

HAVE MIC WILL TRAVEL

A FOOTBALL COMMENTATOR'S JOURNEY

IAN CROCKER



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Introduction

FOOTBALL commentator. It feels a bit strange when you have to write down your job on a form or if someone asks you what you do for a living. I don't know why I still find it bizarre because I've been one for a quarter of a century now. Maybe it's because it's obviously not a proper job.

I'm often told how lucky I am to be paid for watching football and for shouting a few names out. You won't find me disagreeing. It's bloody brilliant!

I still get a buzz ahead of every match simply because you never know what to expect. I've been fortunate to commentate on games that have ended 6-6, 8-4, 6-2, 5-3 and 4-4. Although, perhaps fittingly, I'm writing this introduction the day after the challenge that was Norway 0 Azerbaijan 0. No worries, as a West Ham fan I'm used to taking the rough with the smooth.

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Hopefully this book takes you inside a football commentator's life, but it also tells of the highs and lows of being a fan, something you will all know about. We wouldn't have it any other way though would we?

When you've seen your team thrashed 6-0 at Oldham in the pouring rain on Valentine's Day you know you can take absolutely anything football wants to throw at you. This is what it has chucked at me.

Ian Crocker
June 2015

Terracotta, Claret and Blue

CARDIFF City 2 Weymouth 3. That's the answer to an often asked question, 'What's the best football match you've ever seen?'

I've watched thousands of games across four decades as a fan and nearly 25 years as a football commentator on radio and television but nothing will ever quite match the feeling when, as a fresh-faced football-mad teenager, my home-town team in Dorset became FA Cup giantkillers. It was quite simply the best moment of my life. Admittedly I hadn't had much of a life by then but it's still quite high now on my personal list of momentous days!

The date was 11 December 1982.

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I was only 17 but these are the games of our lives, these are the days of our lives, these are the times of our lives. 'The Terras' – nicknamed after the terracotta colour in their kit – reached the third round of the Football Association Challenge Cup. Get in there.

It nearly didn't happen and quite often where Weymouth Football Club were concerned it usually didn't. They were 3-1 down at home to Maidstone United in the first round and fast running out of time. Incredibly they produced an astonishing comeback to win 4-3 with the decisive goal coming deep into stoppage time. Surely our name was on the cup!

We were drawn away to Cardiff City in the second round. We were trailing 2-0 by half-time and looked down and out. Our dream of Weymouth FC making giantkilling headlines looked just that, a dream.

A couple of burly and surly Cardiff lads had infiltrated our end of Ninian Park to taunt us and they appeared to be looking for trouble, loitering with intent. We'd never really seen that before. The old Recreation Ground across the town bridge in a sleepy south coast holiday resort was hardly a hotbed of hooliganism. Sure, it got a bit nasty when our local rivals Yeovil came to town

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(whatever happened to them?!), but it was nothing too outrageous.

Early in the second half in South Wales my favourite player, swarthy Italian window cleaner Anniello Iannone, pulled a goal back. He used to clean my bedroom window. I remember opening the curtains one morning to see his face. Awesome!

Trevor Finnegan equalised with ten minutes to go and then Gerry Pearson, another favourite of mine, scored the winner with four minutes remaining. A defining moment in my life and I suspect Gerry felt pretty good about it too.

We really hadn't seen that coming but the Cardiff lads in our end evidently had as they quickly disappeared at 2-2 with heads down and mouths shut for the first time that afternoon. So a couple of thousand Weymouth fans were left in a celebratory world of our own. What a feeling. It just doesn't get any better than that.

The Welsh police warned us not to show our scarves on leaving the stadium or once we had boarded the coaches, in case we were targeted by some of the home fans, a minority of whom had a rather fiery reputation.

The police said it would help that the coach company was called Bluebirds and had that very word adorned across the side and back of their

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vehicles. Funnily enough the Bluebirds happened to be Cardiff's nickname too. By the way what an omen that was!

Someone did point out that it actually said 'Bluebirds Of Weymouth' on the side of the coach, which was a bit of a giveaway. A few idiots did linger by the coaches and a couple of missiles were thrown but we escaped intact.

Later in life I would often return to commentate at Ninian Park and I loved the passion and the intensity of the Cardiff fans. It may have been a rather dilapidated arena by then but it was a proper old ground with a proper old atmosphere and proper old support.

To access the television gantry you had to climb a very rusty dated ladder in full view of the home supporters. On one wet and windy night I slipped and was dangling off the ladder with one hand while clinging on to my clipboard with the other to the general amusement of many. Yes, well you may laugh Cardiff fans, but remember 1982. Remember the day the Terras came to town and whipped you!

The FA Cup third round draw is always a major event in itself but in 1982 it was even more so as Weymouth had decided to grace it. There we were hoping for a trip to Manchester United, Liverpool or Arsenal. I'd have happily welcomed an away tie at

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West Ham as would have our bright young manager Stuart Morgan who had started his playing career at Upton Park.

We listened to the draw with huge excitement and tremendous trepidation. Then, suddenly, so very suddenly, we were drawn away to Cambridge United. Nothing personal to Cambridge United but come on, Cambridge bloody United!

Nowadays they are back in the Football League after winning promotion from the Conference in 2014. Back then they were actually in the second tier of English football but even so real glamour had swerved us by some distance.

It wasn't meant to be like that. It was meant to be Old Trafford or Anfield or Highbury or Upton Park. Magical yet mysterious venues that seemed so far away from teenage life in Dorset. Football really can be so cruel. It was about to get crueller.

On the day of the match special trains were laid on from Weymouth to Cambridge via London but alas these were the days of British Rail. Or rather British Fail. They were delayed, we were delayed, everything was delayed except one thing. The kick-off. The bloody kick-off.

They didn't wait for us and we didn't arrive at the Abbey Stadium until almost half an hour into the game. A once in a lifetime experience and we'd

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missed a third of it! These are the games of our lives, well two-thirds of a game.

At least we hadn't missed any goals. It was still goalless when Cambridge were awarded a penalty early in the second half but our goalkeeper Kieron Baker pulled off a magnificent save. Surely a sign that this was going to be our day. Naturally we then went and lost 1-0.

A big striker called George Reilly scored a 74th-minute winner for Cambridge to break our hearts. Two years later he would play in the FA Cup Final for Watford so why George, why? Why couldn't you have let us have our day in the sun? Okay, I know it doesn't work like that really.

George went on to have a decent career but whenever I heard his name mentioned through the years I would merely grimace at the memory of that devastating defeat. It took some getting over but it set me up for a life watching football. Where for most of us there are many more lows than highs and for some not any highs at all. And still we love it.

At the age of eight I used to train with the Weymouth players on a Thursday evening and when you're eight that is such a big deal. Come to think of it, that still would have been a big deal at 48.

It wasn't because they'd spotted I was an incredible talent as such a young age. If only.

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They'd have been very wrong. Although I did once score a screamer in the playground at Broadway County Secondary School on the Dorchester Road. It was talked about for a while (probably a whole weekend in reality) but sadly that was as good as I got.

The Weymouth manager was Graham Williams, who'd had a terrific playing career with West Bromwich Albion. He happened to live in the same road as me in a beautiful village called Sutton Poyntz and I became friendly with his kids. So we used to have our own little kickabout on the pitch at the Recreation Ground as the players trained at the other end.

When they had finished training we took penalties against the first-team goalkeeper and he seemed to save every single one. If he ever saved one in an actual match we took the credit for pushing him to the limit. We made him what he was. It wasn't the same keeper who saved that penalty at Cambridge sadly, otherwise that would have been our biggest achievement.

A couple of years later Williams had departed Weymouth but we still used to sneak in to training when Graham Carr took over as manager. He didn't seem to mind despite having a rather nonsense look about him. Nowadays, Graham has

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been Newcastle United's chief scout for a while. Oh, and he has a very funny son called Alan.

While I was growing up, Weymouth had some great players who went on to bigger and better things. They also had one who'd already done bigger and better things. A former West Brom team-mate of Graham Williams joined for a season in 1975. Jeff Astle had become an Albion legend, scoring their winner in the 1968 FA Cup Final against Everton.

Despite a glorious career in professional football, Jeff was another who worked as a window cleaner while playing for Weymouth but I never saw his face at my window. Maybe Anni Iannone wouldn't allow him on his patch. Anyway, I don't think we'll see many of today's top players up a ladder in the future somehow. I'm not expecting to see one at my bedroom window.

Little did I realise at the time that I would later work with Jeff Astle on local radio in Birmingham covering his beloved Baggies. Jeff was a lovely, humble and funny guy who, like a lot of players from that era, seemed more interested in others than themselves. He and his wonderful family used to take me with them on journeys to West Brom games. Happy days.

Jeff famously, or perhaps infamously, missed a great chance to equalise for England against Brazil

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in that legendary 1970 World Cup encounter. For all the goals he scored, and there were plenty, Jeff would always mention that miss more, the one that got away, although usually just to poke fun at himself. I suppose he had to, considering he could have changed the course of history there!

Jeff was taken from us far too early at the age of 59. His brain had been horribly damaged by all those headers over the years. A tragic loss. Jeff was the kind of man who instantly put a smile on your face. His family are carrying on the fight for Jeff and the Albion fans applaud in the ninth minute of every match to remember a great number nine but, most of all, a great man.

Graham Roberts was a colossal player for Weymouth. He went on to do not bad either for Spurs, Rangers and England. I remember him scoring a 35-yard screamer once in the pouring rain at the Recreation Ground. The ball roared into the goal at the Gasworks End. It might even have been from the halfway line. Graham would probably say it was!

I had dealings with Graham when he was manager of Clyde, who had been drawn at home to Celtic in the 2006 Scottish Cup. I didn't know much about Clyde so went to watch them train to suss out the players and put names to faces. Oh, and

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to have a cuppa with one of my childhood heroes from the Rec!

I don't recall Graham wanting to reminisce about Weymouth too much but then, in fairness, quite a lot had happened in his career since those early days. He had plenty of other things to reminisce about. I on the other hand could've talked and talked and talked Terras!

His focus was rightly on the Celtic game. Nobody gave lower-league Clyde a chance but Graham told me they would most definitely beat Celtic and explained how in extensive detail. I must admit I was still rather sceptical. I shouldn't have been.

Clyde beat Celtic 2-1 in one of the biggest shocks in Scottish Cup history, rather ruining the Celtic debut of a certain Roy Keane. Chinese defender Du Wei managed the old playing two games in one day trick – his first and his last for Celtic.

The result actually flattered those in the famous Hoops. Clyde had two goals disallowed and missed a penalty. Graham was understandably ecstatic. We'd obviously taught him well all those years ago in Weymouth!

Andy Townsend and Steve Claridge were other ex-Terras who I later crossed paths with during my radio days in the West Midlands. Andy captained Aston Villa and would always do an interview, win,

lose or draw. As a young reporter it was always good to have somebody to rely on if other players didn't fancy it, which was often the case. Andy was ITV's number one co-commentator for years and did an excellent job in my opinion. He can now be seen on Premier League TV around the world and will pop up here and there I'm sure.

Claridge was exceptional for Birmingham and all the other clubs he played for. His socks may have been rolled down most of the time but his sleeves were always rolled up. Giving 100 per cent should be a given for any player but Claridge's extraordinary energy and enthusiasm was admirable, often going above and beyond the call of duty. He could play a bit too and score a bit too.

Claridge was one of my favourite players and a fascinating character too. He may not have lived in his car but at times it sure looked like he did. He later returned to Weymouth as player-manager and starred in a TV documentary about his role there. Essential viewing.

I got to work alongside Andy and Steve in their media roles and it's no surprise they've been as successful doing that as they were as players. Being at Weymouth set them up for life perfectly too!

Shaun Teale was another ex-Terra who went on to greater things, most notably at Aston Villa where

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I would see him frequently a bit later in life. It really is a small world.

Weymouth played in a terracotta and light blue strip. As previously mentioned this allowed the unique nickname of the Terras even if it looked pretty much like claret really. In 1974, at the age of nine, I decided I should support a big professional league club. West Ham United had the same colours. That would do nicely. Wouldn't it be great to think like a nine-year-old in your adult life now and again? I'm sure everything would be a whole lot simpler and more straightforward.

I clocked West Ham's results over the course of a few weeks. They beat Tranmere 6-0, Burnley 5-3, Wolves 5-2 and Leicester 6-2. They were definitely the team for me and a few months after I started supporting them they only went and won the blimen' FA Cup.

The date was 3 May 1975.

Bobby Moore lined up for Fulham, against the club where he'd spent all of his previous playing career, and at the stadium where he'd lifted the World Cup for England.

Bobby dominated the build-up to the game but it was his old club who dominated the match. Alan Taylor had not long joined from Rochdale when he scored twice in a quarter-final win at Arsenal. I

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used to love beating Arsenal as most of my mates in Weymouth were Gunners fans. Taylor repeated that feat with a double in the final.

I was glued to the television as Billy Bonds quickly became my childhood hero. He looked the part as he lifted the famous old trophy while I cavorted around our lounge in full West Ham kit and scarf. I could sure get used to winning trophies. Remarkably five years later West Ham won the FA Cup again.

The date was 10 May 1980.

As a Second Division side nobody gave them a chance against Arsenal. Them again! The Gunners had won the cup the year before and in some style, beating Manchester United 3-2 after a fantastic finale. Everyone seemed to think retaining the trophy was a foregone conclusion. No way. It was time for another FA Cup giantkilling.

For Weymouth in Cardiff read West Ham at Wembley. One goal settled it and it was scored in the 13th minute. Unlucky for some, in this case Arsenal. Good.

Trevor Brooking's Header. A Header worthy of a capital H though not due to its quality, more its importance. One of the most talented and gifted footballers I've ever seen scored with a scruffy header. Get in there Trev.

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Brian Clough had written a newspaper column on the morning of the final in which he suggested Brooking ‘floats like a butterfly...and stings like one’. The best part of that story is that 11 years later Clough bumped into Brooking in the tunnel before a game and apologised to him. Well, he was probably thinking about whether to for 11 years. No point in rushing these things.

The other major talking point from the game was a professional foul by Arsenal’s Willie Young which poleaxed the then youngest ever FA Cup Final player, Paul Allen, as he headed towards goal. There wasn’t even a red card for such a professional foul back then. I’m sure Paul’s got over it by now but I still feel the sense of injustice! I used to give Willie some right stick in the years to follow!

The legend that is Billy Bonds lifted the trophy again with a 19-year-old centre-half called Alvin Martin one of his team-mates that day. I couldn’t wait to see my Arsenal-supporting school-mates on the Monday morning. I mean I really couldn’t wait. I went round to some of their houses on the Sunday to milk the moment. As I’ve said already these are the games of our lives. You have to make the most of them.

So two FA Cups in my childhood years would do for starters, thank you very much. In between

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West Ham reached the European Cup Winners' Cup Final.

The date was 5 May 1976.

There was no great shame in losing to crack Belgian side Anderlecht who were rather decent at the time but there were regrets on the night. It seemed a little harsh that the final was actually played in Brussels yet we did manage to go ahead through Pat Holland. Holland scoring in Belgium. It's a good job I wasn't commentating then. I'd have bunged that line in for the sake of it.

Anderlecht fought back to lead 2-1 but Keith Robson equalised before Holland gave away a disputed penalty and the Belgians never looked back. Francois van der Elst scored twice and would later play for West Ham. It was a sore loss to take but even so they were heady days indeed, winning FA Cups and contesting European finals. Where could I possibly go wrong in following the Super Hammers?

West Ham haven't won a major trophy since 1980. If I'd known I'd have had to wait so bloody long I'd have made even more of a big deal of those FA Cup triumphs. To date they're the last team from outside the top flight to win that famous competition.

Some of my mates back then used to change the club they supported to be sure of following more

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successful sides. Glory hunters! Unthinkable! It's just not the done thing whatever your age. It was always going to be West Ham from then on for me, through thin and thinner.

I later got to know and work with Bobby Moore, Billy Bonds, Alvin Martin and other former Hammers. I also got to work at Upton Park as their stadium announcer. Eventually I got to commentate on my team regularly on radio and television and no I didn't ever break out into a chorus of the club's famous anthem 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles' although it was rather tempting a few times.

To coin a few words from that most inspiring of songs, I guess my fortunes weren't always hiding even if West Ham United's mostly have been over the years.