

DAVE BENNETT

with Rich Chamberlain

BENNO



*My Life
in Football*

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The Early Years: Hometown Hero

LONGSIGHT, THREE miles south of Manchester city centre, is an inner-city area flanked by Ardwick and West Gorton to the north, Belle Vue to the east, Levenshulme to the south and Chorlton-on-Medlock, Victoria Park and Fallowfield to the west. Around 15,000 people live there and, to the Bennett family, it was home.

We lived within walking distance of Maine Road. My mum Lucy and dad Zeddy brought up Gary and me. Gary was born in December 1961. I was 18 months older, born in July 1959. Longsight was a tough place to be brought up. I went to St John's Primary School and then on to Burnage Grammar. To go to the grammar school in those days you had to be selected, and it was an all-boys' establishment. I learned how to play cricket and rugby alongside my football, and it was a good education all round for me. My athletics wasn't too bad either, but the round ball was my focus, even

though I didn't think I was going to get anywhere with it. I simply enjoyed playing the game.

Racism was always there, but going to an all-boys' school I didn't see much. However, in youth clubs and similar there were always fights with skinheads and punks. Unfortunately, you were always going to get that growing up where I did. You had to know how to look after yourself, as there was always an undercurrent, whether on your doorstep or in your face, so you'd have to look out for yourself, otherwise you'd get beaten up and bullied every day.

At Burnage Grammar one of my team-mates was Peter Coyne. Peter played for England Schoolboys and scored successive hat-tricks against France and West Germany in 1974. Manchester United signed him and he left school in the Easter holidays of our last year. It all depended on your birthday, and with him being one of the eldest he was able to go. Peter was all the rage locally and nationally; England beat France 5-2 and West Germany 4-0, and he was headline news. Schoolboy internationals drew huge crowds as schools across the country were given tickets to bring coachloads of pupils, often watching at Wembley for the first time, while the matches were also televised on ITV. Peter was top scorer for United's reserves and made his first-team debut at Villa Park, aged 17, in February 1976. It was United's first season back in the First Division after

their ignominious relegation in 1973/74. The penultimate match of the season at Leicester saw Tommy Docherty start Coyne, and he responded with a goal in a 2-1 defeat. United finished the season in third, yet Peter never made another first-team appearance. Disciplinary problems saw his contract cancelled within a year as Docherty released him and he initially drifted into non-league circles. Our paths, however, would very nearly cross again in years to come.

While Peter was over at Old Trafford, I was playing for Ashwood Celtic, and our rivals at the time were a team called Senrab, who were formed by the notorious Barry Bennell. We knew all their players as we'd been teammates for Manchester Boys in earlier seasons. While I was at Ashwood, a local Arabian side, Adenor, asked me to play for them on Saturdays and Sundays. The football was of a high standard and soon I was getting rave reviews. Adenor sent me for a trial at Oldham, and while I was there a scout by the name of Len Davies noticed me and asked me to go to Manchester City for trials and training. My brother Gary played for Senrab a couple of years below me, along with Moss Side youth club. In his side were Clive Wilson, Alex Williams, Steve Kinsey and Andy May.

We played Blackpool in the Lancashire Cup at Maine Road, won 5-1, and I scored a hat-trick. The brief was that if I did well they'd keep me, but if I struggled, I'd be shown

the door. I started playing in the A team and B team and was offered a year's contract to play in the youth team. I by-passed having to carry out apprentice duties due to the date I joined with my July birthday, this being the spring of 1976. I was 16, 17 in the July, and trained initially while I was at college and then they asked me to play on Saturdays for the youth team. On 26 November 1976, I signed my first professional contract. Club secretary Bernard Halford helped me with the contract, which ran until the end of June 1977. I earned £35 per week. It had its bonuses, of course, an additional £5 per week if I played in the Central League, and up to £10 in the first team. The contract also had an option for a further year to take me up to the summer of 1978 and would increase to £45 per week.

* * *

City had just won the League Cup at Wembley when I signed. Dennis Tueart's overhead kick saw us to a 2-1 victory over Newcastle in February 1976. The club was on a roll and would finish runners-up to Liverpool in the league in 1976/77 and qualify for the UEFA Cup. There were stars all over the pitch and the profile was huge. That season only rivals United took the two points at Maine Road, with a 3-1 win in front of 49,000 on a September afternoon. We wouldn't lose at home for 13 months, when Wolves won

2-0. The football was free-flowing and the support backed us to the hilt.

People, however, were waiting for you to fail; I was at one of the biggest clubs in the country. I didn't have to be good, I had to be better than good because I was black. In the changing rooms or physio room you used to wait outside and knock the door before you went in. You couldn't just walk in. Today, it's all completely different. It was a huge learning curve. You had to show respect for the first-team players, and there were some greats in that changing room, players who ended up being my mates. The likes of Joe Corrigan, Dennis Tueart, one of the all-time greats Kazimierz Deyna, Tommy Booth, who I still see now, and Peter Barnes was later at Coventry with me. You had to learn the rules. Colin Bell was returning after his knee injury and was in every day for treatment and to use the gym. Those players accepted me, and it was great. They helped me, spoke to me, encouraged me.

We were coached by a big Scottish guy called Dave Ewing. He'd made over 300 appearances for the club between 1952 and 1962 and played in both the 1955 and 1956 FA Cup finals. Dave was hard as nails, and everybody who was at Maine Road knows about him. You could hear him for miles. He took me under his wing and with his tutelage I had to come in every day to do weights to build

myself up. On the occasional day I didn't do extra, he'd know; he didn't miss a trick. We also had Len Heppel, who came in to do the fitness and movement work. He was the ballroom dance champion, along with his wife. Malcolm always told us to put your shoulders back and keep smiling.

When we had trialists in for practice matches we could kick them, but they couldn't kick us. It was to check out their temperament, how they dealt with pressure and intimidation, whether they could look after themselves. If I played against the reserves or the first team I couldn't kick them, but they could kick me as I was after their position; they were protecting their own spots in the respective starting line-ups. This was all part of the learning curve in my first year where I learned constantly. I did well and built up a good relationship with Roger Palmer, and we were one of the favourites to win the Youth Cup.

When I signed my contract late in November 1976 I didn't consider the effect of what I was achieving, a local lad from a West Indian community. My parents worked on the railways, and I'd started to get a few write-ups in the local paper. People started talking to my dad about it and would say, 'Your son is at Man City now, what's he doing there, playing sweeper?' As if I was on the ground staff sweeping the terraces, but that's how it was. The community looked after me, and growing up in Manchester you were either

United or City. I'd watched United but was turning into a true Blue, so when I played against the red side of the city you had to win at all costs. You'd have the milkman a City fan and the postman followed United. They knew who you were, and word went around; that was difficult, as even going to the local shop you were known. There was no hiding place, but this made you want to succeed and achieve so much, so it was a precious opportunity.

* * *

In 1977/78 I played for the reserves as we won the Central League title for the first time. I played 38 games and scored 18 times. It was while playing for the reserves that I began to train on the same pitch as the likes of Joe Royle, Gary Owen, Peter Barnes, Brian Kidd and Kenny Clements. There was a mutual trust on the pitch. Willie Donachie, Dave Watson, Colin Bell and Asa Hartford would see you on the training pitch. They knew they could trust you with the ball and they looked out for you on the pitch. If they didn't rate you, if you weren't any good, they wouldn't have paid you the respect they paid me. There were several older professionals in the reserves on their way back from injury, notably Colin Bell and Brian Kidd, Paul Power and Tony Henry. We won the title in the days when reserve-team football was tough and unforgiving; no one was in there to

make up the numbers and we all had a goal. You learned your trade at this level, the tackles were flying in, they'd give you a rap on the ankles in training and your instinct was to react, but you just had to take it and get on with it, all part of the learning curve.

Roger Palmer top-scored with 20 and stepped up to the first team, scoring three times. He made his debut away to Middlesbrough, Christmas 1977, yet by October 1980 Oldham had signed him and, as we all know, he went on to become their all-time leading goalscorer over the next 14 seasons. Many City fans recall his hat-trick at Maine Road, August 1988, as Oldham thumped us 4-1. Ray Ranson, Henry and skipper Ged Keegan all played over 30 games in that Central League success, while the greats, Colin Bell and Mike Doyle, played 40 between them. Only Everton, Liverpool and Nottingham Forest finished above City in the First Division that season.

As 1977/78 concluded, Tony Book signed me on to a new contract. My season with the youth team and reserves had been a real success and I penned a one-year deal with the option of a second, which saw my money rise to £60 a week with a £20 bonus for appearing in the first team. Tony and Bill Taylor, the England coach, kept encouraging me, working to improve all aspects of my game. They wouldn't think twice about replacing you as there was always someone

waiting in the wings. You needed the right temperament to deal with pressure and expectation. City was such a massive club in terms of its history, where it had been and where it was going. With United and the Merseyside clubs doing well, football was massive. You always had a chance in the game if City or United released you, as you had pedigree. The reputation of the clubs ensured you were sought after.

My old mate Peter Coyne scored the most goals in United's reserves, one of the best finishers I've ever seen – left foot, right foot. They told him to get his hair cut and he refused. When Tommy Docherty released him in the spring of 1977, he was still 18 and initially ended up at Ashton United before Crewe signed him in the summer and he was able to get back on the pitch, doing what he did best, scoring goals. He'd had the world at his feet, all the clubs had wanted his signature, the nation had seen his success at Wembley when he scored two hat-tricks for England Schoolboys. His brother, Ged, was on the books at City but there was no one else in my year who went on to turn professional.

While I continued to develop and progress in the reserves, the first team finished 15th in the First Division in 1978/79 and reached the quarter-finals of both cup competitions. Malcolm Allison returned in January 1979 as a coaching mentor to Tony Book, six years after leaving

Maine Road for Crystal Palace. He brought in a real emphasis on stretching and ensuring my hamstrings were in good condition. Along with many other players, Malcolm educated us to prepare in the correct way for matches.

Tony Book had signed Kazimierz Deyna just prior to Christmas. Deyna was one of the first wave of foreign players to play in the English league. He'd played at Wembley for Poland in 1973 when they knocked out England in the World Cup qualifier, and by 1978's tournament in Argentina he was captain. He'd retired from international football prior to joining us with 97 caps, and Zbigniew Boniek took his place as captain. 'Kazi', as he was known to us, was what you'd term a 'playmaker'. In his three seasons with us he appeared just 43 times, but seven goals in the last eight games of 1978/79 gave us momentum to stay in the top tier when it was looking slightly precarious in the spring. Brian Kidd used to comment on how Deyna was an excellent manipulator of the ball, so much guile, his technique was something else. He sadly passed away at the age of 41 after a car accident in his adopted home of San Diego, where he headed after leaving City in 1981, shortly before John Bond took charge. The Polish Football Association in later years voted him the best Polish player of all time. 'Kazi' left a positive impact on the players, the fans and the club in general.

My first-ever £20 bonus and senior debut came in the April at Maine Road as Gordon Lee's Everton visited. The team list would go up on a Friday and everyone would crowd around the board to see if they were in the 12; only one substitute then, of course. It was a moment I'll never forget for the right and wrong reasons. It gave me a taste for more; who wouldn't be inspired by playing in front of just under 40,000 at Maine Road? I'd played most of the Central League games that season too. After winning the title we finished fourth this time around, and in 35 appearances I scored 15 goals, with only goalkeeper Keith Macrae and defender Ray Ranson appearing more times. Tommy Caton was a regular, while Colin Bell played alongside us 23 times, with regular runs for Tony Henry, Ron and Paul Futcher, Nicky Reid, Steve Kinsey, Gary Buckley, Russell Coughlin and Roger Palmer, although his involvement with the first team became greater as the season progressed.

Malcolm took over from Tony Book in the summer of 1979, while Tony moved into the role of general manager. As City fans know, Tony is known universally as 'Skip' and he used to play in the five-a-sides, loving a slide-tackle. When Malcolm walked in the room you knew he was there, he had an aura about him. Whether he was sporting a big cigar or a hat, he had a passion in his eyes, a burning desire to win, to do well. Who wouldn't be drawn in and inspired

by this? Malcolm always ensured you were well. He pushed all the young lads, me, Ray Ranson, Tommy Caton, Nicky Reid and Steve Mackenzie.

Steve arrived with a great reputation during that summer. Malcolm signed him for £250,000 from Crystal Palace, where he was an apprentice yet to break into the first team at Selhurst Park. He was the most expensive teenager when he joined, the irony being he made his City debut against Palace on the opening day of the season. Also making his first-team debut that day was 16-year-old Tommy Caton, alongside Tommy Booth at the heart of our defence.

Nicky Reid, another local lad, from Davyhulme, made his debut a month prior to me in much different circumstances. Malcolm named him in the team to face Borussia Mönchengladbach in our UEFA Cup draw at Maine Road. He also featured in the second leg defeat two weeks later, as the West Germans won 3-1 to move into the semi-finals. Mönchengladbach went on to win the trophy, defeating Red Star Belgrade 2-1 on aggregate in the final. Red Star had beaten West Brom at the quarter-final stage and Arsenal in the third round. Bear in mind Nicky was 18 and this was a quarter-final tie where he was up against the Dane, Allan Simonsen. Nicky got stuck in and never feared a challenge, and Malcolm threw him into one of our biggest games with Gary Owen injured. There were 39,000

in Maine Road under the lights but he just got on with it. We were team-mates in the Central League title win and there were parallels with our respective progress into the first-team squad.

Being so far advanced with all his various techniques, Malcolm had us playing three at the back. He'd bring us into the club early in the morning on matchdays and we'd train at 11am before the game at 3pm. He wanted to ensure we were wide awake and ready to go. The only downside was come half-time we were shattered. We had five in midfield, flowing football, and we were given the confidence to play different systems and to play the right way, entertaining and with flair in abundance. With all the training during the summer I was able to cope with the physicality of matchday, but I didn't feature in the matchday 12 as the season got underway. I kept up my form and fitness in the reserves, ready to take any opportunity that came my way but, before that could happen, Malcolm splashed the cash again, following on from the signing of Mackenzie.

Along with Steve Mackenzie, Malcolm had also signed striker Michael Robinson from Preston, who were then in the Second Division. The fee of £750,000 took the summer spending to the million-pound mark. It didn't stop there. We'd taken three points from the first four league games and Malcolm wanted Steve Daley in our side. He'd made

over 200 appearances for Wolves, an attacking midfielder with an eye for goal. On 5 September the initial talks looked at a fee of £250,000, and bear in mind this was the era before agents. Steve was quite happy at Wolves, but we were a side packed with international players and it was a fresh and exciting challenge for him. Arsenal, Bobby Robson at Ipswich, Newcastle and Chelsea also showed interest, while Wolves were known to be after Villa's Andy Gray. John Barnwell, Wolves' manager, told Steve that a deal had been agreed with Peter Swales, so he hopped in his Ford Cortina and headed up the M6. The transfer fee just kept on rising through the day between Peter Swales and his counterpart in negotiations, and when Steve finally signed the deal it was an astronomical £1,437,500. The contract length? Ten years. On 8 September Wolves paid Villa £1.5m for Andy Gray, thus the transfer record had been broken for the second time in four days.

Mind you, during the summer, Malcolm had also sold Gary Owen to West Brom, followed six weeks later by Peter Barnes. Under Ron Atkinson, Albion had qualified for the UEFA Cup after a third-place finish. Mick Channon had also moved to Southampton, and he was our top scorer in 1978/79. Barnes and Owen were local lads and fan favourites who made just over a hundred appearances each. They had so much more to offer us, but Malcolm was in

transition mode. On Steve's first day at training, we went out on to the pitches at 11am and he was passing it around, great technique, in a game of defence versus attack. A cross came in and he smashed it on the volley over Joe and into the side of the goal. We all thought, *What have we signed here!?* Malcolm ended training there and then: 'We'll finish on that note!' Steve was great, a real gem of a lad. I got to know him really well and we're good friends to this day.

After a 4-0 thumping at The Hawthorns, Malcolm gave me my full debut in a 3-0 win over Coventry at Maine Road. I kept my place for the draw with Sunderland in the League Cup but then Kazi returned from injury and scored in three of the next four games. I returned for the win over Forest, in the No.4 shirt, in place of Bobby Shinton, then scored my first senior goal in the 2-2 draw at Carrow Road. A moment I've never forgotten. The instant the ball hit the back of the net, simply brilliant. Our home crowd soared from just over 30,000 to 48,000 for the visit of Liverpool. This was the season Liverpool conceded just 16 goals in 42 league games. Ray Clemence kept 28 clean sheets, including one on this day as the Reds swept home four without reply.

The Big Match cameras were at Selhurst Park a week later as Terry Venables' 'Team of the 80s', Crystal Palace, beat us 2-0. You'll have seen this game on *The Big Match Revisited*; how we weren't awarded a penalty for a blatant

foul on me I'll never know. My fortunes had a sharp upturn seven days later when I took home the man-of-the-match award from the 2-0 Manchester derby win. Tony Henry and Michael Robinson took the plaudits for us, with 50,000 inside Maine Road. My first derby, and Piccadilly Radio presented me with a bottle of Moët, a huge honour for me when you consider the players on both sides. Along with our lads, Corrigan, Caton, Booth, Kazi, Daley, Robinson and Paul Power, United's line-up saw Michael Robinson and me up against Kevin Moran and Martin Buchan, with the likes of Sammy McIlroy, Ray Wilkins, Steve Coppell and Mickey Thomas also in their starting line-up. There was no Joe Jordan that day. He'd missed the first part of the season through injury for a United side who were then top of the First Division.

I then had a steady run in the side as we moved into 1980. Our form was inconsistent – wins over Bolton, Derby and Everton compounded by defeats at Bristol City and Ipswich, before Brighton thumped us 4-1 in the last game of 1979, at the Goldstone Ground. In early December the FA Cup third-round draw had been made live on Radio 2, the usual Monday lunchtime, with us all crowded round the radio after training. It seemed like an eternity before our ball was drawn, away to Halifax Town at The Shay. They were then in the Fourth Division.

It was the last thing Malcolm needed. The pressure was building and he was in the spotlight even more than usual. Halifax had been re-elected to the Football League in two of the previous three seasons but had lost just once at home this season. The Shay pitch was an advantage to the Yorkshire side, and it had snowed all week in the run-up to the game. The pitch was ankle deep in water 48 hours prior, and their manager, George Kirby, had poured hundreds of gallons of extra water on to an already sodden surface. By the time we came to kick-off it was just about playable. Pitches like this in the 80s were ideal for an upset. The referee, Michael Lowe, gave it two inspections before lunch but you could just tell in the warm-up that it was going to be an uncomfortable afternoon. This was compounded by our back four, with Booth, Donachie and Futchler absent, so Nicky Reid partnered Tommy Caton in the centre, with Ray Ranson on the right and Paul Power on the left. The crowd of 13,000 was four times the normal attendance at The Shay and there wasn't room to move on a horrible day for watching football, let alone playing. They were no mugs either. Their players included Mick Kennedy, Lee Hendrie's dad, Paul, and captain Dave Evans, who'd joined them from Villa and was one of the Bradford players carrying people away from the fire on that awful day at Valley Parade.

With so much rain and the pitch a quagmire we couldn't play our usual quick passing game. Malcolm had insisted we play the tie, and the cameras sensed a giant-killing. Halifax were able to get close and press us, which ramped up the pressure on us as the clock ticked on. Bobby Shinton had a great opportunity for us from my cross before the moment we all feared happened on 75 minutes. Paul Hendrie's goal sent the ground into chaos. Malcolm was sat in the tiniest dugout imaginable as the celebrations went on around him. At the final whistle you could hear 'Allison out' and 'Swales out' from the City end, and Steve Daley copped an earful from supporters as he boarded the coach home. We were on *Match of the Day* so the whole nation witnessed the upset.

You never forget those days, and nine years later I'd face even worse in a Coventry shirt. Any City fan who was there will never forget that day and neither will the many thousands listening on the radio or following on *Grandstand*. Martin Tyler summed up the match, writing in *The Times*: 'It had every element of cup-tie football: the Fourth Division against the First; the poor of the league against the biggest spenders; a quagmire of a pitch in one of the game's least fashionable settings.' For the City fans on the terrace on a rainy, sodden day in West Yorkshire, they could only dream of their club's current fortunes: from

Shinton to Sergio, Weaver to Ederson, life has always been eventful on the blue side of Manchester.

Fortunately, we didn't live in the 24/7 social media world we do now. The Sunday papers reported the game then the Monday saw the draw for the fourth round. Peter Swales described the result as the worst day of his football life. He backed Malcolm and Tony to the hilt in person and with money. Halifax drew Bolton at Burnden Park and lost 2-0. Bolton went out after a replay to Arsenal in the fifth round.

* * *

It's fair to say the defeat rocked us as we didn't win another game until 12 April. March had seen Malcolm react to our struggles, as Dennis Tueart returned from a spell with New York Cosmos, while Kevin Reeves signed from Norwich for £1.25m. At the time, Malcolm compared him to Kevin Keegan and praised Peter Swales for opening the chequebook again. After Trevor Francis, Steve Daley and Andy Gray, Kevin was the fourth-most expensive player of all time. No pressure then. Joe Corrigan really rated Kevin, as we all did, and we saw the difference his play made to the side. Paul Sugrue was brought in from Nuneaton Borough, then in the Alliance Premier, the equivalent today of the National League. He was signed for £30,000 and tipped as

the new sensation. On the final day of the season, he made his debut alongside Kevin in our 2-1 win over Ipswich. Along with Paul there were several young players trying to make their mark at City. Gary Buckley was the brother of Mick, who played up at Sunderland. Gary joined us after rave reviews and was tipped for the very top. We also had Ronnie Evans, and Nicky Reid who, like me, had made his debut in 1978/79 and pushed on this year.

I played most of the games after Halifax, including the Manchester derby defeat at Old Trafford – 56,000 in attendance that day. Three wins out of the last four games steadied us, as we finished 17th, six points off the relegation zone. I didn't add to my two goals at Norwich but appeared 27 times in total. Our struggles were highlighted by Michael Robinson top-scoring with just nine goals, followed by Paul Power with seven. Little did we realise that the following season was going to take us within a whisker of glory.