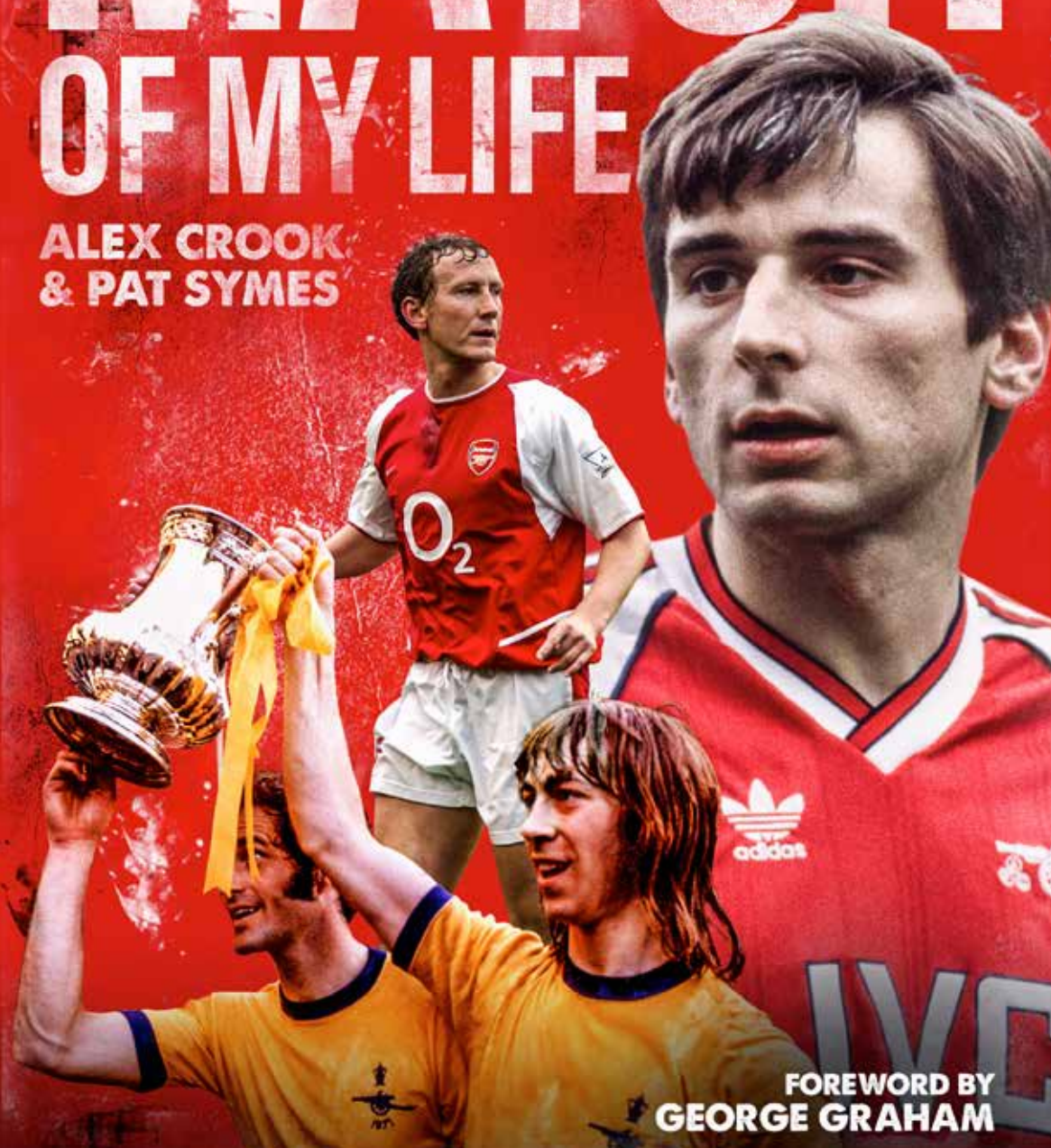


**ARSENAL**

# MATCH OF MY LIFE

**ALEX CROOK  
& PAT SYMES**



**FOREWORD BY  
GEORGE GRAHAM**

**ARSENAL**  
**MATCH**  
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THEO WALCOTT



# Theo Walcott

Forward  
2006–2018

Theo Walcott's rise to superstardom was as rapid as one of his 100m sprints. A product of Southampton's much-heralded youth academy, the Berkshire-raised speedster joined Arsenal for £5m in January 2006 aged just 16 and was a surprise inclusion in England's World Cup squad months later after becoming the Three Lions' youngest-ever senior international. A member of the Gunners' 100 Club, despite not being recognised as an out and out striker, Walcott was part of the side Arsene Wenger led to FA Cup glory in 2015 and again two years later. He is also the only player in the club's history to score in both the League Cup and FA Cup finals, but it is that 2015 triumph over Aston Villa which he regards as the standout moment in his Arsenal career after fighting back from a serious knee injury to become a Wembley winner.

## **Arsenal 4-0 Aston Villa**

FA Cup Final

Saturday, 30 May 2015

Wembley, London

Attendance: 89,283

### **Arsenal**

Szczesny

Bellerin

Mertesacker

Koscielny

Monreal

Coquelin

Cazorla

Ramsey

Ozil (Wilshere)

Sanchez (Oxlade-Chamberlain)

Walcott (Giroud)

### **Aston Villa**

Given

Hutton

Okore

Vlaar

Richardson (Bacuna)

Cleverley

Westwood (Sanchez)

Delph

N'Zogbia (Agbonlahor)

Benteke

Grealish

### **Managers**

Arsene Wenger

Tim Sherwood

### **Goals**

Walcott

Sanchez

Mertesacker

Giroud

‘Theo, are you sitting down?’ I still remember the words of the Arsenal club doctor that followed that made me break down in front of my wife, Mel. That is when the enormity of my knee injury hit me, the moment I knew I would be facing a year without being able to play the game I loved.

I had actually suffered the injury during our FA Cup third-round win over Tottenham the season before the match of my Arsenal life. It was a weird one because, even as I was being carried off on a stretcher, sat upright and famously gesturing the 2-0 scoreline to the baying Spurs fans, it did not feel like the injury was as serious as it turned out to be. I did not have any swelling either so surely that had to be a sign the damage was not too bad? How wrong I was.

After hearing the grim assessment during that fateful telephone call I could not bring myself to go into the training ground because I did not want the rest of the players to see me when I was feeling weak. It was a tough journey, but eventually the physio got me going again and I managed to find the strength to face my team-mates and quickly realised they loved me being around, which spurred me on even more to get back to full fitness.

It was a horrible time in my 12-year Arsenal career, one which gave me so many great moments and fantastic memories. It is also the reason that none of the 108 goals I scored is more treasured than the one which set us on the way to making FA Cup history.

You can score hat-tricks against Newcastle or get big goals in the Champions League, but our emphatic Wembley win over Aston Villa meant so much because it came at the end of a long, agonising road to recovery.

After such a serious lay-off it was a flip of a coin between Olivier Giroud and me as to who was going to play at Wembley. Olivier played most of the season and had done really well, whereas I had only had little bits of games because I was easing my way back in.

We played West Brom a week before the final and I started up front and scored a hat-trick after which I felt like the manager could not leave me out, although it was only a few hours before kick-off that I knew for sure I was definitely starting.

Some managers like to tell you the team earlier so everyone has it in their heads and can work on tactics but Arsene Wenger used to want everybody to prepare as if they were starting so kept us all on our toes as long as possible.

We stayed in the Hilton Hotel overlooking Wembley the night before the final and I was able to stand on the balcony of my room and look down at all the fans excitedly making their way to the stadium, which I loved. People have suggested the magic of the FA Cup has been diluted since the advent of the Premier League but, for me, as an English player, I am proud to be able to say I have lifted the famous trophy.

In beating Villa, we also set a new record of the most FA Cup wins by a single team of 12, which became 13 when we defeated Chelsea two years later. To be part of that history is something that can never be taken away and to be able to say I scored the opening goal makes it even more special.

It was a decent goal as well and started when Francis Coquelin played a long diagonal ball down the left-hand side for me to have a run at Villa right-back Alan Hutton. I spotted that our left-back Nacho Monreal had made an overlapping run so passed it on for him to cross into the area on to the head of Alex Sanchez. Alexis has an unbelievable spring for someone of his size, helped by the fact he used to train wearing ankle weights, which I tried once before deciding it was not for me. He sprung and headed the ball back and just as Santi Cazorla was about to shoot, I came from nowhere and smashed the ball in at the near post with my left foot.

You could see all the emotion come out in my celebration because it meant so much to me after being injured for so long. It was even more magical because all of my family who had



supported me so much were sat in that corner of the stadium, which meant I could share the moment with them.

My son Finley was there and it was nice the morning after the game to see him walking around the team hotel with the FA Cup. After the previous year's final, I took a picture of Finley inside the cup with Arsene alongside, which would have been a great family snap but for the fact my toddler was crying his eyes out.

We dominated the whole of the Villa game and could have been more than just one goal in front when Alexis Sanchez made it 2-0 early in the second half with an absolute rocket shot. He just got the ball out from under his feet quickly and before Shay Given knew anything about it, the Villa goalkeeper was picking it out of his net.

Alexis got so much movement on the shot, which we had seen him do countless times in training, and he was a player that even in five-a-side matches you wanted on your team because he was capable of doing some mad stuff. He just loved playing football and the coaching staff used to find it difficult to get him off the training pitch. Even the day before a game he would be doing 100 extra shots after training, but that is just the type of guy he was and it worked for him, at Arsenal anyway.

That goal was the signal for the floodgates to really open and soon we were 4-0 up and cruising thanks to a header from Per Mertesacker, our giant German defender, and a cheeky back heel from super sub Olivier Giroud.

Per arranged a lot of the post-match party and was the life and soul of it. Just picture a big seven-foot man up dancing and getting all the wives and girlfriends up on the floor with him and you will get the idea.

I was delighted for Olivier to come on and score having been left out of the starting line-up. After I got the hat-trick the week before he said to me, 'Sh\*t, I am not playing am I?' and if the boot was on the other foot I would have thought exactly the same, but

Olivier was a great professional and never sulked in the dressing room before the game.

In all my time at Arsenal, Olivier and Robin van Persie were the two players I most loved playing with. They both held the ball up very well and were very elegant at times. Olivier will always do a job for the team even if he is not scoring, as we saw at the 2018 World Cup with France. If he was not playing, I don't think they would have been able to win that tournament.

Olivier had a good understanding with Mesut Ozil, who seems to get a lot of stick but I think that is mainly down to his demeanour and body language, but that is just the way he is even on a day-to-day basis. As a team-mate you are used to that and know he is not sulking as other people outside the club maybe surmise.

Cesc Fabregas was the best midfielder I played with because I would just make a run, not have to break stride and the ball would magically appear in front of me, thanks to his vision. Mesut was very similar in the way he made everything look so easy and like he was not even trying. He was also good at weighing up the strengths of his team-mates; for example, he knew that Olivier liked balls played into his feet whereas I loved having something to run on to. There are a lot of players with that ability but he has done it on a consistent basis for many years.

As I have already mentioned, we had a good night after the game and it was nice to see Arsene so relaxed at the party at our hotel and letting his hair down, not that he had much. It was good for him to see how much love we, as a group of players, all had for our manager.

Arsene is a man that always has a lot of time for people anyway, but on those particular evenings he would always join in with the celebrations – unless it came to dancing. I never ever saw him dance!

I actually convinced myself that night that he was going to leave, because there was a lot of emotion in him and when I

spoke to him and his coaching staff it felt like a last supper-type scenario. He was just watching everyone enjoy themselves and taking it all in.

Deep down he must have thought, 'I can't leave this now', because he ended up staying another three years and winning another FA Cup.

I always felt like Arsene took a lot of unfair flack for a manager that had led the team into the Champions League season after season. Arsenal have been in a transition stage since he left and that proves it was no easy task to achieve what he did, so I feel like now people are starting to appreciate his job a lot more.

Arsene was great for developing the young players coming through, particularly in the cup competitions. He always gave us the opportunity to show what we could do and that is probably why he won so many FA Cups, because it was a great stage to perform on. I think he enjoyed watching these youngsters fulfil their potential and took a lot of satisfaction in seeing them reach their goal.

I was only 16 when I joined the club and that was a very strange time because it was done under a veil of secrecy. I had played for the Southampton first team but was still sharing a dressing room with the scholars and it was hard to lie to my mates about whether I was leaving or not.

On the day the move was going through I did not turn up for training and was getting loads of messages and phone calls, but could not tell them what was going on until it was officially announced.

That was in the January and I was called up for England's World Cup squad the following summer, which was a crazy time. I did not know I was going until my name came up on Sky Sports News and that was before I had even got the phone call from the FA.

My inclusion at such a young age created a lot of chatter on television and it was all way too much for me to take in. Even

though it was exciting I was totally overwhelmed, so I ended up turning off the TV and playing World Cup-themed Monopoly with my dad. It was the longest Monopoly game ever!

Arsene had told me a few weeks earlier that Sven-Goran Eriksson, the England manager, was coming to watch me train but I did not think much of it at the time, so for him to select me was totally surreal.

I am sure nobody will disagree that Arsene also liked his teams to play football in an attractive way and that was a big draw for me when I signed: the pace and interchanges of players. At 16 you just think about playing with freedom and expressing yourself and do not look too much into tactics. I certainly didn't.

For me, even now, when I think of Arsenal, I think of Arsene and Thierry Henry.

Every kid playing football in the playground pretends to be their favourite player and I was always trying to imitate Thierry. I just wanted to be him so when I actually got to meet and play with him, I was like a starstruck little boy. I always remember the day I beat him in a sprint test and thought to myself, 'Wow. I am quicker than Thierry.' Again, it was a lot to take in but I remember from day one that Ashley Cole and Sol Campbell just grabbed me and put their arms around me and looked after me until they left the club. Having those two strong characters looking out for me in a dressing room full of players who had been Invincibles just a couple of seasons before helped me a lot.

Every day after training Thierry would grab Ashley for extra sprinting training. He would say: 'You know where I am going to go but I am going to knock the ball past you and will always get there before you.' He made it look so effortless and would just glide past players.

I used to try and do it myself to Ashley but physically I was not strong enough so he could brush me away, but it was great training against Ashley every day and seeing the way Thierry

would try different ways to get past him. That stuck with me and eventually, when Ashley moved on, he and I enjoyed some great battles.

After Thierry left for Barcelona, I ended up taking his number 14 shirt but that was almost by accident as I wanted Ian Wright's old number eight jersey. Then we signed Samir Nasri and he took the number eight so I said: 'Okay, I will have 14.' It was only when our long-serving kit man Vic Akers pointed out that was Thierry's number that I realised, but I took it anyway.

One of my favourite mementos from my career is the shirt I wore when I scored my first goal for Arsenal in the 2007 League Cup Final against Chelsea. I got Thierry to sign it and he wrote something like, 'First of many but only 227 to go', because that is how many goals he scored.

Thierry was a great guy to have in the dressing room, very loud, and would always shout 'Lewis' at me as he used to say I looked like Lewis Hamilton.

Emmanuel Eboué was just as loud and it was a really good dressing room to learn and develop in. There were a lot of strong characters in there so at times I would just duck my head and get on with things. I always felt like Thierry wanted me to get more involved but at 16, 17 I did not really know how to interact with people in their primes.

I worked it out in the end and loved my time at Arsenal. As with any club I had some ups and downs but I worked with some fantastic people, both in terms of players and staff. The whole club itself was one massive family and as a family man that was perfect for me. Whenever I put on that red top it felt like home.

The football itself was great; making history at the Emirates, playing in front of those amazing fans under the lights on Champions League nights, scoring more than 100 goals and having my name alongside great players like Dennis Bergkamp and my hero Thierry. Nobody can take that away from me.