

***EVEN
HESKEY
SCORED***



**EMILE
HESKEY**

MY STORY

WITH DEAN ELDREDGE

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Foreword

by Martin O'Neill

FEBRUARY 1996. The rain poured from the darkened skies for most of the afternoon, so by evening kick-off time, Molineux, anticipating the arrival of opponents Leicester City, was well and truly drenched. Mark McGhee, the Wolves manager, had recently departed Filbert Street amidst antipathy and acrimony within the ranks of the Foxes who had watched a number of managers leave in recent seasons just when the club had looked set fair for better times. They were on the warpath, the portents were ominous. McGhee was going to get some 'verbals' that night for his hasty departure. I, as the newly installed Leicester City manager, had an immediate task. Don't get beaten by Wolves. And so Molineux, on that rain-sodden evening, was an intimidating place to be.

I needed a big reaction from the team. Up stepped an 18-year-old, with the strength of a titan and the pace of

an Olympic sprinter to conjure an incredible performance that he would reproduce for the club many times over the next four seasons. Emile Heskey was that player. His two brilliantly taken goals not only won the match but made the footballing public take notice.

Twelve weeks later there were rapturous scenes at Wembley Stadium when victory secured promotion to the 'big league' and the young and extremely talented Emile Heskey was on an inexorable path to stardom.

He became a man that evening in Wolverhampton. His strength and pace from the left wing, his tireless appetite for doing the hard yards, plus an understanding of the defensive side of the game for one so very young, made him an automatic choice in the team. But actually he was a centre-forward in the making, as he politely told me just after our play-off triumph, and indeed, centre-forward was where he played for the rest of his career. In our first Premiership home game, on a balmy August evening in 1996, he overwhelmed Southampton with a two-goal salvo to introduce himself to the elite, a place where he truly belonged.

Quiet and well mannered in the dressing room, he was a colossus for us on the playing field. The esteem in which he was held by his team-mates never wavered, because even if Heskey was having a bad day at the office they felt that he was still capable of making something happen that would alter the course of the game. To say that we were an infinitely better team with Emile in the starting line-up would be a rather sizeable understatement.

With the club's growing success (four top-ten Premiership finishes and two League Cup victories, putting

us into Europe twice) Emile's profile was burgeoning. And so it was with much pride but a great deal of sadness that I watched him walk out the Belvoir Drive training ground door and head off to Anfield, the home of Liverpool for a club record fee in 2000. The loss of Heskey was really tough to take, both for myself and the players. It left a void that proved extremely difficult to fill and the team, of which he was such an integral part, would soon break up, to take its place in the history of the club.

I am not well enough informed to talk about his Liverpool days, which were pretty damned good. Our paths did cross briefly in March 2003 when Celtic, the club I was managing at the time, played Liverpool in the quarter-final of the UEFA Cup. Heskey's equalising goal at Parkhead on an incredibly atmospheric evening was continuous proof of his standing in the game. Yet from a distance I thought despite an illustrious career at Anfield, more goals were certainly within Emile's scope. For some reason he wanted to become the provider of chances, rather than the goalscorer supreme. Granted, Michael Owen was the hero in those days and Emile's contribution was immeasurably valuable, but perhaps the shy, somewhat introverted part of his character had too big a grip on him then. Just my view. Emile, with some relish, will totally disagree anyway.

When I re-signed Emile from Wigan Athletic to Aston Villa some years later, he was a different character. A more self-confident individual, naturally, I assumed, as a consequence of medals won, goals scored and international caps gained. He was as physically strong as before but it was my belief that he had decided, long before his body had told

him, that he could no longer do the hard yards. Maybe that was the reason for a blazing row with him at half-time at Selhurst Park in a tough FA Cup tie against Crystal Palace.

I felt that he should have got to the ball more quickly than he was doing, held it up better in proper centre-forward fashion, and certainly should have been in the penalty box anticipating the cross more urgently in the first half. He evidently didn't agree, and rose to his feet to tell me so with much more eagerness than he had shown in the previous 45 minutes. We agreed to disagree on this occasion. That said, my belief in Emile's ability never wavered, either at Leicester City when he was so young, or at Villa Park in the latter stages of his outstanding career.

Emile Heskey fulfilled his boyhood ambitions by becoming a top-class player at the very highest level; he has a footballing CV of great distinction. I now have the privilege of writing these words as a foreword to his autobiography and of all the memorable experiences we shared I still hark back to that rainy night in Wolverhampton where this precocious teenager lit up Molineux and, in truth, never looked back.

CHAPTER ONE

Five-One, Even Heskey Scored ...

I SAW Paul Scholes bursting through. I just thought, 'I'm off'. I knew I needed to run; to get towards the goal. He played me through. For a moment, the world seemed to stop. I just needed to get a good touch, to get the ball out of my feet and I'd be in on goal. If I'm honest, I didn't actually get the best of first touches. It was good enough, not perfect, but it didn't take me out of my stride.

If you can get your shot away early, it can be difficult for goalkeepers to get down to the ball. My mind was focused on striking the ball hard and low. The defender, Marko Rehmer, was closing in on me, and the goalkeeper, Oliver Kahn, was advancing. There was no space to go around him.

Keep it down, don't blaze it over. Hard, true, hit the net. I'd done it time after time in training, in games, but never on a night like this. And then it hit me 5-1 – I'd just scored in the Olympic Stadium in Munich to put England 5-1 up against Germany. FIVE-ONE. This doesn't happen. To put it into context, Germany had only lost one qualification

game in their last 60 and hadn't lost at the Olympic Stadium since 1973.

I gave an interview not too long ago. I was asked questions about what I'd said in previous interviews in my career. One of the questions was, 'What did you say about your goal in Germany after the game?' I guessed and said I'd described it as amazing. Wrong. Apparently I'd described it as 'good'. Good? What was I thinking? I should have been on top of the world.

That's football though. When you're living day after day in that environment, the bubble, you take things with a pinch of salt. You're already thinking of the next game, the next challenge. It's not until you finish playing, when you look back on your career, that you take stock of those moments and your achievements. It's totally different to supporters, who will all remember where they were on the evening of the 1 September 2001; the night we put five in the Germans' net.

When I get stopped today by people in the street, it's the one thing that gets mentioned more often than not.

'Emile, 5-1, amazing mate!' they'll shout. I'll put my hand up, smile and then take another look and think, 'How old would you have been that night?' They'd have been in nappies, or at school, but it's just one of those games, one of those nights that transcend the generations. Something your mum and dad will tell you about, even if you weren't old enough to see it or remember it for yourself.

One guy once told me that he walked out of the pub the moment Germany went ahead. His son managed to get hold of him after the game and told him it had finished

5-1. He thought we'd lost 5-1. Everyone remembers where they were.

We didn't win anything that night. No trophies. We didn't even qualify for the World Cup that night, that was still to come, but we won the hearts of the public. We gave English football some pride.

Watching my goal back on YouTube, I'm shaking my head. I can't believe I had the nerve to tell Scholesy to wait, to let me do my celebration. Who does that? After the quality of his through-ball, I should have been carrying him on my shoulders.

I started to do my DJ celebration and then remembered I'd agreed to change it. DJ Spooky was the inspiration for it. He asked me to mix up my celebration and to do a golf-putting one. I didn't even play golf. I was in autopilot, about to do my DJ spinning and then you can see the moment when my brain kicks in and I'm holding Scholesy away, running off towards the corner flag. It was all a bit of a blur. I couldn't tell you what Scholesy or David Beckham said, even though they were the first over to congratulate me.

They played with each other. They had such an understanding. At that time, Becks was just amazing. It was weird to watch, really. Observing football through the years, it's generally controlled through the centre of midfield. Becks was controlling games from the wing. He was a phenomenon, almost untouchable at that point in his career.

Scholes, because he was so quiet, no one really noticed him, but he was arguably better than anyone. He was like

the opposite of Becks. Almost unknown outside of the game, whereas Becks was known worldwide.

These guys could pass a ball to you perfectly. Not just at you, but on to the specific patch of grass that you were running on to. If you were running, they would find you. It was a dream to play alongside them.

That night, we all thought back to the defeat to Germany in October 2000; the last England game at the old Wembley Stadium. No one wanted to lose that game and it hurt everyone.

I have a frame up on the wall of my house now. It includes my shirt, Carsten Jancker's shirt and it has the teams and score listed on there. I look at it as I walk past and smile. For all the cup finals with Leicester and Liverpool, the relegation decider with Wigan, and all the other big games I was fortunate enough to play in, this is the one that I'll always be remembered for. That night, that goal; five-one, even Heskey scored ...