bonuses work? What matters more, cash or cups? And what do players really think of you, the fans?

The only way you would ever find out the answers to many of those questions is to read a book that was written in total anonymity by a player who has played at the highest level. In this book, I will try to explain exactly how football really works, away from the prying eyes of the outside world, by drawing on my own experiences. Many of these stories I shouldn't be telling you about. But I will.