

## Praise for *Six Stickers*

“Absurd [and] strangely uplifting \*\*\*\*.”

– *Four Four Two*

“A witty exploration of the romance surrounding the beautiful game \*\*\*\*.”

– *ESPN FC*

“A romantic ode to the beautiful game of yesteryear.”

– *Sam Rowe, The Telegraph*

“An absurdly brilliant idea.”

– *Oliver Kay, The Times*

“Gleefully irreverant...[provides] genuine, hearty laughs at a rate of knots.”

– *Branch of Science*

“Very [Kurt] Vonnegut. But with more stickers.”

– *Iain Macintosh, author of Football Manager Stole My Life*

# THE PICTURES ARE **BETTER** ON THE RADIO



A fan's love affair with sport  
on the wireless

**ADAM CARROLL-SMITH**

# Contents

Thanks . . . . .	6
Prologue . . . . .	7
Chapter 1: Midweek evening football, circa 1995, at home in Portsmouth . . . . .	9
Chapter 2: The Ashes, August 2005, Rosie's Vineyard, Southsea . . . . .	15
Chapter 3: American Football, February 2012, a house in the countryside near Weymouth. . . . .	26
Chapter 4: Tennis, Summer 2013, Wimbledon. . . . .	34
Chapter 5: Football, Saturdays throughout the 1990s, northbound on the M27. . . . .	47
Chapter 6: Football, August 8th 2015, 606 on BBC Radio Five Live. . . . .	55
Chapter 7: The Ashes, November 2010, Edinburgh . . . . .	76
Chapter 8: Golf, September 2012, The Ryder Cup, Medinah Golf Club . . . . .	84
Chapter 9: Football, England vs. Brazil, June 2002, The Portsmouth Grammar School . . . . .	95
Chapter 10: Football, England vs. Germany, June 2010, Glastonbury; Portsmouth vs. Manchester City, November 2004, Fratton Park . . . . .	103
Chapter 11: The men's 100 and 200 metres finals, August 2015, Beijing . . . . .	117
Chapter 12: Various, winter 2008, Archway . . . . .	136
Chapter 13: The ballad of A.G.P. . . . .	144
Chapter 14: The Ashes, November 2013, Southsea . . . . .	153
Chapter 15: Football, April 2005, Bath. . . . .	159
Chapter 16: Football, The County Ground, Swindon, sometime in 2009 or 2010 . . . . .	169
Chapter 17: Football, August 2015, Arsenal vs. Liverpool .	178
Epilogue . . . . .	184

# Prologue

I HAVE a healthy distrust of any sports fan who says they don't enjoy listening to sport on the radio. It seems insane to me that television should be the default second-choice on every occasion when getting to the ground itself to watch is not an option.

*The Pictures Are Better on the Radio* picks through a few notable occasions in my twenty plus years as a sports fan when listening to the radio felt important or necessary or just plain enjoyable. It is a collection of essays and stories and memories, of moments in time when the radio was on and I was glad to hear it; when listening in really stirred my emotions or taught me something about fandom or simply kept me amused, or distracted.

This book is not a futile attempt to prove radio's superiority of any other way of following sport but a love letter, in episodic form, to the medium and all that it is capable of providing to the sports fan with the willingness to tune in. Not that I am *actually* in love with radio; I am *just* a big fan. Even on those dark nights when we only had each other and a live

commentary for company, it never went any further. My relationship with my radio is platonic. Though the more I labour this point, the more I realise I am undermining my argument. I think I'll stop now.

With a little luck, over the course of the following pages, I might strike upon a few deep and meaningful reasons – or failing that, some shallow and emotionally-manipulative ones – for radio's enduring appeal in a busy and noisy age. There are, I think, small and easily over-looked reasons why radio remains a fantastic way to follow sport. I hope I find a few of them.

But more importantly, I hope that a few of these stories and observations prompt you to dig out your radio a little more often, or cast your own mind back to exciting and memorable listening experiences in your own past. If I can jog your memory of times when your radio brought the sound of victory and defeat directly into your living room, your kitchen, your car or your tent, then I will be happy.

I hope you enjoy the book, but if at any point you decide it is not for you, go ahead and switch the radio on instead. I will understand. If there is football or golf or cricket or tennis on at the time, I *absolutely* will.

**Adam Carroll-Smith**  
**Southsea, summer 2015**

## Chapter 1

“Radio sport, at its best,  
is teleportation.”

*Midweek evening football, circa  
1995, at home in Portsmouth*

**M**Y first radio was a portable Sony Walkman. I got it around my ninth, maybe tenth, birthday. It was shiny and black with a mess of small buttons on the front, like Darth Vader’s chest panel, only with better AM/FM reception than he probably got. Along the left-hand side were a series of tiny switches, and on the back, a belt clip. I actually used the belt clip a lot. I thought it made me look cool. And still do, as it goes, because it did. Ten-year-old me was an excellent arbiter of the zeitgeist. And in the mid-90s, it was definitely *de rigueur* (French for ‘everyone else is doing it, so go for it’) to holster your consumer durables (radios, cell phones, portable televisions, microwave ovens, Sodastreams, etc) along your belt line.

Belt clip aside, I loved my Walkman because of its ability to defy my puritanical bedtime. Back

then, lights out for my brother and I came at seven o'clock; half-past on a good night. And not because we lived on an eighteenth century working farm and there was milking to do early next morning either. As far as I could tell, there was no reason, besides my parents selfishness. Now that I have children of my own, I get it: children are tiring, and parents need some quality time alone to tidy up toys, eat in silence, and watch a TV programme with a murder in it.

Growing up, I was lucky enough to have one of those combi TV-and-video sets in my room, and my first instinct was to try and watch that once my mum and dad were safely deposited back downstairs. But switching it on was a noisy operation. The power button made a loud plastic clang when you pushed it in, and an even louder one when you released it. If there was a tape in the machine – and there always was – it made a pained whirring noise; a sort of winding heave like the sound an old robot with a bad back would make if he was trying to lift his robot grandchild, and the robot grandchild was just far too heavy and his lifting technique was all wrong.

All that was racket was enough, nine times out of ten, to give away my covert intentions. On the tenth time, the best I could do was watch with the sound off.

My desire for a Walkman was borne of necessity, in the first instance. And fortunately for me, my parents are wonderful and generous and kind people so they indulged me, and bought me one.

*“Radio sport, at its best, is teleportation.”*

Snug beneath my duvet, I would pull my radio and spongy headphones out from under my pillow and listen in the dark, the only light in the room coming from the small red battery indicator LED on the front of the radio.

I used my Walkman to listen to comedy on tape, *Bottom* in particular, which I loved despite the loss of all the violent visual slapstick. I used it tune in to John Peel and Steve Lamacq on Radio 1, to listen to strange and brilliant and occasionally awful music. I used it listen to random talk radio stations. I scanned the airwaves at random sometimes, and caught snatches of French chit-chat (probable topics: smoking, lunch, existentialism) through fizzing static at the far ends of the dial.

But my favourite thing to listen to was football.

First of all, because I knew my mum and dad would be watching on TV downstairs. I liked that I was defying my bedtime instructions, and enjoying the same entertainment they were, without them even knowing.

I quickly developed a taste for night-time football under cover of darkness. I liked the sound of a commentator talking close into a lip mic. I liked the noise a crowd made: the small pockets of singing that marked a quiet passage of play; the full-throated roar that accompanied a goal; the howling fury that followed a late challenge or flag. I liked that it was the supporters, not the players, who led the action: without the context provided by TV’s wide-angle pitch view, cheers and jeers were exciting



events in themselves. They arrived suddenly and without context. The crowd created the drama, they propelled the action along. The commentators provided the detail a split-second later.

I liked listening to those night games best, in winter. It was strangely enjoyable to hear of whipping winds and horizontal rain at Villa Park or Elland Road while I lay toasty and secure in bed. I felt the cold in the stadium, and was glad to be elsewhere. It heightened my sense of excitement that the commentary was always so busy and urgent, while I was horizontal; that while the match was all noise and light and colour, my bedroom (to a passing parent at least) was quiet and dark and still.

Most of all, I liked the fact that listening to a match on the radio, alone in my bed, it was possible to feel intimately involved and incredibly close to the action – to really picture what was happening – despite being in my pyjamas, in the dark, hundreds of miles away. It was the first time I realised that radio sport, at its best, is teleportation. In my case, illicit, *secretive* teleportation to boot.

I don't remember individual games, because most of the time, the names of the teams playing were unimportant: it was entertainment enough to remove myself to the secret world of adventure that *Five Live* – and it was *always Five Live* – opened up. My interest in football as a pre-teen boy was so total, that I was content to have any contact with it, whatsoever. I would have listened to non-league football through the fuzziest of receptions if it meant

“Radio sport, at its best, is teleportation.”

staying up later, and being able to imagine two teams in direct competition.

These, then, were the formative moments in what is now lengthy relationship. And it is unquestionably relevant that what I can recall now, so many years later, is how it made me feel. I was, I think, quite an attentive listener back then: I was hungry for fact and detail and trivia. I needed playground ammunition – knowledge about players and teams I could drop into conversation with my equally football-obsessed friends. And yet nothing of the sort stands out. I cannot remember, even vaguely, a defining moment of commentary that electrified me in my bed and had me kicking the sheets in excitement. And yet it does not seem to matter in the least.

I think it was arguably the radio itself, as much as the programming, that I got hooked on.<sup>1</sup> That, and hearing stories told in a non-visual way. In that respect, football was no different to the *Bottom* tapes I so treasured, the late-night Radio 1 music shows, or the random talk radio stations I half-listened to for a few minutes at a time. They each stimulated the creation of vivid images in my head. And that was addictive.

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1 I also developed something of a taste for small-time crime, thanks to the regular acts of theft I had to commit to keep my habit going. As the batteries in my radio began to run down every few weeks, I would steal the double-As from the television remote downstairs, and replace them with the nearly-dead ones from my Walkman. I think my parents knew, but they were kind enough never to turn me in. Good people.

*The Pictures are Better on the Radio*

Looking back, my parents must have known. Some nights I fell asleep with both the radio and my headphones still on. And yet they never once picked me up on it. I guess they probably thought my late-night radio activities to be quite a harmless sort of rebellion against their authority. I imagine they reckoned against it being the sort of thing which could snowball into a worrying obsession. On reflection, I think they misjudged it. They ought, perhaps, to have nipped it in the bud. I am glad they did not.