



400 AT 5:30

WITH NANNIES

INSIDE THE
LOST WORLD OF
SPORTS JOURNALISM

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Introduction

SO you want to be a freelance sports writer, eh?

Enticed by the international travel, the free press passes to world events like Rugby World Cups, Olympic Games and The Masters at Augusta National? Reckon you could handle the business-class flights and working with leading sportsmen and women?

Can I ask you two questions? Have you taken leave of your senses? When did you last see a doctor?

You see, you'd need to be sure you were of sound mind to embark upon the freelance sports writer's life. Images of dining out under the stars on a warm night in Durban or swimming off Bondi on an Australian summer's morning may well be alluring. But they're a mirage. Most times they don't exist.

Take the night of 22 November 2003: the night of the Rugby World Cup Final in Sydney. Fantastic. England have won the cup. I'm an Englishman and I'm in Sydney. Someone has paid me to be here and write about it. How good is that?

It was a hectic, dramatic final with England requiring extra time to edge home. Jonny Wilkinson's dramatic drop goal sealed the deal. So you head straight out to a celebratory dinner and get legless, yes? Er, no.

We formulate in our minds a straight match report and/or analysis piece for our respective papers. Then we encamp to the press conferences and take our notes. This takes much time and with good reason. One team has lifted the World Cup and they

want to preserve the moment with their mates in the privacy of the dressing room. The other lot have lost and the last people they want to face are the inquisitive media.

Given, too, this was a night match, the clock has long since passed midnight. And Telstra Stadium at Homebush is miles out in the suburbs of Sydney.

When we've finished the official press conferences, we need to talk to the players. This, too, takes time.

It's past 1.15am when I get out of the stadium, my notebook with enough quotes to include in the many reports I need to file in the next few hours. It's pouring with rain but I'm in luck. Without much waiting, I find a train to get me back to central Sydney. But it's too late for a connecting bus to Coogee, where I'm staying, and the taxis are in huge demand as the rain teems down.

Again, I get lucky. I grab a cab and direct him towards the eastern suburbs. We get to Coogee sometime after 2am. It's still pouring and I'm soaked.

So I make a hot coffee, get out the computer and start writing...for newspapers all around the world. There are the titles I work for in Ireland and England, then there are the South African papers. There is one in New Zealand. And I also have a couple of radio interviews to do.

Remember, there is one intrinsic difference between the freelance writer and the staff reporter. The latter works for one paper. I might be working for eight or nine at a major event such as tonight.

There are evening papers in Cape Town, Dublin and Belfast which need my stories by the time they first come in at around 6am. Then there are the morning papers in Auckland, London, Dublin, Belfast, Johannesburg, Durban, Pretoria and Cape Town that want to have a look at the analysis or comment pieces I have written by about mid-afternoon in their offices. Then there are the follow-up features to consider for the Sunday papers in the group. You need to think of an angle and try to keep it back for them.

All the while, you need to have in mind the time of day or night it is where your newspapers are based. Can you say

instantly, what time it is in Johannesburg, Auckland and Dublin when it's 2am in Sydney?

So I tackle the list of orders. Outside, the rain continues to fall as I hammer away on the computer. You can't write one story and hope to get away with it – almost certainly, you'll need to tailor it to a particular market with a local angle somewhere in the piece. So you have to write a different one for the papers in each country.

Eventually, my fingers almost bruised by the thousands of collisions with the keys, I finish my last piece and press the SEND button. I yawn. I'm weary.

It's past 5am and I've gone through the night. But hey, England have won the Rugby World Cup. Where's the party? To find it, at the England team hotel across the harbour in Manly, I'd have to drive for about an hour, either myself or in a taxi. And it's still chucking it down outside.

To hell with it. I'm tired out, written out (until the morning when I'll have to settle down and do some more analytical, reflective pieces) and I head for one place. Bed. I haven't had a single drink all night. Just too busy. So this was my night when England won the Rugby World Cup.

So now you've got a clue, a small idea about this freelance life. Now you should realise it isn't all about swigging from bottles of champagne and frequenting clubs into the small hours. Not if you're doing the job properly.

As a freelance, you'll have made all your own travel arrangements, made the bookings yourself and checked out hotel availability in the cities where you will be working. The staff guy has all this done for him. He just has to collect his airline passes, hotel vouchers and such like and he's away. To write for just one paper.

So why would anyone freelance? They're doubling, tripling, quadrupling their workload in the blink of an eye. Must be mad, surely? Well yes, but why did Daley Thompson become a decathlete and tackle ten disciplines in his sport? He could have specialised in just one of those events. Why did Jessica Ennis take up the heptathlon with its seven disciplines? The same reason,

I suspect. It's much tougher to succeed that way so there is an inherent challenge. You have to work so much harder and longer hours. But if you make it, it is very satisfying.

Freelancing requires certain qualities. You need to learn to operate, to duck and dive. 'No' doesn't mean no, it means 'find another way to do it'. And if that doesn't work, discover a third. Of course, these are the fundamentals of journalism in general.

But a freelance life is lived on the edge: thinking on your feet, thinking out of the box and very often just thinking about how to get the story others can't. For that's how you live. You sell your stories only if the staff guys can't get them. So they've got to be good and they've got to be plentiful for you to make a decent living.

Let me give you an example. On the morning of Wednesday 12 January 1983, the *Daily Mirror* sports desk in London called my office. The hot sporting topic of the week, not just in the UK but worldwide, concerned an imminent rebel cricket tour of apartheid South Africa by a West Indian squad. This was dynamite in the sporting world.

Cricket, unlike rugby union, had long since banned all sporting contact with the South Africans. For a West Indies squad in particular to have agreed to tour, was a sporting sensation.

The party had slipped out of the Caribbean like fugitives from the law. They caught a flight from Miami to London and had all day UK time before their flight to Johannesburg that night. Trouble was, no-one in the British media knew where they were spending that day.

'Can you track them down for us,' was the request from the desk. It wasn't quite needle-in-the-haystack time but not far short. I made one decision straightaway, based on pure logic. It was unlikely they had gone far from Heathrow, where they'd flown into early that morning. But there are a lot of hotels in and around Heathrow airport.

My working partner and I drew up a list of about 20 hotels. We didn't have a clue whether they were at any of them but knew one thing. The hotel wasn't likely to be forthcoming.

We each called ten of them and offered a name or two of the rebels. No-one answered in exultant terms, like, 'They are here just waiting for you to come and do an exclusive interview with them. They have rooms on the ninth floor.'

Doesn't work like that, unfortunately. I drew a blank on my first half-dozen calls. But the reply I got on the next raised eyebrows.

'Do you have a Mr Richard Austin staying with you?' I asked.

The reply was so fast I smelled a rat. 'He isn't here,' I was told. But there was something in the voice that made me doubt it and anyway, how did they know the name so well?

I jumped into the car and headed for Heathrow.

When I got there, I had to find someone behind the desk who looked as though he or she might be willing to help, not erect a brick wall. And I didn't want to sound desperate, either. For sure, that would have alerted them given the fact that front desk reception had almost certainly been warned not to give out any information, especially to the media.

So after a few minutes watching the staff handle queries, I sidled up to the one I thought might be the most cooperative.

'I need a room number for my friend, Richard Austin.'

He checked a sheet of paper with a list of names on it.

'He's in 417. Would you like me to call him, Sir?'

What? And alert him the media were downstairs? I think not.

I went up to the fourth floor, took out my notebook and scribbled a short note. It said that I needed to see him for just a few minutes, there was no hidden agenda and I certainly wasn't from the anti-apartheid movement, which had condemned the tour. I slipped the note under the door and took a chance he was there.

In two minutes, the door was opened. On the chain.

'What you want?' said the voice.

I figured I had no more than ten seconds to make my case. Then the door would slam shut and that would be it.

So I told him everyone else had had their say. He should have his, make his case and defend his views if he was going.

Introduction

The door closed, but then I heard the chain being undone. It was opened furtively and I was admitted.

I had half an hour with Richard Austin and also spoke to his room-mate and fellow rebel, Everton Mattis. And the next morning's back page lead story on the *Daily Mirror*, Thursday 13 January, said, "‘Why I'm going to land of race hate. I cannot feed my family on principles" says Tour rebel Richard Austin: Exclusive by Peter Bills.'

It was the story no-one else got that day. And that night, their lips sealed, the players boarded their flight to Johannesburg.

But the story ended in tragedy. Richard Austin, who was so versatile a player that West Indies cricket enthusiasts once labelled him 'the right-handed Gary Sobers', was paid about £60,000 for each year of a two-year contract. But it ruined his life. He was ostracised thereafter back in the Caribbean and died, homeless and abandoned, as a drug addict at 60.

Now, do you reckon you could handle challenges like that, most days of the week? Oh yes, it's pretty much a 24/7 job freelancing. While the staff guys are out on the golf course on their couple of days off a week, you're on the phone trying to line up an interview or writing an article for someone within the hour. Always, you need to come up with something different to sell it to a paper.

And if you manage all that, if you do actually make it work as a freelance, what are the advantages of such a life? In a word, fun.

It is my belief that Australians know a thing or two about that particular commodity. Somehow, they seem to possess a sixth sense in such matters.

One of my closest mates from that part of the world, Australia's 1991 Rugby World Cup-winning coach Bob Dwyer, is a man certainly in tune with this topic. Dwyer has such fantastic connections to the Almighty that when he had a heart attack a few years ago, he just happened to be in a hospital's examination room when it occurred.

Clearly, he'd been tipped off about it by someone.

Dwyer emerged from that little brush with his maker in a reflective mood. 'Mate,' he once told me during one of our

many long discourses about life, 'there are very few men who get on their deathbed and wish they'd spent more time at the office.'

Very true.

What Dwyer was saying was that if you don't have fun and enjoy life while you have the chance, it's going to be too late when your maker picks your number out of the black bag of balls and calls you up for tea.

Thus, FUN is the word that is the core element of this book about freelance sports writing.

Life can be viewed through a prism of varying colours. On one side it might seem dark and grey, on the other, bright and blue, even on a dark and grey day. It just depends how you perceive it.

Now I accept that some jobs hardly lend themselves to humour. If you're sitting trapped in an office, doing a boring job that never changes and you are counting down the days of the last 19 years before you can retire and flee the place, humour might seem a touch misplaced.

But a multitude of people aren't fettered by such chains. Many possess riches beyond the imagination of their forefathers. Yet how do they look? Bloody miserable.

I mean, is it an ingrowing toenail that's troubling them? Or do they actually enjoy looking about as friendly and happy as Gordon Brown on a bad day?

The point is, humour is omnipresent. But you need eyes and minds tuned to the correct wavelength to see it. Some people wear a 24/7 expression of happiness and contentment, not to mention an eye that twinkles with humour. Then you find out later they're suffering from cancer or they have lost a wife or child in a car crash.

If you spend the better part of 40 years in any single profession, chances are you're going to encounter some lean times, periods when the gambling chips seem stacked forbiddingly against you. It's at times like that, you have a choice. Shrug, order up a beer and raise it to 'a bloody sight better tomorrow than today', or let the grim statistics overwhelm you.

Once again, I got lucky. I met many great people in my years as a journalist. And they gave me so many reasons to smile, to enjoy their company.

Great? Some were, literally. In that rarified category, I'd include Nelson Mandela, who once gave me an exclusive one-on-one interview at his home. Mandela had more reason than almost any other human being to be downcast and miserable at his lot. The vile apartheid system in his country had robbed him of 27 of the best years of his life. By the time he emerged from his incarceration, he was an old man, his life almost done. What man could ever forget that?

Deep inside, I doubt Mandela ever did. But outwardly, if you judged him by his demeanour, it was as though he'd just been away on a cruise for a few years. And, crucially, that sense of joy at being alive was infectious. Others in his company caught it and left feeling uplifted.

But great does not just fit a world statesman as renowned as Mandela. Others, like a friend of mine, a writer for years, fit comfortably into such a category.

He worked for decades establishing his reputation. Then he got a highly debilitating illness that wrecked his career and his paper eventually fired him. He had to go to court with all the associated trauma of that process to claim what was rightly his. Then he got cancer. Then his sister revealed she had it too.

For most people, the sun would never have brushed his features again. But not this guy. He has endured his treatment, brutal as it has been, with a philosophical grace. And whenever you meet him or spend time with him, he remains the roaring great host he has always been.

He would never allow your fun and pleasure to be affected by his illness. To him, that is a no-go zone. Even when he doubtless feels lousy, he'll pour you a glass, chat and share some fun with you. If it is an act, it is in the Oscar class. But it isn't.

The point is, people like him are an inspiration to others. In the case of Mandela, he inspired a whole nation; actually, much of the entire world. As for my friend, he just earned the deep

admiration of his friends who knew his story but would never have guessed had they not been told.

I remove myself rapidly and completely from such esteemed company. I am not fit, as they say in sporting parlance, to lace the boots of such men.

But when I set out on this journalistic odyssey what seems like about 200 years ago, I was determined about one thing. Whether the idea soared or crash-landed, I was going to have some fun along the way. And that was one of the main reasons why I became a freelance.

Thus, what you will read in this book are not long essays as to the merits of the *Guardian's* change in paper size, arguments over the moral issues wrapped up in *The Sun's* Page 3 girls or revamped, boring reports of matches played long ago.

In my career as a freelance writer, I worked for most of the London daily and Sunday newspapers, the UK provincial press and newspapers all around the world. Some elicited fun and excitement, others drudgery and boredom.

But in many cases, there were funny things to see, brilliant times to share. And this is what this book purports to be about.

So don, if you will dear reader, your special glasses marked 'Humorous times, happy events and wild, mad, dangerous escapades' and join me on the road that rambles across most of the world to enjoy some of the stories.

They are, I have to confess, all completely true.

Part 1

SOME go to journalism colleges, some to university. I went to church to become a sports writer.

I should declare my true motives at this point. And that muttering you hear is no Gregorian chant, just formal apologies to the ecclesiastical brethren. For all my cherubic expressions from the choir stalls each week, I had devious, ulterior motives.

Every Sunday morning at our local church, a few pages of scruffy notes were always stuffed inside my prayer book. They came out just as the vicar was settling to his weekly task of explaining some part of the Bible and relating it to modern life.

‘And the Lord said’ read his notes.

‘Blackheath 6 Swansea 3’ read my notes.

We parted company in terms of attention very early in his oration.

‘It was the Lord’s wish that...’

‘It was the Blackheath forwards that...’

I would soldier on quite oblivious to his words. I had a list of scorers from the day before. And on a clean sheet of paper, I gradually filled in what I considered was a far more important lesson.

‘The Swansea half-backs could not break down an efficient Blackheath defence.’

Nor was this simply a vainglorious exercise in filling time while the vicar droned on. I knew he talked for about 20 minutes. That was my deadline. I would aim to get down about 150 words by then.

My first ever deadline. I was seven years old.

It was either something extraordinary or very sad. I’ve never been quite sure which.



I never had a hope of making school work. The crucial year when I took my senior exams was 1966. That should give you a clue. The whole period of the examinations coincided with the World Cup which Bobby Moore's England would win. I mean, what chance did a sports-mad youngster have? Which idiot could possibly have scheduled school examinations for roughly the same time as the World Cup finals?

Honestly, which would you have chosen to study – Bobby Charlton's searing shots that threatened to tear the roof out of the Wembley net, or some algebraic formula? Not even history, a subject I would come to adore all my adult life, had much of a chance.

The only history I was interested in that month concerned previous World Cups. I could tell you about 1962 and the South American World Cup. And, clever boy that I was, I knew there were two Koreas although only one, the North, featured in those 1966 finals.

So the ecstasy of England's triumph was cruelly terminated when a grim-faced father walked into the bedroom one morning with my results. It was like a prison sentence about to be read out. Not even the replay of a Bobby Charlton goal could put a smile on my face at that moment.

But I had a 'Get out of Jail' card. And now was the time to play it.

After all, I'd known nine years earlier what I wanted to do. In the winter gloaming at Blackheath's Rectory Field ground in south-east London, we kids would wait eagerly for the end of the game. Blackheath v Swansea, Blackheath v Harlequins, Blackheath v Oxford University, it didn't matter which game it was.

Almost the moment the match was over, piles of glutinous mud all over the ground, we'd dash on, grab one of those old heavy, mud-caked leather balls and immediately start to pass or kick it. Mind you, they often seemed heavier than a couple of us put together.

As the crowd drifted away and the light began to fail, the November winter fog settling like a blanket, we'd line up crucial penalties or drop kicks at goal. Within no time, we were covered in mud and grime. Pigs in shit might be the best analogy.

We were out there in all weathers, all seasons. Even Boxing Day. Especially Boxing Day.

Boxing Day lunch, using up all the turkey left from the giant emu-sized bird we had only partly devoured the previous day, plus half the mountain of uneaten vegetables, had to be on the table by 1pm. Otherwise, Grandfather was in a condition far removed from the Christmas spirit.

We, the male members of the family, would wolf down our meal and gather our coats. Then we'd set off across the heath to The Rectory Field, home of Blackheath, said to be the oldest rugby club in the world.

In those days, Blackheath always played a home Boxing Day match, against the renowned Racing Club de France. This was about 1957 so it's unlikely the visitors would have nipped over from Paris on Eurostar on the morning of the game.

Spying rugby men from what seemed to me at that time like a distant, foreign land was a mouth-watering spectacle. They ran on in their chic soft blue and white striped jerseys, pristine white shorts. And the rough, gruff men of the Blackheath pack usually treated them like a clove of garlic in the crusher. Still, the *entente cordiale* somehow seemed to survive.

And then, late one winter's afternoon after we had kicked the grossly heavy, muddy ball around for a while, it struck me. Not the ball, but a career choice. Peering through the gloom, I spied a naked, single light bulb at the front of the big, old, decrepit double-decker stand on the ground. Alongside it, sat a reporter. He was telephoning his report of the match to a newspaper.

That's what I'll do when I'm older, I thought.

There, decision made without a bloody careers advice officer anywhere in sight.

Simples, as they say in that advert.



IF 1966 was a landmark year in the lives of footballers such as Bobby Moore, the Charlton brothers and Nobby Stiles, alas, I could hardly say the same.

Poor Dad. My abysmal results meant a visit to the headmaster for him. He approached it with the foreboding of Sir Thomas More heading for the scaffold.

W.R. Hecker, headmaster of the Senior School, was a patrician figure carved from the mould of Victorian institutions. Tall, balding, and, by then into his early 60s, he examined the pieces of paper in front of him that told of my failure with the displeasure of someone who had stepped into something foul on the footpath.

‘He will, of course,’ came the deep, booming voice, ‘stay down in the fifth year and take his exams again.’ It wasn’t a comment; rather, an order.

Father shuffled his feet uncomfortably.

‘The problem is, headmaster, I am not sure that would make much difference. You see, he has decided he wants to be a sports journalist.’

The headmaster’s explosion of incredulity was akin to Mr Bumble, the beadle’s response to *Oliver Twist*’s request for more food.

‘A journalist?’ came the roar from the headmaster’s guns. ‘We do not train boys at this school to become journalists.’

The word was spat out like gone-off milk.

Tacitly, Father decided retreat was the order of the day. Besides, the headmaster was quite wrong, he was talking nonsense. The school had prepared me immaculately for a career of ducking and diving, thinking laterally and at times downright disingenuously. Amid some of those malcontents and no-gooders, you learned quickly that rules and regulations were for others, not yourself.

How else to explain the day I nearly got run over by a train at Catford Bridge, a London suburban railway station? The school was still playing soldiers in those days in the form of a

junior military section. You'd get dressed up in army uniform (there were also a few sailors, I seem to remember, but the less said about them, the better).

Drill parade involved marching around the school playground for an hour or two once a week, in enormous heavy boots and wearing a uniform of coarse, itchy brown material. And there was the occasional afternoon parade. It was as farcical as *Dad's Army*, just a younger version of the species.

Luckily, I got a tip-off from a pal to clamber on board the great skive. We joined the band. True, we had to polish our bugles every week. But as the other poor suckers marched around the playground, often under a hot sun, we would lounge around in the covered playground, most of us taking a furtive drag on a fag, waiting for the band leader, a sixth-former, to turn up. He was always late.

In fact, he was almost as big an idiot as the rest of us. After one madcap plot, the details of which I forget, he was hauled in front of a senior teacher and admonished.

'I expect it from that lot but not from you,' he was told. We sniggered and went back to deafening the neighbourhood by blowing our bugles out of tune.

One day a year, the whole school – well, those in military uniform which meant about 95 per cent – decamped to Chelsea Barracks in London to march around a new bit of tarmac and be inspected by some top wallah of the real army.

But before we could get there, the school's fighting force nearly suffered its first casualty. We'd been told to meet at the local railway station. But I was late, disastrously late. Coming from where the bus dropped me, I had to go over the bridge to the far side where you boarded trains for London. Then you had to walk up a long approach road before you finally reached the station entrance and platform.

Alas, as I started going over the bridge, I saw to my horror the London-bound train was already in. Worse still, our apology for the British Army was pouring into the carriages. I knew I'd never catch it if I went down the other side and had to run up that lengthy approach road.

So a brilliant plan came to mind. I could nip down some stairs which took me on to the Down platform, jump on to the tracks and climb up through a door or window of the train that was sitting waiting to leave for London.

I am not sure whether you have ever tried to board a train while standing on the tracks. I accept it is not the conventional method but I thought I'd just ask. If you haven't, my advice is don't. Let me tell you how difficult it is, especially when you are clad in army gear with heavy boots and an equally heavy kitbag slung over your shoulder.

I might have been all right but for the noise this rag-tag army was making inside the carriages. Clearly, they couldn't hear me banging on the carriage door as I tried to jump up level with it, all the while making sure I didn't slip on to the live rail.

The difficulty was then enhanced by the sight of a train coming around the bend and heading straight for me on the Down line. This did pose a problem.

The banging on the train door became increasingly urgent as the other train got closer. Even worse, judging from the speed, it didn't look as if it was planning to stop.

A few hundred yards away might seem a safe distance. But it was closing seriously quickly and my options were diminishing at about the same pace.

Eventually, someone inside the carriage did hear. They wound down the window, saw me, looked up the line and saw the train approaching. There were shouts of alarm.

The door was opened on the track side (they must have been mad, there could have been a terrible accident) and two burly arms lifted me up into the train and deposited me on the floor of the carriage. They slammed the door shut and the other train rushed by.

'Nearly our first casualty of the war, Sir,' said some joker to the master in charge. I have to admit, he looked white with shock. But then, not all these army types are much good under the guns.

In my experience, journalists are far more reliable when the proverbial hits the fan.



THAT'S about it from school times. One story, that's your lot. You will gather from that it wasn't exactly a fun-filled time of my life. I'm sure there must have been some fun times but I can't remember them. Probably blotted everything out, good and bad.

In mid-winter, when the crystals of frost were thick in the lush grass on the rugby fields behind the vast, imposing school buildings, Saturday mornings were the highlight of my week. We would rush out of school at 12.30pm and when it was a Five Nations rugby weekend and England were at home, jump into my pal's dad's car and drive around the South Circular Road to Richmond and then Twickenham.

Those were the days when ordinary people could afford to buy tickets, even four of them in our case, as opposed to today when the corporate, prawn sandwich brigade Hoover up most of them. The closest many genuine rugby supporters get to a Twickenham international these days is a chair in front of the television at home.

Back then, the tickets were something like 30 shillings and the programmes four shillings. Find me the deviant who thought up decimalisation and I'll hand you back a corpse.

Mind you, one early Twickenham adventure might have turned me off rugby forever. It was 1962 and England were playing Wales. It was the first international rugby match I ever attended. We filed on to the south stand terraces, got ourselves immersed in the middle of the Welsh lads and waited for the action. Trouble was, we waited and waited.

Oh, the game began all right. But it would be stretching the truth to say there was any action. In those days, most England teams were filled with chaps from Oxford and Cambridge, the Harlequins club and the City of London. Welsh teams were composed mainly of schoolteachers (the backs) plus steel workers and miners (the forwards) from clubs like Ebbw Vale, Newbridge and Pontypool.

Anyway, all the lot of them did that day was concede penalties that allowed the opposing team's kicker to line

up kicks at goal. Copious numbers of them, I seem to remember.

I think England missed six, and Wales, five. And that was about it for the afternoon's entertainment.

Final score? England 0 Wales 0. To this day, 53 years later, there has never been another 0-0 draw between the old protagonists.

'Welcome to the sport, son. Cracking game, wasn't it?'

'Er, Dad, can we go to Charlton next time instead?'

But of course we didn't. Kept making the same faithful trek to Twickenham. And it did get better.

Naturally, Sod's Law decreed that I missed seeing one of the greatest ever tries scored on the ground. It was 1965 and England were hosting Scotland. The Scots led, 3-0, until the dying moments of a foul day when the England left wing got the ball and set off into the mist and rain, a la Oates leaving the tent, on the most unlikely prospect of reaching the Scottish line 90 metres away.

With conditions underfoot resembling a farmyard, Northampton's finest Andy Hancock side-stepped a couple of opponents yet somehow managed to keep his feet on the liquid mud. Opponents slipped and slithered as they tried to reach him but all failed. So the poor bloke had no choice but to keep going.

By the time he reached the Scottish line and flopped over it, he looked as though he'd just completed a route march across Britain from John O'Groats to Land's End. And then some idiot wondered why he hadn't run around behind the goal posts to make the conversion easier. Which part of the sentence 'I'm knackered' do you not understand?

So the kick was missed and it was a 3-3 draw. But it became known as Hancock's match.

I'd have seen it all, rather than avidly reading about it in the next day's papers and seeing it on the TV highlights, but for one thing. I had a music exam at 3pm that very day, just as they were kicking off at Twickenham.

I've always born a grudge against pianos for missing that try that day.



THREE pounds, seven shillings and sixpence. That was it. My first weekly wage in my first job, at Hayter's Sports Agency in London.

Outrageous exploitation? Well, not exactly given that I was one of the youngsters charged with making tea and phoning the stories written by the real reporters on the staff. We kids were only playing at it in those days. Charlatans, fraudsters, wannabes the lot of us.

We'd do shift hours – 9am–5pm, 12noon–8pm or the dreaded 2pm–10pm. And with the last, your final task of the day was to nip around Fleet Street and deliver to all the national newspapers an envelope of results from sports such as squash or real tennis which had been played that night, then telephoned into the office, printed and run off on the office copier by an old chap whose face was creased by the smoke drifting out of his strong Capstan cigarette, which seemed permanently attached to his lips.

And you'd curse *The Guardian* and *The Sun*. Their offices were way out, at Grays Inn Road, Holborn, and in the old Covent Garden at Endell Street.

If you were really late and in danger of missing the train home, you might inadvertently slip those last two envelopes into a nearby post box. Well, it was only the squash results, they probably wouldn't even use them that night.

Hayter's had a lofty office on the top floor of an old wartime-type building in Shoe Lane, off Fleet Street. For some of the senior staff trying to negotiate the steps after a long, tiring lunch it could be hazardous. It was an odd thing but I'd sometimes hear some of them singing to themselves as they made the ascent. Presumably to pass the time on the journey.

Our big excitement as kids came when they let us out on Saturdays to attend a game. Not to write anything, of course. It was far too premature for that. But we'd go as the telephonist, to telephone a proper reporter's copy or story to a newspaper.

I remember one foggy November night in the late 1960s down at Fulham beside the Thames. They were playing Manchester United in a League Cup replay. Sometimes, as the telephonist, you got a seat in the press box. Boy, you were lording it on those occasions. But if it was packed, you squatted down on the steps of the press box in the old wooden stand.

You would either phone the reporter's match report as the game progressed, or you had to be ready once the final whistle had blown.

I was told to phone for the guy from the *Manchester Guardian*. Didn't know who he was, but he'd find me, I was told.

Five minutes after the game ended, I heard a voice shout, 'Hayter's boy.' That was my cue. I crossed the press box and there stood a gentleman in a long trench coat with bushy eyebrows, thick jowls and a kindly smile.

'Would you be so kind,' he said in his gravelly voice, as he leant over the bench and slipped me the two typed pages of his match report. I looked at them but felt something underneath. It was a £5 note. I can tell you, in 1967, £5 was very definitely worth having. Especially when your weekly wage was £3, seven shillings and sixpence.

But then, that man always had style. He was different class, John Arlott.



YOU might have been just a kid, and there were no guarantees you'd ever make it as a journalist. Even so, you'd get to some smart places on the circuit: Arsenal, Chelsea, Tottenham and West Ham. If someone was in a foul mood in the office and really didn't like you, it'd be Millwall at the old Den.

At Highbury, the charismatic old Arsenal ground, they had the best half-time food and especially hot sausage rolls anywhere in London. It was calamitous if you had to phone someone's story during half-time. By the time you had done that and got downstairs, most of the food had gone.

In time, they even let us kids out for a real game. Not to cover Arsenal v Tottenham or Fulham v Manchester United,

you understand. But maybe Crystal Palace Reserves v Plymouth Argyle Reserves. A 150-word report to be phoned at the end of the *Western Morning News* in Plymouth. Is it even still going?

And so it began. A life lived knee-deep in newspapers. This was Fleet Street in its pomp, the long trailer lorries blocking all the hooting traffic as they unloaded vast reels of paper to the *Daily Express* building, the so-called Black Lubyanka, just up the side of Fleet Street, and the bustling, rushing vans of Associated Newspapers darting off here, there and everywhere with the stacked early editions of the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Sketch* or, in the daytime, *London Evening News*. The hive of activity was as frenetic as the London docks.

At night, if you worked late, you'd nip into the printing room of the *Telegraph*, or *Mail* or *Express* and spy out a friendly, familiar figure checking the early editions. Amid the deafening roar of the presses, he'd always slip you a fresh copy to read on the journey home.

One day in 1968, there was great excitement in the office. Reg Hayter, the boss himself, came into the room where we kids, Fagan's gang you might say, were based with an item to phone to all the Fleet Street daily papers. It wasn't a story but something much more important.

It said, in essence, that the South African-born England cricketer Basil D'Oliveira, who had been left out of the original England squad to tour South Africa that winter but then included when another player cried off injured, would give an interview commenting on the decision of the South African apartheid Government to ban the tour rather than allow D'Oliveira, a Cape Coloured man, to return to his own country as a member of the England party.

The story had caused a crisis in the cricketing world and Hayter had shrewdly signed up D'Oliveira. To this day, I remember my eyes almost falling out of their sockets (and I wasn't alone) when I read, 'For this interview, we would propose a fee of 750 guineas.'

That was serious, serious money in those days. And which of the UK national papers could refuse? None.



HAYTER'S was a breeding ground for future sports journalists. They turned them out as if some sort of manufacturing company and their record was exemplary. But after a couple of years, albeit a period in which I learned so much, I decided I wanted even closer exposure to a journalist's world. So I joined a newspaper. I also wanted experience as a news reporter if the sport idea didn't work out.

Of course, the confident kid from London Town thought he'd have no problems on that front. So he wrote to about 40 regional newspapers around England extolling his virtues and promising each and every one of them that another Hemingway was in the making and they'd be well advised to offer outstanding attractive terms.

Of the 40, three bothered to reply. Two said no. But a third said, in so many words, well, maybe. But only perhaps.

Thus, I found myself on a London Waterloo to Southampton train very early one morning, to see the editor of the evening paper in Southampton, the *Southern Evening Echo*.

I had a reason for the early start. I was beginning work at 2pm at Hayter's and needed to get back to London after the interview. But the sight of a keen young journalist knocking on his door at 8.10am was something the editor found hard to grasp.

Rodney Andrew peered up from his morning post, re-adjusted his spectacles and in a voice that told of the English shires and perhaps a military background, exclaimed, 'Good God laddie, what on earth are you doing here so early?'

'Well Sir, I'm very keen to get a job and join your paper,' I told him. Two questions later, he was asking me where I would live IF I was offered a position. The cat was in the bag.

So in 1968, I went to Southampton and became a junior reporter, tasked with writing, not sport, but news. It was a real eye-opener.

I quickly learned the value of adaptability. You would cover pretty much anything that came into the office. It might be

wedding reports, 'the bride wore a taffeta dress laced with...', or an invitation to the Women's Institute Flower Show, the local beauty pageant (I managed to get off with the runner-up one year – she wasn't bad going) or some horrific road accident.

The docks were a key part of Southampton life and I got there just in time to see the final years of the great shipping liners. What a privilege. On a regular basis, you might see five P&O liners berthed in the Western Docks, one of the great Cunard ships, the *Queen Mary* or the *Queen Elizabeth*, coming in from New York to the Eastern Docks, the elegant SS *France* or one of the Union Castle liners like the *Windsor Castle* departing at 1pm every Monday for Cape Town from Western Dock 102.

Once, I suggested a feature to the news editor focusing on the customs service. They were tasked with trying to search the liners for contraband when they arrived in Southampton and my love of ships made it a dream job.

I spun the project out to last an entire week. The highlight was undoubtedly clambering into a rubber, outboard motor craft with the customs officers and whizzing down Southampton Water early one morning to wait off the Isle of Wight for the great American liner, the SS *United States*, which held the Blue Riband for the fastest crossing of the North Atlantic.

As we bobbed around in the swell, eventually we saw this giant shape loom up through the morning mist off the island. She was at Dead Slow and a long rope ladder was flung down the side of the ship by the crew.

Only problem was that by this time, the *Queen Mary*, outbound for New York, was gathering speed down the Solent. The wash from her bows made it a perilous task trying to jump out of the rubber launch on to the bottom rungs of the rope ladder.

One by one, we made it and climbed, ant like, up to the deck. From there, customs officers fanned out to begin their search of the ship. But before long, we were informed there was an invitation to attend the captain's cabin. There, we found the captain with his senior officers and a gargantuan spread of American cheesecakes, baked especially for their visitors.

After almost an hour of this feeding frenzy, someone asked what time we berthed. 'Did so 20 minutes ago,' answered the American drawl. So the cheesecake eat-in just carried on.



YOU could meet a lot of interesting people in those days working for a paper like the *Echo*. By that time, a pop group called The Who were creating major waves with their brand of music, Mod clothes and Pete Townshend's violent guitar wrecking routine at the end of most acts. They looked, sounded and acted like the bad boys of the music scene, especially set alongside the perfectly coiffured, perfectly boring Beatles. Excellent. A challenging interview to do.

The Who were due to play some gig in Hampshire and the same plot was employed by yours truly. 'What about doing an in-depth feature on them?' I suggested. 'Great idea,' was the response. So I set off to join the band for their short tour of the north-east. They would play gigs in Middlesbrough and Sunderland and I'd snort (sorry, follow) along in their wake. It was classic 1960s stuff. If you were there, you could never remember much of it.

Now to someone who knew only really London and the south, driving north and getting out of the car in Middlesbrough High Street on a Sunday evening represented something of a culture shock. I stood there and gawped at the run-down buildings, closed-down shops and general grime. This definitely wasn't France's Cote d'Azur on a sunny day.

And on an early Sunday evening with the rain dropping steadily on the desolate scene, it was tempting to get back in the car and head south. I resisted the temptation and never regretted it.

A few hours later, at about 11pm, it's so hot in the club I have to remind myself I'm not actually in France on a summer's day. Roger Daltrey is stripped to the waist, sweat running down his body in little rivulets as he blasts out another anthem, 'I'm free, and freedom tastes of reality.' Immortal line.

Pete is swinging a guitar and Roger Daltrey a microphone perilously close to those of us at the front of the stage, where

my pass enables me to shoot some photos for the article. Bass John Entwistle, rock-like at the back of the stage, looks half out of it. And behind him is an explosive human cocktail named Keith Moon.

Now to call Moon just the drummer would be absurd. Keith was a thousand things to The Who; madcap inspiration, demolisher-in-chief of convention, lunatic in charge of the asylum, experimenter like none other of any path to craziness. If Keith wasn't doing it, smoking it, screwing it or wrecking it, it wasn't worth knowing about.

Daltrey continues to roar out the famous lines. 'Hope I die before I get old,' from Townshend's fabulous songwriting. And it's all going off in an enclosed, underground cellar-type room where the smoke threatens to choke your lungs and the heat rises in waves off the musicians and the swaying, rocking kids in the audience.

You leave gigs like that with a ringing in your ears. The decibel levels would send today's EU Health & Safety tzars into a frenzy.

They might have been up most of the night, but the next afternoon, the caravan by now encamped in Sunderland, the guys seem in great form. They say Pete never made many friends at school, which could explain why we hit it off. Maybe he recognises a fellow individualist, in part a loner. He's friendly, helpful and provides some great quotes for the article.

As we talk, there are frequent outbursts of manic laughter from Moon. The guy never stops, the madness never abates. Nor the wacky baccy smoke that wafts across the room. But then, that'd be the mildest of things on offer in a room full of back-up men and a few hangers-on.

They're loud, brash, in your face and, especially in Townshend's case, supremely professional, this lot. It's no wonder a group he put together made it, big time. The guy always had a presence, there was never a doubt of that.

Course, they carried the madness to the grave. Keith Moon was dead at 32, after swallowing about a third of his 100-pill collection to help his alcoholism. Ironic, that, given some of the

really lethal pills he'd consumed in his time. As Pete Townshend put it, 'He always took pills in handfuls. It was just a habit that he had.'

As for Entwistle, he would die what someone called a true rock-n-roller's death, suffering a heart attack induced by cocaine in a hotel bed in Las Vegas, the night before the latest Who tour was due to get underway. In bed with him was a local stripper or groupie who woke up alongside the guitarist to find him cold.

Incongruously, back in England, Entwistle lived the life of an English squire, with his partner, in a vast, rambling house overlooking the fields of the genteel Cotswolds. They mourned him at a funeral service held at St Edward's Church in Stow-on-the-Wold. He was 57.

There wasn't a whole lot of humour going around on the particular days when they were found dead. But then, if you think about it, both guys crammed a lifetime of living into their lives. And they played out Pete Townshend's words. They sure died before they got old.



I'D covered enough major road accidents during my time as a news reporter with the *Echo* to know the horror of them. Once, while I was working at the paper's Basingstoke office, a call came through to get out to a site on the A30 bypass. This was in the days before the M3 motorway was built which meant that just about all the traffic from Devon, Cornwall and the south-west heading to London, came up the A30.

We found a dreadful mess and a major story when we reached the crash site. A car in which the then Liberal Party leader Jeremy Thorpe was travelling, had been in collision with a truck. His wife Caroline had been driving and was killed outright in the accident.

Not that long after, an inquest was opened at Basingstoke and I covered it. I just remember one awful, arresting image – an ashen-faced, mentally broken man, Thorpe, being helped by friends into the courtroom for the hearing. That is what death

on the road to a family member or friend does to people and it is haunting.

Our office received another call one day of a similar kind. My colleague volunteered to do it, jumped in his car and raced out to the crash site, somewhere in the country outside Basingstoke. A car with four elderly people had turned from a side road straight on to a no-speed limit road on a fast downhill stretch. They had driven straight into a heavyweight truck. The carnage was appalling, bodies and blood littered the road.

All of which might incline you to the view that it wouldn't be any great shock to me if I were to end up in a major road accident one day. Let me tell you differently.

Firstly, hands up in confession. I hadn't been to bed for about three nights because of various parties. Then I'd driven with a bunch of pals to Portsmouth, left the car and boarded the ferry across to the Isle of Wight. It was 1971 and that year's pop festival had a very special performer. Bob Dylan. As a reporter on the *Echo*, somehow I managed to get passes for all of us.

So Dylan rasped in his distinctive tone and the place was as high and happy as could be. But we didn't get back to Portsmouth until 2am and I had to drive two hours back to south London with my pals, before setting out for Basingstoke and a day's work at 7am. Something had to give and it did.

After less than three hours' sleep, I set out by car for north Hampshire. It was a journey doomed to disaster. Somewhere near Bagshot on the old A30, not far from the prestigious Wentworth Golf Club, I lost it. Fell completely asleep.

Apparently, the car kept going for a short distance before it began to drift across the road. It was a dangerous road with a 70mph speed limit and no crash barrier. The explosion of metal against metal jarred me awake. What I saw was alarming. The car, one of those old VW beetles with the engine in the back and just a small, empty luggage compartment in front, had struck a lamp-post head-on which basically had cut the front part of the car in two, like a tin opener. Had anyone been in the front passenger seat, they would have been killed instantly. The car was a wreck, a total write-off.

Fearing an explosion of the petrol tank, I tried to climb out but found myself trapped, as well as covered in blood. Keep calm, keep cool, I remember thinking. I did, quite soon, extricate my trapped leg from the mess and crawled out and up on to a bank where I lay, half propped up against a tree.

I drifted in and out of consciousness. Yet, when a Jaguar stopped on the other side of the no-speed-limit road, something in my sixth sense foretold danger. That's not a safe place to stop, I thought.

Seconds later, there was an almighty bang. A car at full speed smashed into the back of the stopped vehicle and the impact threw both cars up into the air. The Jaguar turned over and came down on its roof.

In the ambulance heading for St Peter's Hospital at Chertsey, Surrey, were not only a young journalist, his face cut to pieces and his back damaged, but four older people who looked distinctly unamused.

As I lay in theatre, a Polish doctor inserted a needle into my face and I winced. 'If you move, you will lose your eye, it is that close,' he said. Funny, isn't it, how you suddenly forget the pain and just keep still.

He put 60 stitches into my face and I was ready to audition for a role in *The Munsters*, the American spoof horror show of the time. The hospital claimed an ambulance would take me home. But even then, the dear old NHS was coughing and spluttering like a patient on its death bed. I waited four hours, no ambulance came, so I got a lift to the local station and caught the train home.

The worst part of the journey came at the other end, when the damage to my back just about stopped me walking. I stopped a car, pushed my freshly stitched-up face close to the driver's window and moaned about the pain, asking him if he'd give me a lift down the road close to my home.

An expression of naked fear spread across his face, he quickly wound up the window and revved the engine. Maybe I looked too gruesome even for *The Munsters*.



BY 1971, I knew I wanted to return to London and work for myself. And as I soon discovered, when you worked in or for the Fleet Street papers of those days, boredom was never a part of the job.

Entertainment was close by, and I don't mean just along The Strand at Aldwych where London theatre land began. In truth, you didn't have to put a foot outside Fleet Street to get rip-roaring entertainment.

Some winter afternoon one year, I remember crossing Fleet Street and coming upon a quite extraordinary sight. It was around 4.30pm, an hour when you might expect most reporters to be in their offices hammering the keys to get out a story for the next day's paper.

Not so these two well-known gentlemen. Both lay in the gutter, bodies side by side flailing their fists at each other and trying to land some meaningful blows. I have to say, the only people in physical danger were not the two would-be pugilists but by-standers risking rupture by their groans of laughter at this side show.

There was every bit as much entertainment on offer at most of the newspaper offices. At *The Sun* in Bouverie Street one afternoon, the noise and clatter of a busy working newspaper office was silenced by a roared expletive that rebounded around the newsroom like a sonic boom.

'What the fuck do you think you're doing?' came the shout. Typewriters stopped dead, telephone conversations hushed. All eyes craned to see the editor berating some poor unfortunate.

Although by then I was a freelance, I once accepted an offer from one of the tabloid red tops to do a six-week stint as back-up soccer reporter, while one of their staff guys was away through illness. Frankly, the money they offered made it non-negotiable. Where do I sign, was the only sensible thing to think in response.

I asked what time they wanted me to go in the first day.

'Oh about 11 will do,' I was told.

So, drifted in at 11am, made a cup of coffee, read the morning papers and called a couple of contacts. At about 12.30, I received another offer.

‘Want to come over to the pub?’

Ask an Eskimo if he fancies an ice bath.

So we headed for one of the Street’s hostelryes, ordered pints and began to sup. As you do. Or rather, as you did in those days.

Lunch? What do you mean? We were having it. The liquid variety.

And so it went on. To 1.30pm, then to 2.30pm, then to 3pm. At which point, after I have no idea how many pints we’d drunk, the landlord rang the bell for closing time and I began to drink up. An expression of bemusement crept across my colleagues’ faces.

‘What are you doing?’ they asked, almost in unison.

‘Well, drinking up. They rang the bell.’

Disdain replaced bemusement in their expressions.

‘God, don’t worry about that. It’s only to empty the place. We can stay as long as we like.’

And we did. Until 20 to five. At which point, I stumbled back across Fleet Street, made my unsteady way back to my desk, made a couple of completely nonsensical calls and told them there didn’t seem to be much going on.

‘Oh that’s all right. See you in the morning,’ was the reply.

After a week of this, with just the occasional story to write, an even odder thing happened. One of the sub-editors who also happened to be an NUJ (National Union of Journalists) official, came ambling down the sports news desk table one afternoon.

‘Got yer exes?’ he said to me.

‘What exes?’ was my response. ‘I haven’t been out of the office all week.’

His face dropped a few notches and a cloak of frustration appeared upon it. ‘Oh bleedin’ heck, not annuver of ’em. Don’t tell me I gotta do the ’ole bleeding lot for you too. Gawd, gimme that pen. Right, what yer do Monday?’

If I’d been honest, I’d have said something very close to, ‘Stood in the pub for over four hours and got pissed.’ But this didn’t seem the time for honesty.

‘Well, I rang someone at QPR and then spoke to someone up at Arsenal and...’

I’d almost finished the sentence, but not quite, when he cut in and began to fill in the form.

‘Right. Taxi to Shepherd’s Bush [where QPR were based]: £12.50. Lunch, west London: £15. Taxi to Highbury [Arsenal’s then home] £14. Tea £5.50.’

So it went on. According to this weekly ledger, I’d taken enough taxi rides around London to keep half the Cockney drivers in employment for the next six months. Lunches? The café owners and restaurants must have been celebrating at the number of meals I had consumed.

Not far into Tuesday’s list came that catch-all phrase. Drinks. I swallowed hard at the first amount he put down; £11.75. But what was a long session worth? I remember one amount; £24.50.

This fantasy existence (and associated expense) spread across every day of the working week. By the time he’d got to Friday, I reckoned he’d written a list longer than the invasion plans for the Normandy beaches in 1944. And there was not a receipt in sight.

The total was enough to make jaws drop. Remember, in the early 1970s, a sum of more than £130 a week in cash for expenses was something worth having.

‘What do I do with this?’ asked Mr Innocent.

‘Gor blimey, what yer think yer gonna do wiv it? Eat it? I’ll put a name on the top and you go upstairs and get it. Or do you want me to do that an’ all for yer?’ he asked.

I didn’t even bother to check the name he wrote on the top. I thought I knew my name. How wrong can you be?

As we queued outside an office with a small glass window, a curious thing then occurred. The man behind the glass screen pulled it open and called a name.

‘Dickens, C.’

Eh? I thought I’d misheard. But another guy from the sports desk pressed forward and scooped up an unknown amount of notes and coins into his hand. The window closed and we resumed our wait.

A couple of minutes later, the same voice called out.

‘Shakespeare, W.’

I did a double take and turned around to share the joke with the guy behind me. He wasn’t moving a muscle in his facial expression.

Just to be sure, I looked down at the name on my sheet, to check it was authentic. It was. Churchill, W.

And so eventually came my finest hour. Well, you’d have to say scooping up over £130 in cash for a week’s expenses, when I had only left the office to have a series of liquid lunches, was some achievement. Perhaps with hindsight, it might even have been close to a Churchillian act.



IT wasn’t quite like that when I resumed my real freelance working life in the early 1970s. You had to work for your money in my world.

But the system, if you could call it that, worked in your favour. For example, you wanted some quotes from a First Division footballer or an international rugby player? Well, you had most of their home numbers so you just rang them up. Or if you wanted a tape interview for a radio station, you drove to a club’s training ground, parked up beside the multitude of Ford Cortinas and Ford Zephyrs of the day and waited.

When they finished training, you’d greet them in the clubhouse and tell them what you wanted. They would sit down and do the interview. Any time, any day of the week. You could walk in and pick whoever you liked. They were all there, most of them friendly and happy to help. Of course, it’s all changed a little these days. In May 2015, Barcelona star Lionel Messi gave his first interview for TWO years.

I’d spend just about all my evenings on the phone, talking to players, getting quotes for some story or a preview of an upcoming match. Then I’d write up the stories I’d got and call the Fleet Street sports desks around 11am the next day.

‘Hi, I’ve got this angle from the Arsenal keeper, the Chelsea striker says so-and-so and there’s a yarn from West Ham.’

Nine times out of ten, they'd say 'bung it over'. And the next morning you'd often see three or four of your own stories in the sports pages of most national papers. All with the by-line of one of their staff reporters. I used to think, gee, he's had a busy day.

But who was complaining? Almost always, I filed by noon so they could read the stories and maybe alter them a little. Most times they didn't even do that. So by 1pm, they'd have a large chunk of the next morning's paper filled. Time to go over to the pub. As for me, I'd have a nice cheque in the post a few weeks later. It was happiness all round.

I wasn't the only freelance operating so I couldn't say they came to rely on what I'd send them. But I did wonder, especially one Christmas.

In those days, the national papers didn't publish on Christmas Day or Boxing Day. But the sports staff writers who would be in the office on Boxing Day morning, would be looking for stories for the next day. And they wanted them early.

One of them called me at home one Christmas night. 'What yer got?' said the Cockney voice.

'What have I got? Well, I got a cuddly toy, a box of golf balls, a new sponge bag and a book...'

'Nah, nah, don't mess about. What yer got for tomorrow mornin'? I'll be in early so send everything you've got.'

So I set about ringing around players from most of the London clubs. Okay, it was Christmas night, but none of them seemed to mind. They'd give me their thoughts on their team's form, upcoming opponents or whatever. And by midnight, I'd done four or five interviews and written stories from all of them.

Friday nights were frantic. You might think it was a down night after the rush of the week. In truth, it was usually one of the busiest.

I'd be in the car driving to London by 5pm or 6pm. Why? The clue was in the next day's fixtures. Arsenal v Manchester United, Chelsea v Liverpool, QPR v Hull City, Fulham v Sheffield Wednesday might be the games. It meant that you had a glut of footballers from all around the country, sitting

bored in their London hotels most of Friday night. It was simple to do interviews with as many of them as you could manage, whether it was for magazines or newspapers. Like shooting into an open goal.

Manchester United usually stayed at the Europa Hotel in central London and you'd find players like George Best, Denis Law, Alex Stepney and others just killing time.

'George, got a minute?'

'Sure, what do you want? Sit down.'

I'd first met Best when I worked for the paper in Southampton and Manchester United were due to play them a few weeks later. 'Go up to Manchester and do an interview with him,' they said.

We sat in his clothing boutique, did the interview and then he asked me a question, 'Are you fit?'

'Sure, why?' I replied.

'Well we're going for lunch now but when we get outside we'll have to run for it. There'll be hundreds of them.'

We opened the door, saw about 200 young women and started racing down the road, followed by a screaming female army. I don't know about George but it was the only time in my life I've ever run AWAY from women.

He was lovely, pure gold that guy and years later, I would work with him, editing a World Cup guide magazine. A special bloke, and Denis Law was just the same.

On a typical Friday night, you'd then maybe drive on to the Royal Garden hotel at Kensington, to find someone like the then Hull City manager Ken Knighton or one of his players. Once, I got drinking port with a First Division manager until 2am or 3am on a Saturday. Long night, that.

Just about all of them were happy to chat, actually to do something. They couldn't leave the hotel so you had a captive audience.

Even on Saturday mornings, you could pick up a story or two or do a longer interview with a player or manager. Norwich City came to London to play West Ham one year, and I sat down for an interview with the Norwich manager Ron Saunders for half an hour over coffee. At 12noon, we hadn't quite finished, so he

invited me into the private lounge for the pre-match lunch with himself and the players. It was like that in those days.

With rugby very much an amateur sport, football was where you made your money as a freelance. Especially if you worked for television.

The freelance business I'd started up in 1971 grew significantly. We'd cover matches all over London on Saturdays, both soccer and rugby. Then, one year, we picked up a contract to supply London Weekend Television with any stories, statistics, rumours, gossip about transfers or the like for its Saturday night highlights show which started at about 10.30pm.

That meant some serious work. Someone in my office might get a call at 5.30pm, saying the programme wanted a picture of a certain player with his wife or his son, or with his car, for some reason.

So you'd have to track down a home number for the guy and then you'd need to arrange a courier company to get to his home, collect the picture and rush it by bike to LWT's studios in South Bank, by Waterloo Bridge.

That process could contain some alarming hiccups. You'd think it was all arranged and head out for dinner yourself (having left your contact number wherever you were going to be, with the studio. Remember, this was in the days before mobile phones). Then you'd get a frantic call to the Italian restaurant where you were about to tuck into a plate of calamari.

'Where is he, the bike hasn't turned up,' you'd be told.

'Okay, leave it with me, I'll get back to you.'

So you'd put the phone down in the restaurant, pick it up again and call the courier company.

'Where the hell is your bloke? We're running out of time here. It's less than an hour to the programme.'

'Okay, we'll get back to you,' they would say.

You'd return to your table and long-suffering girlfriend, mumble apologies and take one mouthful of the by now half-cold dish. Then the phone would ring again.

You could tell the owners were getting tired of this game.

'Eet's for you, again,' they would scowl.

'So where is he? Well, how far is that from the studio? Do you want me to send a taxi or something?'

In a world without mobiles, this nonsense would go on endlessly. I'd need to update the studio with what was happening. Then I'd have to check again with the courier company as to the bike's progress.

At one meal, I finally got back to the table as my girlfriend was just finishing her coffee. My dinner was by then stone cold so we paid up and went home.



IN many aspects, a freelance reporter's lifestyle resembled the whore's way out. Sell yourself to the highest bidder but aim to please all the customers all the time. And to extend the analogy, you get punters who want the usual, some who want the downright impossible and others who are just mixed-up, sad bastards.

Maybe that's why you can't expect to find many normal people being freelance journalists. The insecurities would kill off most logical types.

If you had a staff job in those days, it was all set up for you, you were in easy street. Airline tickets booked by the office secretary, telephones arranged and in working order when you turned up in the press box, hotels fixed, cash advanced. Biggest problem those guys had was trying to get 25 receipts for every meal they ever ate for their expenses chit. Oh, and persuading taxi drivers from Bucharest to Birmingham not to fill in the amount for the fare. Of course, that's the oldest trick in the book. Four guys share a cab to an airport from the city centre, get blank receipts and sign each other's chits for, well, what shall we say, £60? Or £80?

A nice little earner, as they say. Arthur Daly had nothing on those jokers.

If you're a freelance, life doesn't quite work as smoothly. You have to do it all yourself. Chase whoever you want for interviews, chase the people who employ you to pay you, find the funds in the meantime, book the hotel and plane yourself, talk your

way into where you want to be. And most of the time you might have some mentally retarded, alcohol-craving lunatic back on the sports desk, just waiting to scream the vilest abuse down the phone at you because some prima donna you've gone to interview either hasn't bothered to turn up or doesn't want to give you more than one minute of his valuable time.

To survive all that you need a combination. Not of whisky, gin and rum, but wit, ingenuity and cunning. Wit, because you need to laugh, whenever you can. It keeps you half sane, at least. Ingenuity, because bucking the trend is what you are all about. You have to find ways to get stories, ways to operate and overcome barriers that others wouldn't think of. And cunning because sometimes you'll need to convince people that the porky pies which have just accidentally slipped from your lips are actually true.

It usually depended on which newspaper you worked for, what sort of treatment you got. In those days, the *Daily Express* had a male copy taker who was legendary in the business, the star of Fleet Street. Never mind getting out of bed the wrong side one particular morning. This guy was born on the wrong side.

Your heart sank when you phoned up to dictate a story and he picked up the call. First there was the obligatory clearing of his throat (and presumably stubbing out of a cigarette). Then there would be the brief, weary and distinctly irritated enquiry, 'Who is it? What yer got?'

Any article longer than about 49 words began to get the heavy sigh treatment early on. Then it got personal. 'You got much more of this?' he'd say in an exasperated tone.

'About another 400 words,' you'd reply.

'Oh my gawd, you're jokin', ain't yer? I can't take all that.'

You would give him another couple of paragraphs and he'd erupt. 'Look, this ain't fair, I can't take any more o' this bleedin' stuff.'

And with that, he'd put the headphones down on the desk, cough again and clear off. You had to wait for someone else to pick up the call to continue.

But joy oh joy. How absolutely lovely it was when you dictated a story or match report to a broadsheet paper of those days, like *The Times* or *The Guardian*. Here, intellectualism ruled, and equally so right throughout the newspaper offices.

You would get a copy taker who would smoothly type your words on to his or her machine and then stop for a moment at some word.

'Now,' they would say, rolling the word around their tongue for consideration. 'Do you think that is the right word? Or could we use something better. Let me see. What about...?'

Nine times out of ten, they would suggest a word far more suited to the sentence.

It was the same when you called the sports desk of *The Times* or *The Guardian* to check all was well with your story.

'Lovely stuff, old boy. But do you think you could possibly manage to give us another 75 words? We're a little short. As soon as you can, there's a good chap.'

The decency all but came down the telephone at you. Alas, while the heavyweight papers wanted YOUR opinions, the tabloids demanded those of managers and players. And you had to brave the rottweilers on the door to get to the latter.

Sometimes, the adrenaline would get the better of you when you faced some obtuse, downright objectionable idiot barring your path to a dressing room or players' lounge.

'If you weren't wearing those spectacles, I'd hammer your head into next week,' was one memorable over-reaction.

When the guy removed them, sense prevailed. 'Um, not a great idea to get into a punch-up here,' said a voice somewhere in the back of your brain. And you found another way. Always had to do that.



PEOPLE turning up late for interviews was par for the course. But a week late? The great West German footballer of the 1970s Franz Beckenbauer broke all known records in that respect.

I'd gone to Munich to interview him for a series of articles I wrote every Saturday in the *Manchester Evening News* sports

edition, or *The Pink* as it was known. Writing on overseas football was interesting and it was a niche a top provincial paper like the *Manchester Evening News* was keen to fill. So they commissioned a weekly column from me and were usually willing to send me to some European destination to do a series of interviews.

They flew me to Madrid to interview Real's Dutch coach of the time, Leo Beenhakker. And on another trip, I went to Barcelona to spend three or four days doing interviews with that mercurial Dutch footballing artist Johan Cruyff, as well as some of his colleagues of that era at the Nou Camp like fellow Dutchman Johan Neeskens. Nice people to work with, too. Couldn't do enough for you.

So I went to Munich one winter to interview Beckenbauer. He'd agreed the time and place. Alas, when I got there, I was told he'd had to go on some trip unexpectedly. So I hung around Munich and he came back a week later. Not very apologetic.

Others were more helpful. I couldn't remember a more stimulating interview than with Paul Breitner, Beckenbauer's colleague for Bayern Munich and West Germany. Breitner was a Maoist and we spent most of an afternoon one day exchanging views on politics, the world, etc. I think we discussed a bit of football but not much. It wasn't Paul's idea of fun to spend hours analysing past soccer matches.

Breitner was a left-back for Bayern Munich from 1970 to 1974 and the club had another world-class full-back on the other side of their defence. Right-back Bertie Vogts. Now Vogts was quick, decidedly so. Especially in the white Porsche 911 he drove at that time.

I'd gone to the Bayern training ground and he'd agreed to do the interview. But not there, he wanted to go back to the club. 'Follow me,' he said. I did, and nearly died. But not as nearly as his friend who was in the car between Vogts's and mine.

I had a quick car of that era, a Renault 17 convertible which I'd bought second-hand from an Iranian and which had been specially made for him at the Gordini factory outside Paris. When the turbo was in sync and properly tuned, the thing flew. I remember doing Plymouth to West London, up the old A38 (M)

motorway section to Bristol and then down the M4 to London, in 125 minutes very early one midweek morning. The things you did to get your girlfriend to work on time in London.

The problem in Munich this winter morning was that ice and fog were everywhere. Vogts set off at a decent pace but his pal following behind in a big BMW clearly thought the footballer wasn't going fast enough. At around 100mph on the autobahn, he started to play silly buggers with Vogts, sitting on his tail. When Vogts accelerated, he chased him down and remained inches from the Porsche's rear bumper.

Sadly for the friend, Vogts's patience was not endless. As I hung back, fearing that 70mph was lethal with black ice around, the BMW closed once more on the Porsche's tail. Vogts snapped.

Slamming on the brakes, he forced the BMW driver to swing the wheel as far as he could to avoid ramming. As he did so, he hit a patch of ice. The big BMW slewed across the carriageway like a drunk, nearly crashing into the central reservation barrier before spinning back across the road and almost down a steep embankment off the autobahn.

I sat back and watched in amazement. It was only pure luck that the guy managed to cling on to the BMW and eventually control it. He could easily have lost it and been killed.

We got to the club around the same time and all three of us got out of our cars. Vogts moved close to his friend and wagged a finger in front of his face. He was not smiling. 'You do not play like zis in zees conditions,' he said. 'It can be very dangerous.'

His pal looked white with shock. Then Vogts and I went inside to do the interview.



NO matter where it was, Munich or Manchester, London or Liege, as a freelance you had to scramble to meet your customers' requirements.

Sometimes legally, occasionally by disingenuous means such as taping up the only public phone box outside a ground and sticking signs saying 'OUT OF ORDER' all over it. At least

then that guaranteed you had a phone to use immediately at the end of a game.

So you might have two orders, including one for a live radio job, at West Ham and the guy who was covering the match for you called in sick Saturday morning. Trouble was, by that stage of a busy weekend, all the reporters on your books were busy doing other matches for you. So what to do?

Sometimes you might have a writer free but he had never done live radio reports. So he would call me on a phone I had managed to beg, borrow or steal at a rugby ground where I was working, give me details of the first half and I'd call the radio station and give them a minute's report live at half-time from, er, West Ham. It was all right until the announcer on the rugby ground said something like, 'We welcome back on to the field for the second half, London Welsh and Cardiff.' Doubtless, the guy in the studio at Middlesbrough waiting for my report from West Ham was a bit puzzled by that one.

But improbable circumstances demanded improbable solutions. Like the day I went to report on Tottenham v Sunderland and found myself covering the game for four radio stations. In those days in the north-east, there was a BBC Radio Cleveland station as well as BBC Radio Newcastle.

Then there was the local independent radio station Metro, in Newcastle, and Radio Tees, which was based in Middlesbrough.

But you couldn't use the same name when you worked for a BBC and independent station in the same region. So I had to use four different names at the match. It became impossibly complicated.

If you covered a match for a radio station at that time, you normally gave them a two-minute preview before the start, either live on to air or recorded, then two or three 30-second live updates in the first half. At half-time, they would want a one-minute live report before two or three more 30-second updates during the second half and a one-minute round-up on the final whistle.

In a normal world, one guy would go and cover the game for one radio station. But I didn't often live in a normal world.

What I did have this particular afternoon, doubtless by some illegal means, was two landline telephones in the press box. So I'd be talking live into the programme on one phone, saying something like, 'Sunderland missed a great chance after five minutes, so-and-so shooting wide from only five yards out,' when the other phone would start ringing.

That was my cue to start wrapping up the first report. You would finish your live report with the score line and an out-cue: Peter Bills at White Hart Lane.

Invariably, you had to pick up the other phone while you were still live on air to the first programme which meant that somehow you had to think up a word quickly that would be all right to use in your live report, but convey the fact to the next station that you were ready to go with them. So you might say live to one programme, 'Were Sunderland ready for this counter attack,' and when you used the word 'ready' you'd push the other telephone's mouthpiece right up close to the one you were already speaking into.

Radio station number two took that as its cue. I was ready to broadcast. The producer, unaware I was talking live on the first phone (immediately after saying 'ready', I had put a hand over the mouthpiece of the second phone so they couldn't hear me broadcasting on the other line), would say something like, 'OK Peter, we'll give you the programme,' (which meant you could hear their programme going out live in one ear while you were broadcasting live with the other phone against your other ear).

And as you signed off from the first programme with your out-cue, Peter Bills at White Hart Lane, you could hear the next station's announcer say, 'And now we're going down to London and for news of Tottenham against Sunderland, here is Colin Johnson.'

Then you'd do another live 30-second report. And so it went on.

That afternoon, I was Peter Bills, Colin Johnson, Will Craven and David Peters. And it sure got the heartbeat raised a notch or two to become four different people covering the same game.

It went swimmingly, absolutely wonderfully right up to and through half-time. Not a bother. And then, in the second half, it collapsed into complete disaster. Well, what else did you expect?

BBC Radio Newcastle's man at the game, Will Craven, suddenly metamorphosed into David Peters and Colin Johnson wasn't sure whether he was Peter Bills's blood brother or uncle.

'How come we heard our man Will Craven on Metro radio?' asked one irate BBC studio producer, later. Oh dear.

What was it, Laurel and Hardy's catchphrase? 'Another fine mess you've got me into.'