



“IT’S ONLY
BANTER”

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
LEROY ROSENIOR

LEROY ROSENIOR WITH LEO MOYNIHAN

FOREWORD BY ANDREW COLE

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Prologue

The First Time

A YOUNG man with something to prove. That's what I am. Yes, I've made it, kind of. I'm a professional footballer. A teenager living his dream. A young man who wakes up, goes to work, plays football (the game I have always loved) and for my trouble, I get paid. Each weekend I run out in front of thousands of fans and do my best to score goals and win matches. When I do my job, those fans sing my name. Me, young Leroy Rosenior from Clapham. *Leroy, Leroy, Leroy.*

When I leave the ground they stop and ask me for my autograph. This is the early 1980s and whilst so many young men up and down the country are signing for their giros, I'm signing for my fans. Life is sweet, but despite all that, I know I have so much to prove and perhaps tonight is the night when my name will spread further than the comfortable corner of south-west London in which I ply my trade.

Since joining Fulham, I've listened in training, improved, taken my chance in the first-team and I'm now spoken about as a player with potential, a young striker who might go far. Might. That word hangs over me. I don't want might. I'm desperate for

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success, desperate to be seen as the real deal. Might won’t do. Might is for schoolboys. I’m a professional footballer and it is time to prove I’m here to stay.

It’s a night match. That makes it even more special. The floodlights shine down on us and I’m ready. Like an actor about to play his first leading role, I step into the spotlight, ready to take centre stage. Don’t fluff your lines, Leroy. You’ve worked too hard to get here.

It’s a big match. Bigger than usual. We’re away. The stadium isn’t like Fulham’s Craven Cottage. I love playing there but this is different. More imposing, perhaps more uncomfortable but I can’t dwell on the occasion or the crowd.

I bounce gingerly on my toes, nerves and excitement lifting me off the squelchy winter mud. My muscles are well oiled and limber as I nod to the opposing players out of quiet appreciation and professionalism. All I want to hear though is the shriek of the referee’s whistle, and get among them, get into them, show them what I can do. Show them that I am ready. Come on, ref, get on with it.

The man in black is talking to the two captains. They shake hands. I’m ten yards away but I can’t hear what they’re talking about. Thirty odd thousand fans have made sure of that. The noise swirls around my ears filling me with fear and joy in equal measure. I glance over at a mass terrace, fans swaying one way and then the next, seemingly out of sync, but kind of hypnotic to watch. Under the floodlights and in their team’s colours, it’s like watching colourful algae on a concrete sea.

Most faces are singing, shouting, screaming to raise their heroes and terrify their opponents. The noise pierces through my body but I won’t allow myself to buckle. This is it. This is the sort of night we dream of. The captains have finished their formalities and we’re ready to go. The crowd’s noise gets louder in anticipation, the referee raises his arm to each goalkeeper and

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the whistle is raised to his mouth. *Get into them, Leroy.* The whistle goes.

I move forward, looking to get amongst their defenders. The 1980s. Defenders aren't graceful playmakers that seem so prevalent in today's more refined game. Tackling from behind is the done thing. Leave your mark. Studs, elbows, foreheads, all tools to be used to gain an advantage. They'll be ready for me. I need to be ready for them, and I am. I'm young, fucking fit, and eager to test myself. *Get into them, Leroy.*

The ball is back with our keeper, he'll kick it long so I position myself, ready to leap, ready to make my first challenge. The ball comes out of the lights, I jump, I get something on it, I feel the force of my opponent on my back, we land. And then it happens.

'You black cunt.'

I'm confused. Did that come from the crowd? It couldn't have. It's too clear. Too close. I look around and my opponent is snarling at me. Hate filling his eyes. It came from him.

I'm momentarily disoriented but the ball breaks free again and it's time to play on. I chase the ball into a channel, grapple with another opponent, my mind again focused on winning the ball, being a dangerous centre-forward. I try to impose myself but the ball is cleared upfield.

'Fucking nigger.'

Another voice. Another player. A different voice but filled with the same venom. I can't believe it. Two players take it in turns to abuse me. After each challenge, every time I turn my back there it is. Abusive comment after abusive comment.

'You black bastard.'

'What are you doing on the same pitch as us, you fucking coon?'

I forget where I am. What I'm supposed to be doing. The wind has been taken out of my enthusiastic sails. I have to get back to doing what I do best, but they have got to me. I'm not naive. I was

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born and bred in south London. Brixton. I know of racism. I’ve heard it. I’ve seen it. This though, this seems different to me. All racism is foul and feral but this is on a football pitch, the place I’ve always been most at home.

It’s not from the terraces either. That I know of. That I’m mentally prepared for. Been on the end of that plenty of times. Fans, their eyes wide with rage and vitriol, spittle flying from their mouths, willing to shout anything to get at you and to convey their hatred for you. This though is from fellow professionals, men I want to compete against tactically and physically, fellow sportsmen I have trained hard to be strong enough to take kicks from, supple enough to out-jump, skilful enough to score goals against.

The game is going on around me but I’m going through the motions. More abuse. What do I say? What do I do? I look at the ref. I’m afraid to say anything to him but maybe he’s heard. More abuse but he does nothing. I look to my team-mates? Gordon Davies, my strike partner. He only has eyes (and obviously ears) for the ball, the game. The game that right now I am out of.

It’s half-time and we’re losing. In our dressing-room, steam rising from our sweaty shirts, the manager, Malcolm Macdonald only talks of a way back into the game. To him, his staff and my team-mates, I have worked manfully and I’m encouraged to do more of the same. More of the same? I’m sure they’re right. I’m sure I’m in for more of the same. ‘Keep working them, Leroy. Keep trying to stretch them. We’ll get back into this.’ Stretch them? The only thing that has been stretched out there is my head and no one knows or is it they don’t care?

The second half and there’s the abuse again. They score again and the game is lost but there is no let-up. ‘We’ve not seen you before,’ they say. ‘You must’ve just got off the banana boat.’ Their laughter cackles in my ear. They’re demeaning me, belittling me, embarrassing me, attacking me all to win a football match. They’ve set out to wind me up and it has worked. It will be 25

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years until I look into the eyes of one of my tormentors and see a glimmer of remorse.

The game passes me by. The whistle goes and I stand alone in the centre of the pitch, splattered in mud, drawing in large, cold breaths of the winter's night. The crowd roar their approval, 21 other players shake hands and share sporting pleasantries. I stand alone. I should be lamenting the result, my poor form, but all I can think of is my two tormentors and the words they've used against me.

They're walking towards me. Smiling. 'Well done, son,' says one of them. 'Better luck next time.'

'Fuck off, you prick,' I say, my voice cracking with emotion. I'm looking him straight in the eye.

'And you,' I say, turning to the other one. 'You can fuck off too.'

They smile. They turn to each other and walk away, like two plump fishermen who have landed the lake's prize carp. Job done and goodnight.

My fists clench up. I want to run behind them and punch them both in the back of their heads. A cowardly but painful act from behind, just like their words were to me. I'm stuck in the mud, momentarily paralysed with my thoughts. I come to. Hitting them won't help. The battle is lost. I trudge from the pitch, forgetting to salute the travelling Fulham fans.

Back in the dressing-room, I'm patted on the back. Apparently a good effort from a young striker. Words of encouragement but they mean nothing. I ignore the inquest to what went wrong. Expletives and what-ifs fill the room but soon the talk is lighter. What pub do we go to, where shall we drown the sorrows? Hammersmith? Yeah, let's get to the Palais. It's agreed.

I'm not interested though. My head is bowed. After what seems an age I undress, grab a towel, wade through the swamp of dirty kit and discarded shin-pads and I'm in the shower. The lads are laughing now. *Win or lose, we're on the booze.* I feel alone.

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In a bubble. Unable to talk about what just happened but unable to forget it.

As the steam rises around me I think about it and I think about my reaction. I want to cry. Can’t do that. Can’t let that happen. Water and steam surround me. Maybe I could let a tear out, no one would know. No, I can’t. I’m a footballer. Come on, Leroy.

The players are laughing but I am thinking. Maybe this was the game I had chosen to play. I was a big, athletic centre-forward, taught to get into defenders. *Let them know you’re there, Leroy.* Taught to use a shoulder, coached to use my strength if it meant gaining an advantage. *It’s part of the game, Leroy.*

Part of the game? Is that what just happened? Is that what I would have to come to terms with? Is that how pros treat other pros, all in the name of winning football matches? Earlier, I said I wasn’t naive but maybe I was. I knew I was by no means the first to face such bile from other players and I knew I wouldn’t be the last but this had surprised me. Everything I had dreamt of achieving had just been tested.

I leave the ground but have no idea if I can handle this. Suddenly I don’t know if I want it. Questions race through my mind and then I think of my dad. ‘Keep your powder dry, son.’ He always says that to me. I go to bed, thinking about my dad, his journey, his hardships and how he dealt with similar attitudes when he arrived in England; thirty years before but still there.

Football was all I had ever wanted to do and it dawns on me that I won’t let those attitudes stop me doing it. I have to find a way to cope. I won’t accept it, but I have to deal with it, even use it to better myself. That night as I took to the field, I was a young man with something to prove.

I left as a young *black* man with something to prove.

PART ONE

WILLIE

A Quiet Drink

I 'VE celebrated scoring a goal at the Kop end at Anfield. I've stood in the centre circle at Upton Park while 25,000 West Ham fans have chanted my name. I've stood on the African west coast, white sand warming my toes as I looked out on the Atlantic Ocean.

All wonderful places but if I shut my eyes and think of a place I have always loved, a place I would always like to be, it would be on my father's knee. Me, a small but proud boy looking up at his smiling face, him a proud dad (I hope!) but for now an entertainer, surrounded by people eagerly awaiting his next line, the next gag within a gag. This is Willie Rosenior, local raconteur, my dad, my first hero. My last hero.

Dad loved to tell stories. Like all the great storytellers, I'm sure only some were true and all were exaggerated but oh, how I loved to be pulled up to his oak-like knees and allowed a ringside seat to his many stories about anything from life back in Sierra Leone to a recent holiday in northern Europe.

It might have only been a few family members, neighbours and friends sitting around us but back then, Dad might as well have sold out Wembley Stadium, such was the joy and pride I took from

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watching him entertain us all. I might not have understood much of what he was saying and I might have heard the same story for the umpteenth time, but who was counting? Not me. I relished him and his tales and would laugh and laugh every time I heard them. Almost as much as he laughed telling them.

Dad was always laughing, especially when he was telling his own stories. Which is most of the time. He could barely get a sentence out without interrupting himself with the contagious ‘hee-hee-hee’ chuckle of his.

On so many occasions he would take me from our house in Thornbury Road to the local shops to get a few groceries, and what should have been a 20-minute round trip usually took two hours or more. He sauntered along, stopping to talk to everyone. In conversation, he could switch effortlessly between the Krio language (patois) of his native Sierra Leone, the normal English he speaks to Mum and us kids, and his rather regal, received pronunciation telephone voice – think Philip in *Rising Damp* – depending on his audience.

Dad had an instinct for how to get along with all kinds of people. Princes or paupers, hospitality boxes or terracing, Dad just loved people.

He could be charming, funny, serious, whatever, and people were drawn to him.

* * * * *

Everyone in the area knows Willie Rosenor, and he’s got time for anyone that has time for him. Everyone, that is, except for the man from the electricity board when he comes knocking to see if our three-bedroom Victorian house is occupied or not. Then it’s a case of, ‘Turn the lights off! Turn the lights off! Be quiet!’

Dad is a qualified electrician himself and he’s able to rewire the house so when money is short and times are tough, we can avoid the bills. A perk of the job, shall we say. These occasional

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games of hide-and-seek continue for years, causing amusement and terror in equal measure. It's pretty much the only time our house falls silent.

'It's okay everyone, he's gone, you can come out now.'

Throughout my childhood, it's not unusual for one of Dad's chats during a shopping trip or on the way home from work to lead to an impromptu party back at ours. Any day of the week; whenever Dad feels like it.

The Woodleys who run the paper shop up the road opposite Brixton prison will usually turn up. Chris and Brenda will come round with a huge bowl of chips. They half-fry big batches of them and keep a ready supply in their freezer – so that they only take five minutes to cook when needed. I'm not sure how much time that actually saves, but we normally eat rice at home, so chips are a treat. All the neighbours are welcome to come round. Adults and kids all mixing in.

My mum cooks and, no matter what time of year it is, always insists on getting the coal fire going. She likes the warm glow. Meanwhile, my four elder sisters are in charge of the music, taking their pick from their own LPs – the likes of Earth Wind & Fire, The Jackson Five, Change, Marvin Gaye – and hundreds and hundreds of my dad's records.

My Dad is a music lover and a jazz buff. He played guitar and loved everything from his favourite Ink Spots to Miles Davies, Nat King Col and African High Life. He regularly bought the latest music from a record shop in Brixton market including the popular 'Tighten Up' Reggae albums and Blue Note jazz records.

We all do the 'Car Wash' dance – kick, kick, jump back, jump back, kick, turn, slide, slide. Me and my sisters at the front, Mum, Dad and the neighbours behind, tipsy or drunk, trying to follow the steps.

Parties were frequent in our house. When Mum and Dad didn't have family and neighbours around at our regular 'get

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togethers’, my Dad was to be found most evenings holding court in the kitchen. Although we had set meal times, I was free to eat whenever I was hungry (not a privilege I’m informed enjoyed by my sisters!). Mum always had a huge pot of stew or soup on the stove for unexpected visitors. Mum was extremely resourceful and very versatile, making limited budget go a long way. She could conjure up the most delicious meals from the cheapest cuts from the butchers (beef brisket, neck of lamb, oxtail) or being given away at the butchers (pigs’ trotters, chickens’ feet). Cooked long and slow until the meat falls off the bone, each one lasts for days. Rice is reheated until all that’s left at the bottom of the pan is as hard as a biscuit, and we eat it like one. Nothing is wasted. Not with Mum at the helm.

It is the kitchen rather than the living room where my sisters and I always congregate to listen to Dad’s life stories. I sit on his lap. My sisters sit on chairs scattered about the room or on the floor. Mum is buzzing around in the background, chipping in with the odd comment, usually to wind him up. Even those stories he has told again and again, he always finds a new way to tell them. It’s far more entertaining than watching the three channels on telly.

One evening in 1970, with six-year-old me perched on that knee, he launches into a story with all his familiar gusto, but hold on, this is one he’s never told us before, ‘It was one evening in November back in 1954. I was 25 at the time, a trainee electrician. I joined my mates for a quiet drink after work down at The George in Tooting – it’s still there now. We were all black guys – the black guys that came to this country at the time, we all tended to stick together.

‘One of the guys was with his girlfriend. A white girl. I’d only known her a little while. Bit shorter than me – about five-foot-eight, slim with short mousey brown hair. Tight-fitting knee-length pink coat zipped up to her neck. Black boots reaching up

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just below the knee. A few guys in the pub noticed her when she walked in. Hee-hee-hee.'

Mum shoots him a mock quizzical look.

'Hee-hee. Yes, very attractive, but nothing on you, dear. Hee-hee-hee. And I was looking pretty sharp myself. Nice black overcoat, dark brown suit, crisp white shirt and a black tie. But I was chatting to her, not chatting her up – as I say, she was my friend's girlfriend. I talk to everyone. And she was a nice girl. So we're sitting having a drink, talking, laughing, when these three Teddy Boys – teenagers, who'd been standing at the bar – came over. All tall, white; quiffs as tight as their drainpipe trousers. I hadn't noticed, but apparently they'd been watching us ever since they saw Sarah join our crowd.

'I say, [Dad puts on his best telephone voice] "Gentlemen."

'The men ignore me and look over at Sarah.

'One says, "What are you doing?"

"Pardon me?" she replies.

"What the heck are you doing with them?" (I'm pretty sure 'heck' is not the word the man actually used.)

'So I say, [telephone voice, again] "Excuse me chaps, you don't need to be talking to a lady like that."

He starts giggling again, 'All hell breaks loose! Hee-hee-hee. These boys are going crazy! Hee-hee. They're punching the hell out of me and the other guys. I'm trying to defend myself when – thud! I feel a heavy whack on the side of my head.'

Dramatic pause. My sisters and I are all looking at him agog.

'Hee-Hee. One of them had hit me with a beer bottle – knocked me over! Hee-hee-hee.'

He's chuckling away to himself. I'm looking up at him, half-horrified and half-smiling at his jovial description of the incident.

'Why are you laughing?' says Mum, sitting down next to him, then turning to my sisters. 'He could have died, you know. They

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found a shard of glass this close to his temple,’ she continues, gesturing with the tips of her thumb and forefinger almost touching. ‘He spent weeks in hospital.’

‘Hee-hee-hee, luckily St George’s hospital was just around the corner. We were clever. We drank in a pub near accident and emergency! And anyway, I’m still here, aren’t I?’ Dad continued to tell an enthralled crowd about his lying on the floor, rushing blood ruining his always immaculate attire.

The fight continued around him, spilling out on to the street. The sight of white teenagers and a group of black youths would soon be commonplace in England’s cities, especially London, but the thought of some customers just sitting there and finishing their pints like this was a bit of Saturday afternoon sport is a galling one.

My dad is left dazed on the sticky wooden floor of the pub, gasping for breath, arching his back as he reached to try and stem the flow of blood, while the fighting between his friends and the Teddy Boys spilled on to the street, the locals enjoying their afternoon beverages seemingly oblivious to Dad’s plight.

‘I remember one guy going to the loo with the fight going on and man, the smell when they opened the door to those toilets. Hee-hee. It was like smelling salts! That woke me up! Hee-hee-hee.’

Other punters were coolly asking questions about how the whole thing started, insinuating that maybe my dad had it coming to him. Soon phone calls were made and the small matter of the glass sticking out of my dad’s bloody face was dealt with by the arrival of an ambulance. It was serious. Dad removed and in an ambulance, the mess was cleaned up from the pub’s sticky floorboards, arrests were made and medics got on with saving a life. With that smile on his face, Dad described to us all in technicolour tones, the crimson ambulance pillow and how he was immediately wheeled through to the operating theatre, and – like the audience listening to this story – all anyone could do was wait.

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Such was the severity of his injury, Dad was kept in hospital for weeks for observation. Now, the inch-long scar by his temple – which he takes great pleasure in showing us – is there for all of us to see. A badge of honour. Welcome to England.

* * * * *

I thought a lot about that story. Later I would face racial abuse and while I was never physically hurt, I know what it is to feel alone while it is happening. It will be a long time before I fully understand.

This was a working-class south London neighbourhood – a white working-class south London neighbourhood – in 1954. People were more interested in finishing their pints and then heading home to get dressed up for a night out. Maybe dancing at the Brixtonia Ballroom Club on the Stockwell Road or the Wimbledon Palais; or going to the flicks at the Mayfair Cinema on Upper Tooting Road; or checking their numbers at the local bingo hall.

It was just nine years since the end of the Second World War when Britain – and London especially – was still trying to heal itself from the scars of the conflict. In July 1944, a bomb had dropped on the corner of Idlecombe and Southcrofts roads nearby, wiping the place out. Post-war, some families responded by moving out to places like Devon or Salisbury in Wiltshire. Other more defiant types were adamant that they wouldn't be forced out. Then the perceived threat was no longer from above but from outsiders who – in the eyes of the vast majority – were trying to change their British way of life.

Young black men were seen as a threat, no matter how personable they were. No wonder the drinkers around my dad didn't want to get involved. No wonder they didn't want to get blood on their hands.

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‘I was in hospital for weeks and the police managed to find the guys who attacked me,’ Dad continues. ‘They were arrested and taken into custody. And they were all facing a long time in prison for attempted murder.’

‘Ahead of the trial, the mother of the boy who actually hit me with the bottle comes to visit me. She wants to distance herself from what her son has done and apologise for the unprovoked attack.’

‘I could tell she was sincere and she came to see me regularly during my recovery. She asked me to forgive her boy.’

‘By the time the case went to court, it was a big story in the area. Big story – the *South London Press* was all over it. Hee-hee-hee. In the courtroom, when the defence lawyer stands up, he tucks his left thumb in his waistcoat and waves his right hand around like a Shakespearean actor as he speaks to the judge.’

“I am going to try and keep this very simple for Mr Rosenior,” he says, “because he has come from the Colonies and obviously doesn’t have the language to deal with this sort of thing.”

‘Hee-hee, that’s what he said. He carries on talking for a while, outlining the case. He’s talking as if I’m not there. I just sit there listening, looking like this.’ (Dad pulls a face of fake bewilderment.) When the two of them have finished, I stand up.’

He turns on his telephone voice.

“Please do excuse me, Your Honour,” I say. “I was brought up with English as my first language. I went to St Edward’s, an English grammar school and I am perfectly capable of speaking the language, possibly even more fluently than you, sir. So, please, if you could refer directly to me with any questions, I would be most grateful.”

“Hee-hee-hee – mouths dropped around that court. Stunned silence! After that the judge spoke to me on level terms, and when it came to summing up he asked if I had anything else to say.”

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“Yes, Your Honour, I would like to make a plea for leniency for the young man who struck me with the bottle. His mother has come to see me, we have struck up a friendship and I feel that he wants to change. His mother is going to play a big part in that so I ask for clemency.”

‘The judge, the defence lawyer and probably half the courtroom can’t believe it. Hee-hee-hee.’

* * * * *

There was my dad fighting the corner of a guy who had nearly killed him.

‘The judge says to me, “Mr Rosenior, if more people had your attitude, Britain would be a better place.”’

This is a story that Dad will enjoy repeating over the years. Like all good raconteurs, he’ll tweak the details here and there – I still reckon he might have made that bit up about the judge praising him! However, the truth remains that, due to my dad’s intervention, his attacker got a very lenient sentence for his crime, just 18 months. His mother personally thanked Dad afterwards, but he just told her to forget about it and make sure she looked after her son.

But why does a father tell his six-year-old son and four young daughters such a gory tale, even if it is laced with humour? Well, he has reasons. I learn that everything my father says to us is for a reason. And the underlying lessons of this anecdote will only truly become clear to me when racism impacts on my own life. Fifty years later though I still chuckle at the judge’s words. He was right. People like my dad did make Britain a better place.