UP POHNPEI

Leading the ultimate football underdogs to glory

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CONTENTS

1

IN SEARCH OF THE LOST CAUSE

It began, as so many things do, with Andorra. In November 2007 Matt and I were sitting on the sofa, watching England lose their final Euro 2008 qualifying fixture to Croatia when, in the final minutes, the commentator uttered the immortal line: 'Of course, England will still go through if Andorra can beat Russia.'

To two football-obsessed men such as us, this was obviously insane.

Of course Andorra couldn't upset Russia! The tiny country, sandwiched between France and Spain, has a population of less than 84,000. In the just over a decade its national team had been in existence, they had played more than ninety games and only won three of them – and those had been against Albania, Belarus and Macedonia. Rather than hoping for an Andorran win, England would probably have been better off praying for Zeus to strike down Croatia's goalkeeper with a rogue thunderbolt. In fact, we reasoned, it was basically only the fact we hadn't been born in Andorra that was stopping Matt and me getting a game for them. Wasn't it? If we had been born in Andorra we would probably

have racked up twenty or thirty international caps by this point in our lives. We'd be established international footballers.

You have to understand that Matt and I were particularly vulnerable to this type of thinking. We had met as students in Italy in 2006 and bonded there during that year's World Cup, of which we watched every single game. It was no small feat of endurance and pig-headedness. While others immersed themselves in Italian culture, we frequented dingy bar after dingy bar to roar on Costa Rica against Germany, Ecuador against Poland, and, most treacherously, everyone against Italy.

Back in the UK after graduating, I moved into Matt's spare room where, temporarily between jobs and bored to the point of insanity, he embarked upon a tireless programme of distraction. I was working from the flat as a football journalist specialising in Italian football, although Matt seemed determined to put a stop to that.

Aside from football, Matt's great passion was film, but finding a job in the industry had proven as hard as securing a contract with his beloved Tottenham Hotspur. He had applied to study film at the University of Southern California – one of the most respected courses in the world – but with so much competition for places, Matt had pretty much written off his chances of ever getting in, though he would still rifle through the post every morning just in case. He tried to keep his film-maker's eye in by pacing around the house with a hand-held video camera.

'You never know when something could happen,' he explained as I crunched my way through a bowl of Cheerios.

On one especially slow day Matt filmed me working for the best part of three hours, despite my vociferous protests. His resulting work – *Man Typing* – met with very little critical acclaim.

Matt's presence, plus the creeping feeling that I had covered every combination of events possible in a football season and was simply repeating them with different names, left me vulnerable to distraction. A game of 'Name that Norwegian Footballer' cost me three hours' work on one black Friday when Øyvind Leonhardsen's name inexplicably escaped me, while ranking every German team in order of how much we liked their kit compromised my writing sufficiently to warrant a severe talking to from my boss. (It was unquestionably worth it to establish that FC St Pauli, rather than Bayern Munich, were the powerhouse side of German football.) By the time we found ourselves sitting on that sofa, trying to work out which famous players we would have come up against if we had been playing for Andorra in our preferred positions over the last five years, this level of attention to detail had come to seem entirely normal.

In the end, of course, Andorra lost 1–0 to Russia. Even with all our bravado, we had to concede that any team Matt or I had ever represented would have struggled to hold Russia to a 1–0 deficit. But that night we started along a dangerous path. What about Lichtenstein or San Marino: surely we could play for them?

It probably goes without saying that I loved football. In truth I didn't really have any choice in the matter. As soon as I was able to walk, my impatient brother Mark thrust a football into my arms and told me it was my kick-off. In every childhood photo I am wearing a football shirt and so is Mark. The family photo albums could be mistaken for a chronology of Bristol City shirts in the 1980s and 1990s.

Football permeated every aspect of family life to the point where our exasperated mother had to ban discussion of the game during Sunday lunch; a ruling that we appealed against

as passionately as a tough offside call. School friends supported Manchester United or Arsenal and changed allegiance at the slightest whim, sometimes several times during the same game. But already I didn't care about the glamour sides and glory hunting. It was the other end of the spectrum that fascinated me: the minnows. Instead of playing England v. Brazil in the garden, Mark and I conducted laborious qualification competitions with many a Saturday afternoon being sacrificed to Bolivia v. Paraguay or Saudi Arabia v. Yemen.

Inevitably, I dreamed of playing for my first love, Bristol City, and also for England, but two things were to stand in my way: a lack of any discernible natural talent and the professionalisation and globalisation of the sport. As a Tottenham Hotspur fan, Matt had set his sights a little higher but met with the same obstacles. He was as likely to become the new Gary Mabbutt as I was to be the next Dariusz Dziekanowski.*

When I was a kid, footballers were still, basically, normal people. The kind of men I could realistically aspire to be. Many of the players I saw on TV, and especially at Ashton Gate, were local lads, hard-working professionals grafting out a respectable living. It wasn't uncommon to see several moustaches, a comb-over or two and the odd player nursing a hangover on a Saturday afternoon. Maybe the players weren't riding the bus to games with the fans as they did in the 1920s, but most of them at least lived in the same city.

But somewhere in the 1990s, football changed. BSkyB brought

*A Polish striker who played for Bristol City 1992–3. He was hugely popular with fans at Ashton Gate but less so with the manager, whose wife he allegedly bedded.

huge money into the game after 1992, a trend accelerated by American entrepreneurs, oil-rich Arabs and Russian oligarchs, who started buying up clubs and adding to an ever-expanding influx of highly paid foreign stars. TV rights and merchandising quickly smothered a century of tradition. Ticket prices soared, leaving the average fan able to watch his team only whenever Sky deemed fit to broadcast their games while nouveau riche season-ticket holders filled the stands. Footballers were no longer mere employees: they were assets. And as such they had to be super athletes. The days of the captain handing out shots of whisky in the dressing room to prepare for a game were over. Maybe those scenes were best left behind along with Bovril and the Zenith Data Systems Trophy, but the link between those on the pitch and those in the stands very quickly eroded. There was no longer room for sentimentality and local boys made good.

Naturally I registered that the game I loved was changing before my eyes, but it still took a surprisingly long time to realise that I would never fulfil my dream of playing for England, or even Bristol City. Somehow I had never really taken stock of how far I had drifted from my boyhood aspiration until the night of England v. Croatia. I wrote about football for a living and played at weekends for an amateur side in London, where my performances ranged from forgettable to creditable. Although I had built a lifestyle that allowed me a substantial daily dose of the sport I loved, I wasn't ready to give up on my delusional football fantasies and felt thoroughly miserable at the compromise.

The day after the Croatia game, as the English media responded in typical measured fashion with apocalyptic headlines such as the *Sun*'s 'Useless, pathetic, insipid, spineless, desperate, rubbish: England are the joke of European football', and introduced an

ingenious new moniker for manager Steve McClaren ('The Wally with the Brolly'), I was taking part in my own afternoon of football ignominy. My team was beaten, and beaten badly, by a fellow Ninth Division outfit in a Cup match on an ice-cold afternoon in Surrey. Worse still, I had travelled three and a half hours for the right to stand on the sidelines waiting to play just eight minutes when we were already six goals down and very much second best. I returned home, slamming the door shut, only to find Matt in even lower spirits.

'Tamworth!' he spat venomously.

'Excuse me?' I was pretty certain that greeting had never formally replaced 'Hello'.

'The Cape Verde Islands have got a goalkeeper, José Veiga, who plays for Tamworth in the Conference. There's no way we'd get in their team. I've tried Nepal, Belize, they're all too good,' Matt lamented, gesturing at both the computer screen and a stack of dirty plates, mugs and beer cans that bore testament to a misspent twelve hours.

By Monday, the search had reached a crisis point. I was desperately trying to write an article on the decline of Juventus for a looming deadline and ignored several yells of anguish from the next room, but a resounding crash fractured my fragile concentration. I tentatively peered into the living room where Matt, incandescent with rage, was glowering at his laptop, which had been knocked off the desk in the heat of the moment.

'Everything all right, mate?' I ventured.

'Tesfaye bloody Bramble. He plays for Stevenage Borough and Montserrat. It's over. Montserrat are the lowest team in the FIFA rankings and they're still too good.'

A few days earlier we had been convinced there was an

international team bad enough for us to represent them. Now it seemed that we were wrong. I began to reconcile myself to the idea I would never get a cap. I left Matt to it and got on with composing stinging indictments of Milan's transfer policy and profiles of players I'd barely heard of. My commitment to my job was fading. Every day I'd make up one ridiculous nickname for a player and see if anyone called me on it. Sometimes I'd nominate a day as an 'angry day' and have players 'lamenting', 'bewailing' and 'caterwauling' instead of the journalistic staple of 'stating'. Nobody ever noticed.

One rainy evening a few days later, I came back to the flat to find Matt glowing. He silently handed me a beer and opened his.

'Yap.'

I looked at him. 'Yap?'

'Yap.' He took a long swig from his beer and put it on the table carefully.

'There's another list.'

He was right. Though the FIFA World Rankings are meant to cover every team in the world, in reality they leave out many tiny islands, principalities, politically contentious territories and other places too poor, too small or too far away to be worth FIFA's while. These include Greenland, Monaco, Southern Cameroon, Lapland, Occitania and quite a number of others. In this parallel universe are islands without enough grass to mark out a pitch, teams so isolated they have nobody to play against and regions of disputed political status. Yet organised football is part of daily life for people in the incredibly remote British overseas territory of St Helena, the scarcely populated Easter Islands and the politically troubled regions of Iraqi Kurdistan and Tibet. There are even records of formal games on Antarctica between research scientists at weather

stations. These are places where football had taken on common sense, and won. Matt grabbed me by the shoulders and steered me towards the computer, reading aloud the words on the screen. He was too excited to wait for me to read them myself.

'Yap is an island of 6,300 people in the Federated States of Micronesia, where stones are still used as currency alongside paper money.'

It might have a total population that would fit inside any football league ground in the UK, but Yap had a soccer association, with a proper badge, and a team that had recently lost 15–0 to Guam – not one of football's superpowers. I looked up at my grinning housemate.

'You've done it.'

He shook his head with a mixture of self-satisfaction and compassion. As he clicked to the bottom of the screen I saw in their list of past results a single win. Yap had once beaten one of their Micronesian neighbours: Pohnpei. Clicking through, the page for Pohnpei included a single sentence, which was enough to set my pulse racing:

'They have never registered a win, and are said to be the weakest football team in the world.'

I sat back in the chair. The search was over. If we couldn't play for Pohnpei, we couldn't play for anyone.

That night, we began learning about Pohnpei. As we read, the reasons for the island's poor football track record started to emerge. One of the four Federated States of Micronesia, Pohnpei is a Pacific island with a population of 34,000 – roughly the same as

Stroud in Gloucestershire. Two thousand miles north of Australia, the tiny island is one of the wettest places on earth and 91 per cent of its population is classed as medically overweight. This figure owes much to a diet strangely lacking in abundant local produce and heavily dominated by packaged, imported US tinned food.

We certainly weren't the first Europeans to happen upon Pohnpei. The Spanish occupied the island in the late nineteenth century before selling it to the Germans. The Germans subjugated the locals, who violently rose up in the Sokehs Rebellion of 1910, but were crushed. Eventually the Germans did leave when the island was given to Japan as part of their war reparations in the Treaty of Versailles. The US removed the Japanese at the end of the Second World War and the Micronesians have had a 'Compact of Free Association' with the US since 1989. The US hands over a sizeable cheque to Micronesia each year to keep the region in its sphere of influence. In recent times, the Chinese have made subtle attempts to challenge American power by funding a large gym at the college and a grand new town hall. These 'friendship gestures' haven't gone unnoticed by the US, but are yet to convince the locals to switch allegiance.

Since other foreigners before us had managed to integrate into Pohnpeian society, we could see no reason we couldn't do the same. There would, of course, still be the small issue of citizenship, but anyone who'd watched Welsh captain Vinnie Jones (who famously admitted to only having been to Wales two or three times), standing in bemused silence as the Welsh national anthem played, knew there were ways around such things. For now, we had somewhere to start.

The Pohnpei Soccer Association had a website and even a list of contact email addresses, but the page hadn't been updated for

five years. We composed a calm email stating our 'interest in football in the region' and desire to 'find out more', deciding not to play all our cards at this stage. In any case, we didn't hold out too much hope of a reply. At first our negativity seemed to be well founded as emails came flying back as undelivered. But a few days later we had a reply – from a Charles Musana. Charles was the vice-president of the Pohnpei Soccer Association and he sent us a very polite message thanking us for our interest in the game in Micronesia. However, it was very hard to concentrate on much of what he wrote as I had already skipped ahead after catching sight of the sentence, 'My family is moving to London in December.'

It was 26 November; Mr Musana would be in England in just over a fortnight's time. We rubbed our eyes, re-read the email and then arranged to meet him in Piccadilly Circus on his second day in the country. Slightly shocked by the speed at which fantasy had moved closer to reality, I felt it was time to discuss the idea of playing international football for Pohnpei with my family. I decided that if anyone would understand my motives, it would be my brother. Mark was captivated by the story so far and immediately began his own line of research. Hours later I received an email with the subject line: Micronesian Naturalisation. The body text read simply: 'There may be a few problems with this bit, mate.' Attached was a document from the Federated States of Micronesia Government website, listing the requirements for naturalisation.

> § 204. Naturalisation.
> The President may naturalise a person as a citizen of the Federated States of Micronesia in a manner or form prescribed by law or regulation if the person: