

JOHN McNICOLL



An Ode to the

CHOSEN FEW

Football's Piano Players

J O H N M c N I C O L L

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Ferenc Puskás

'Ferenc truly was just a wonderful player. He had a roly-poly physique, but a wonderful left foot and he was a brilliant finisher. I would put Puskás in any list of all-time greats. A wonderful player and a wonderful person and he really enjoyed playing the game.' – **Sir Tom Finney**

OUR INAUGURAL taste of footballing excellence takes us back to possibly the earliest recording of a world superstar. When football was limited in how widely it was broadcast, it was only through newspaper cuttings and matches on home soil that people in the UK were able to witness the technical prowess of some of the players that lived outside its shores.

Hungarian forward, Ferenc Puskás was possibly the first global name in football. Prior to Puskás bursting on to the scene, a player by the name of Jose Andrade had wowed South Americans by inspiring Uruguay to World Cup success in 1930, with an emphatic 4-2 victory over neighbours Argentina in the final. Andrade has been compared to an olden-day David Beckham, with his scintillating football skills, dashing good

looks and he was even rumoured to be working part-time as a gigolo, something I'm sure Posh Spice might have had a bit to say about. The Black Pearl, as he was to be known, was to begin the 'superstar' trend that was to follow.

As war raged across Europe, Ferenc Puskás, still able to play football, signed for his local team Kispest. The forward had grown up living in and around the Kispest area, having played in his younger days for the junior teams, and with the player now coming of age, he signed papers on a professional contract in 1943. The 16-year-old made his debut against Nagyváradi and never looked back. The youngster soon attracted attention from a wider audience, so much so, in fact, that by the time he had turned 18 he was called up for the Hungarian national team to face Austria. The Second World War had ceased and international football was again at the forefront of people's minds. Puskás wasn't to be fazed by this huge occasion and notched on his debut in a 5-2 victory, the first of many in a Hungary shirt.

Puskás was in and out of his club side during the first few campaigns as questions over his size and agility were asked. Puskás senior was the coach of the first team at the time and highlighted the fact that his son, despite his streamline-defying shape, was more than capable of roughing it with the big boys. His early years would see a return of 24 goals in 51 starts. As with all young players, inconsistency can have an effect on numbers and statistics. But the striker had scored a goal every other match, which is certainly not to be questioned at any level of football. It was when the forward entered into his twenties that his shooting boots began firing.

As the 1940s drew to a close, Kispest were taken over by the Hungarian Ministry of Defence. The team were to be known as the 'Hungarian Army Team', changing their name to Budapest Honvéd. With a sudden new influx of financial clout and

prestige, Honvéd started to attract players to the club, which began a period of domination domestically. Zoltán Czibor and Sándor Kocsis were the first big names recruited into the squad. The pair had shone in the national team alongside Puskás and were deemed excellent additions to the team. The cream of Hungary was slowly but surely drafted in through the turnstiles and, with Puskás now finding his feet in front of goal, Honvéd, secured the first top-tier title in their history at the end of the 1949/50 season.

I say finding his feet. Puskás had one foot for football, the other was merely for standing on. ‘You can only kick with one foot at a time, otherwise you fall on your arse,’ said Puskás when once quizzed about the rigidity in his playing style. His left foot, though, was deadly. With his frame being a little portlier than your average footballer, the power he was able to generate once in a shooting position was that of a ball being fired out of a cannon.

The army had insisted that all the players at the club be given rank status. This is where one of Puskás’s many nicknames came from as he was to be named the ‘Galloping Major’. The major was certainly galloping all over opposition defences as his goal return was starting to reveal pure class. In five consecutive seasons from 1945 to 1950, he scored over 30 goals a campaign, including becoming Europe’s top goalscorer in 1947/48 with 50. These were quite phenomenal numbers from a player who was accepted as not being very mobile.

With domestic success becoming a regular occurrence for Puskás, international accolades would soon dovetail wonderfully as a period of footballing domination was about to begin for the men from Hungary. With the Soviet Union still heavily occupying large parts of the country and the communist regime causing the worst period of oppression that the nation had ever lived through, the displays of the footballers wearing the

badge had lifted the spirits of the folk at home. The 'Magical Magyars', as they were to be fondly known, were to embark on a near-perfect run towards world football nirvana.

For a period stretching over half a decade, Hungary played football that was out of this world. The tactics and formation that were utilised by the team were like nothing that had ever been seen before on the football pitch. The norm around football during this period was the WM formation, which consisted of a 3-2-2-3 line-up. Hungarian manager Gusztáv Sebes had other ideas. He liked his players to drop into pockets and was possibly the first manager to play a deep-lying forward behind the frontline, in between midfield and attack. His 2-3-3-2 formation was revolutionary, as was the fitness regime he implemented during the team's training camps. Of course, this didn't suit all the players but Puskás knew that, if he wanted to play, he had to toe the line.

Sir Alex Ferguson had witnessed the skill and technical ability of this team with his own eyes. 'The great players do things that you don't expect, so when I dodged school on that Wednesday afternoon in 1953 to watch the England vs Hungary match at a misty Wembley on TV, no one expected what we were about to witness: a new way of playing football. It was nothing short of breath-taking.'

Prior to what was dubbed the 'Match of the Century', Hungary had competed in the summer Olympics in Finland. In July of 1952, they embarked on a run to the Olympic podium, starting with a preliminary-round win over Romania. A 2-1 victory ensured that the Magyars were off and running in the competition. Italy provided their first-round opponents and, although Puskás had been on the periphery of the matches thus far, he was still a danger to the men charged with trying to mark him. Hungary advanced with a 3-0 win. With no goals during the opening two matches, Puskás certainly made up for

that in the quarter-final tie with Turkey. Hungary had begun to strut like a peacock as they provided their most dominant performance to date.

Leading 2-0 at half-time, Sebes could sense the confidence beginning to ooze out of his players. Puskás joined the party with two second-half strikes as the Magical Magyars ran riot and finished with a 7-1 rout. The golden touch in front of goal continued as semi-final opponents Sweden were also drummed, 6-0, with Puskás again adding to his tally with another goal. 'It was one of those days,' said Puskás, who opened the scoring. 'Once we'd hit our rhythm, we were virtually irresistible.'

In Jonathan Wilson's book, *The Names Heard Long Ago*, it was rumoured that news had reached Hungary coach Sebes regarding unrest back home. Sebes, on the morning of the final, received a telephone call from Mátyás Rákosi, the leader of Hungary's Communist Party, warning him that defeat wouldn't be tolerated. He needn't have worried. On 2 August 1952, Yugoslavia faced Hungary for the Olympic gold medal at Helsinki's Olympic Stadium. Another clean sheet followed as Hungary were to prove far too strong and claim the centre stand of the podium. Puskás again notched in the final, as well as club-mate Czibor, to end the match with a 2-0 win. The aggregate score for the team during the course of the competition was 20 goals for and only two against, as they took home the gold medal.

'It was during the Olympics that our football first started to flow with real power,' said Puskás when interviewed by reporters years later. The Turkey match was clearly the turning point for the team who, once they could smell blood, would finish the job with the cold, ruthless touch of an assassin. The good times just kept on coming as the following year saw yet more honours, with the Central European Championships also added to the team's growing wealth of achievements. The

nations' championships were an early format of what's now known as the Euros, or European Championship in old money. This originally consisted of Hungary, Italy, Switzerland, Austria and Czechoslovakia. Hungary breezed through to the final, where they faced Italy. The Hungarians made light work of the Italians and, with two Puskás strikes, completed a 3-0 win to lift yet more silverware.

But what was to become even more historic in 1953 was the aforementioned 'Match of the Century'. England hosted the Hungarians at Wembley, having never lost on home soil to a foreign nation. The Three Lions had a host of quality players in their ranks, including goalkeeper Gil Merrick, Stan Mortensen, Stanley Mathews, Billy Wright and Alf Ramsey. Wright at the time was considered one of the best defenders in the world. The most notable name in this team, though, was defender Ramsey. The soon-to-be England manager was about to be given a taste of the football future.

England, as predicted, lined up in their WM formation, whereas the mavericks from Hungary were playing in their now much-loved 2-3-3-2. The visitors took the lead within the first minute, a sign there and then that England might well have underestimated their European counterparts. The rigidity of England's formation was about to be their undoing as the Hungarians exploited the space in between the lines of defence and attack by situating players in the pockets. The English players were bamboozled by this and were unsure whether to stick or twist in how they lined up to mark the opposition. This was a particular problem for defender Harry Johnston, who was constantly dragged out of position by Nándor Hidegkuti, who was playing in what today we call the No.10 role. Of course, this was unheard of at that time.

England hit back to equalise before Hidegkuti added to his tally to regain the lead. Puskás began to purr. He struck twice,

in the 24th and 27th minutes, to put daylight between the two countries with not even 30 minutes on the clock. Mortensen pulled a goal back before half-time, but it wasn't anywhere near enough for the hosts. Hungary came out after the break and within ten minutes had scored a further two goals. The final score on that day at Wembley was England 3 Hungary 6. Over 100,000 fans had crammed into the twin towers and what unfolded before their eyes was a new footballing dawn. The country that had given the game to the world had been reminded that there was more than one way to skin a cat, well in footballing terms anyway.

Sir Bobby Robson said of the match, 'We saw a style of play, a system of play, that we had never seen before. None of these players meant anything to us. We didn't know about Puskás. All these fantastic players, they were men from Mars as far as we were concerned. They were coming to England; England had never been beaten at Wembley – this would be a 3–0, 4–0 maybe even 5–0 demolition of a small country who were just coming into European football. They called Puskás the "Gallop Major" because he was in the army – how could this guy serving for the Hungarian army come to Wembley and rifle us to defeat? But the way they played, their technical brilliance and expertise – our WM formation was kyboshed in 90 minutes of football. The game had a profound effect, not just on myself but on all of us.'

England were arrogant prior to kick-off. 'We completely underestimated the advances that Hungary had made, and not only tactically,' Billy Wright said. 'When we walked out at Wembley that afternoon, side by side with the visiting team, I looked down and noticed that the Hungarians had on these strange, lightweight boots, cut away like slippers under the ankle bone. I turned to big Stan Mortensen and said, "We should be alright here, Stan, they haven't got the proper kit."

Their arrogance was to add to the misery that compounded the defeat.

Prior to the commencement of the 1954 World Cup in Switzerland, England, still licking their wounds, travelled to Hungary for a return match with one thing on their mind, revenge. They needn't have bothered leaving Heathrow, as this time it was just plain embarrassing. In the Népstadion, Budapest, England weren't only beaten but were also completely humiliated and outplayed yet again. This time there was to be no mercy shown by Sebes's team as the Magical Magyars thrashed the Three Lions 7-1. England were predictable, whereas the wily Sebes had slightly changed his formation to a 4-2-4. Puskás this time wowed the home fans with two goals in the rout, like a conductor leading his orchestra.

This result against what was considered one of the better teams in the world had put the Hungarians in good stead with the World Cup looming over the horizon. Sebes and co had been on a long run of matches without tasting defeat, dating back to 1950. The team were in prime form as the competition kicked off and boy did they show it. Their first two group matches saw huge victories, with a 9-0 opening win over South Korea and an 8-3 demolition of the West Germans. Puskás was revelling on the big stage again and had struck three times in the opening two matches. Berne was to become a venue of both cheers and tears as first a quarter-final victory over Brazil was marred by two red cards in a bruising encounter with the South Americans. Puskás was struggling through injury and was left out of the team, a trend that was to follow in the semi-final as again Sebes left out his talisman, such was the strength of his squad.

Uruguay provided stern opponents in the last four, but a mammoth effort in extra time saw the Hungarians prosper 4-2. Puskás, looking on, wasn't to be left looking on in the final.

Sebes recalled the striker to face West Germany in Berne. In what would be their 50th match unbeaten, the Hungarians raced into a 2-0 lead, Puskás and club-mate Czibor opening the scoring inside the first ten minutes. The quarter-final against the Brazilians had been heralded the 'Battle of Berne' due to its ferocity. This final, however, was to be branded the 'Miracle of Berne'.

West Germany, who had rested many first-team players in the 8-3 defeat in the group stage, were now at full strength and, despite the early setback, powered back in true 'Vorsprung Durch Technik' style. They battled back, reversing the scoreline to lead 3-2 and were heading for championship glory. The Hungarians fought hard and rallied to try to save not only the final but their proud undefeated record. Puskás struck with a little over a minute to go, but an offside flag cut short the celebrations. Again Hungary poured forward. With time ticking on, they thought that they had a lifeline when Kocsis was brought down in the penalty area, but English referee William Ling waved away the protests and West Germany held on to become world champions. I wonder whether the referee had the 6-3 and 7-1 in his mind at that time? Or maybe that's just the devil in me.

Battered and bruised, Puskás returned to his club Honvéd and again secured them the title, a fifth in six seasons. What was to become significant with this accolade was that little did anyone know the chain of events that was to follow. As with any team winning their domestic league around this time, the following campaign would ensure a tilt at the newly created European Cup and a chance to pit their wits against the cream of other nations. The competition had been born a year previous in 1955, which excited teams across the European landscape. Honvéd travelled to Athletic Bilbao in the first round of the competition. In a topsy-turvy match, Honvéd were beaten 3-2

in the Basque region, but the Hungarians were confident of a victory on home soil despite trailing by a single goal. What they didn't know was that they weren't to play on home soil for a very long time.

The Hungarian Revolution had erupted in the capital while the team were away on international duty and, with fear of the regime reigning strong amongst the squad, the players decided to move their families out of the country. Honvéd still had a home leg to take care of against Bilbao, but, with all the goings on in Hungary, decided to host the Spaniards in the Heysel Stadium in Belgium. Puskás scored in a 3-3 draw, but it wasn't enough for the Hungarians and their European trip was cut short ... for now. With the club in effect being homeless, they decided on a money-making tour of Europe, showcasing the team's talents to parts unknown.

FIFA were furious with the actions of the Hungarian club and, along with UEFA, threatened action if Honvéd failed to return to their homeland to complete their league campaign. They didn't, so, in 1956, Puskás and his team-mates were slapped with a two-year ban from football. As if things weren't tough enough at this time for the players and their families, they were now prevented from doing what they loved and what brought in the money. By the time their bans expired in 1958, Puskás had turned 31. His chances of playing at the highest level were beginning to diminish with every passing month, but his future lay somewhere other than his homeland. 'I swore to myself I would never return,' said Puskás. 'I felt bitter at such treatment, after so many years giving my best for the nation.'

First, in an attempt to find himself a new contract, he headed to Italy, but he was knocked back on multiple occasions for both his size and height, a theme throughout his footballing career. Then, in the wake of the tragic Munich air disaster, Sir Matt Busby's assistant Jimmy Murphy attempted to take Puskás

to Old Trafford. Manchester United's team had been decimated in the plane crash and Murphy knew that the Hungarian would add the magic that was now missing after the demise of Duncan Edwards and all, god rest their souls. Unfortunately, due to red tape and reportedly high wage demands, the move never materialised. Real Madrid, the Spanish super club, took a punt on Puskás. They already had the emphatic Argentine forward, Alfredo Di Stéfano, on their books, who was a phenomenal goalscorer in Spain. What was most noticeable was the fact that both strikers were moving into the sunset of their careers at the time that Puskás joined the club.

The Hungarian player put pen to paper in August 1958 and embarked on another enthralling chapter of his career. An article on the website Puskas.com details the contract signed by the forward, despite his advancing years and expanding waistline:

Many thought the four-year length was too long for a fat, old player such as Puskás and there is no doubt the 150,000 pesetas-a-year signing-on fee was down to the generosity of club president Mr Santiago Bernabéu. This amount, a total of 150,000 dollars, suitably covered the loans which Puskás and his family had taken out over previous months, amongst which was one from their friend and fellow football star László Kubala at FC Barcelona, and additionally, according to the contract signed and witnessed on 16th August 1958, Puskás received 3,000 pesetas per month as his salary.

The natives didn't have long to wait to see their newest Galactico. In only his second match, Puskás took home the match ball, with a stunning hat-trick against Sporting Gijón.

His strike partner Di Stéfano wasn't to be outdone and continued with his own ridiculously high strike rate. The pair became so deadly that during their first campaign playing together they both notched trebles in a 10-1 victory over Las Palmas. Despite their heroics in front of goal, neither quite did enough domestically, as the team finished four points behind eventual winners Barcelona.

What did brighten the end of the campaign was a run to the European Cup Final, a first for Puskás. Fate, though, had other ideas as injury curtailed his season at the semi-final stage, ruling him out of the final in Stuttgart against Reims. The bittersweet end of his first year in Spain was compounded when his pal Di Stéfano scored the second of two in a 2-0 win to ensure that the Hungarian was holding silverware on his maiden voyage in the Spanish capital. There was even more to come. This just fired the belly, excuse the pun, of the forward, whose scoring numbers nearly doubled over the next five campaigns, from the 25 times he had netted in 1958/59 to 47, 44 and 40 over the subsequent three seasons.

As well as achieving team honours, Puskás was now beginning to collect recognition of his own, with the Pichichi Trophy (Spain's golden boot) being won on four occasions in eight years. He was runner-up for the Ballon d'Or in 1960 and was the highest goalscorer in the European Cup on two occasions. His scoring was now becoming so regular that it catapulted Madrid to five consecutive La Liga titles. The team also retained the European Cup the year after Puskás was cruelly denied a place in the final. This time out, though, he was to be on that pitch, unfortunately for their German opponents, Eintracht Frankfurt.

Real Madrid demolished their opponents in a very one-sided match at Hampden Park. Despite Frankfurt taking an 18th-minute lead, Di Stéfano and Puskás took it in turns to toy

with their prey, before treating them to a 7-3 defeat. Puskás, making up for lost time, scored only the four, while his mate Di Stéfano followed up with a paltry hat-trick. The pair just loved playing together. The Argentine had already endeared himself to the fans at the Bernabéu prior to the Hungarian's arrival, but in the period of the partnership playing together they notched a staggering 426 goals between them in all competitions. Not bad for a couple of 'over-the-hill', out-of-shape pensioners.

Unfortunately, with time most definitely not on Puskás's side, he did manage to add just one more European Cup to his collection as the curtain came down on his amazing career. One last win, against Partizan Belgrade, although Puskás again was to miss the final through injury, was enough to ensure he was heralded a king in Spain.

A side note to this amazing story is that, despite scoring 84 goals in 85 matches for his native Hungary, due to being granted Spanish citizenship, Puskás also collected four caps for Spain in 1961-62. His four matches for his new-found homeland were fruitless in front of goal but, nevertheless, the Spanish people took him to their hearts.

George Best had particularly fond memories of Puskás, which really is saying something considering the talent that Best himself possessed:

I was with [Bobby] Charlton, [Denis] Law and Puskás, we were coaching in a football academy in Australia. The youngsters we were coaching did not respect him, including making fun of his weight and age. We decided to let the guys challenge a coach to hit the crossbar 10 times in a row, obviously they picked the old fat one. Law asked the kids how many they thought the old fat coach would get out of 10. Most said less than five. I said 10. The old fat coach

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stepped up and hit nine in a row. For the tenth shot he scooped the ball in the air, bounced it off both shoulders and his head, then flicked it over with his heel and cannoned the ball off the crossbar on the volley. They all stood in silence then one kid asked who he was, I replied, “To you, his name is Mr. Puskás.”

All in all, Puskás tallied up an impressive 511 goals in 533 matches at club level. His skill was commemorated even further when, in 2009, FIFA named an award after the forward for the best goal scored in the world for each calendar year. The inaugural winner of this prestigious new prize was Cristiano Ronaldo of Manchester United for his 40-yard screamer against FC Porto in the Champions League quarter-final. Puskás would certainly have approved.