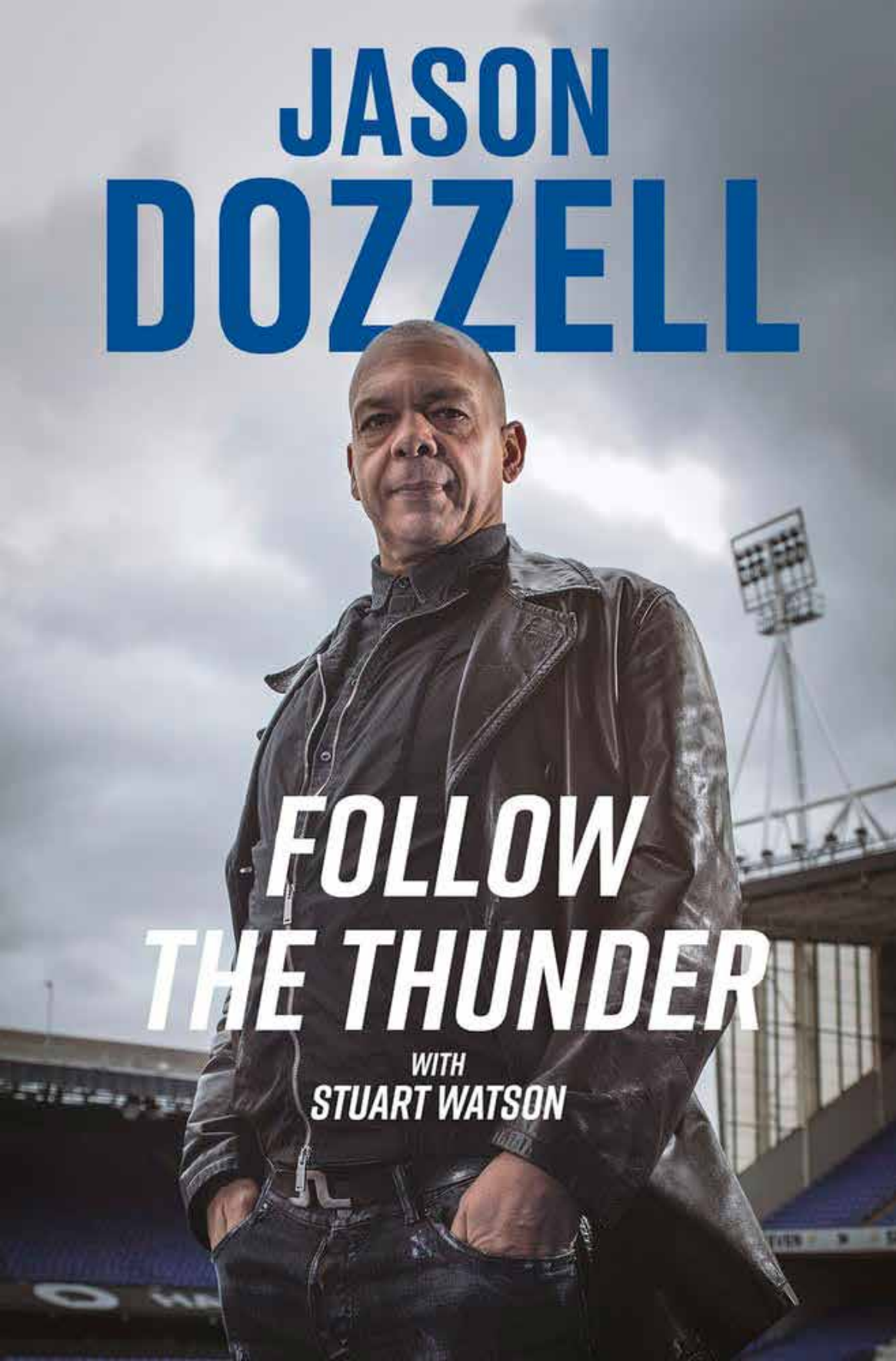
JASON DOZZELL



FOLLOW THE THUNDER

WITH

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What's That Noise?

SATURDAY, 9 December 1967. The nation was still feeling the afterglow of Bobby Moore lifting the Jules Rimet Trophy at Wembley when I entered the world. That World Cup triumph was masterminded by a manager, Sir Alf Ramsey, who had been forged in Ipswich. It's the town I was born in and one I'm immensely proud to have always called home.

It's often said that I grew up a goal kick away from Portman Road. Not quite, but almost. The distance between 67 Elliott Street to the home of Ipswich Town is 500 yards – a straight walk through Alderman Road Rec. I heard the stadium before I ever saw it, though.

At five years old I was already allowed to mess about on the street in front of our house. First, I'd hear these strange rumblings. *That's weird.* Then, out of nowhere, an almighty roar would vibrate off the streets and echo around that small residential area. It was so loud the neighbours' windows would rattle.

I'd stop still, frightened, frozen to the spot. *Is that thunder? Maybe it's a lion or a bear just around the corner?* My young mind would race with wild thoughts.

This went on for weeks. I'd forget all about that burst of noise, be back in my own little imaginary world, kicking a stone or swinging a stick, and then freeze with fright all over again as the sudden sound reverberated off the concrete. Eventually I ran inside one day and asked, 'Mummy, what's that sound?' 'That's the football,' she told me with a smile. *Football?* That answer brought a mixture of relief and curiosity.

It wasn't long before that noise provided a thrill rather than a fright. I followed that thunder. Ridiculously, little more than a decade later, I was the one creating it.

* * *

It was just me, my mum and my older sister Charletta, or 'Tootie' as we call her, in that house.

I'd call it very humble beginnings. Two up, two down. No inside toilet. I wouldn't say we struggled, we just didn't have much. The furthest we'd go on holiday was to Clacton on the Essex coast. We always had loads of presents at Christmas, but I do remember going to the cupboard and often seeing just bread and ketchup. Veg? What's that? With my mum it was fish fingers and chips most nights. Bless her, she did the best she could.

Mum is the number one person in my life and always will be. I don't know everything about her life before me, but the little I do know doesn't paint a pretty picture. I've always assumed she doesn't really want to talk about it, because it's never really been brought up, and that tells me a story in itself. It's not a topic I've really pushed and it's still not one I'm really keen to explore too deeply, to be honest.

All I know is she had five other kids before Tootie and I came along and they were placed in the Dr Barnardo's children's care home at Harland House, 15 miles away in the seaside town of Felixstowe. I can only imagine how difficult life must have been for my mum. She must have felt completely overwhelmed. Rightly or wrongly, she made that decision. All I can say is that I guess she did what she felt she had to do at the time.

Why didn't Tootie and I get put into care too? Was that ever close to happening? I don't know. I can only guess that our dad, who wasn't their dad, had something to do with it. Some people need answers to questions like that, whereas I've never gone looking for them. You'll soon see that's been a theme in my life.

My five oldest siblings – Kenny, Tony, Cheryl, Carolyn and Nathan – weren't complete strangers to Tootie and me growing up. We knew who they were and they'd come into our lives sporadically through the years with the odd visit to Ipswich. I think they got brought up with more structure than we did. They were on the beach every day, got regular meals and eventually left care as adolescents to make their own way in the world. Mentally it was tougher for them growing up though. We were with our mum and they weren't. It's difficult to put myself in their shoes.

There have been issues. At times, I think, they've found it hard to accept why my mum did what she did. Once we all became adults it could get awkward and get political. We'd go to BBQs together, have a drink and things would come up. We've all got older though, had children and grandchildren

of our own, and the last 20 years, thankfully, has been the strongest and most stable we've ever been. Everyone gets on with my mum now, but that's not always been the case. It could have been a lot worse.

I'll talk more about some of my wider family, and my dad, as this book goes on, but for now I'll focus on those early years of seclusion.

Tootie is a year and a bit older than me. We were very close growing up and still are today. That bond, which will never be broken, was probably strengthened by the fact there was no extended family to go to when we were kids. There were no weekends with a roast at the grandparents' or anything like that. All that was fine by me. I didn't know any different and it gave me more time to play football. There was definitely more good than bad in my childhood.

I have to respect what mum did as a single mother. She didn't get everything right, but she's got the heart and decency of any good human being. She's kind and loving, but she had her struggles and would get frustrated. Her mood swings were up and down.

Everyone who knows Francine Dozzell will tell you she's a real character. She knew a lot of people, put it that way. I remember she had this radio scanner thing, God knows where she got it from, which meant she could listen in on the police. Where they were going, who they were after – she could hear it all. As news of a raid crackled over the airwaves she would frantically ring people and shout, 'Get out of there quick!' The next day someone would knock on the door with a bunch of flowers in hand. 'Cheers Fran, thanks for that!'

She could be hard. I'd often suffer the wrath of the slipper. That came into full force the one time I got in trouble with the police as a kid. My mate Gino Washington and I were walking to the train station along Ranelagh Road to go and watch Ipswich play away. We could only have been eight or nine and, chances are, neither of us had eaten any breakfast before rushing out the door.

These were the days when you could ask the milkman to leave a few extra groceries on your doorstep. Gino spied some Jaffa Cakes outside one house. He looked at me, I looked back at him. Within a flash he'd grabbed them and started legging it. I had no option but to join the getaway. Were the police called or did they happen to just be driving by? I don't know, but all of a sudden we were being taken to the station.

Mum came to collect me. *Uh oh*. I knew I was in trouble. Pleading that I was guilty by association did not wash. I tried to catch her eye the entire walk home but she just stared straight ahead. I needed a plan because I knew full well she was going to switch as soon as we got in. The second that front door opened I took those stairs three at a time as she gave chase, then I jumped into bed and covered myself with the blanket. I wasn't stupid. That extra layer killed the pain a bit as she whacked away. Parents were a lot stricter then than they are today.

Mum could be really fun too. When I was 16 she got a job as a lollipop lady – I'd love to know how she passed the interview for that with no relevant experience – and was assigned a crossing near our house on London Road, the main route out of the town.

I'd just got into the Ipswich Town first team. As a fresh-faced young pro, my focus should have been on earning the acceptance of senior team-mates and the next day's big away game as we hit the road on the team coach. Instead, all I could think about was surviving that nightmare first bit of the journey.

Mum, who knew exactly what time we were setting off from Portman Road, would calculate when we would reach her crossing and step out on to the road to greet me. In turn, I had to perfectly time a ten-second slide down into my seat, pretending to look for something on the floor, as she stood in the middle of the road jumping up and down, waving frantically and looking for me through the windows. All the lads would look up from their game of cards and be nudging each other, going, 'Look at this nutty lady!' That went on for ages. Every single trip. 'Here she is again!' the lads would all shout. They all thought it was hilarious.

Eventually Mum, ignoring pleas to stop cramping my style, started stopping Trevor Kirton's bus. Knock, knock. Doors open. 'Tell Jason good luck!' she'd cheerfully call up the stairs. I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me. Embarrassed in front of all my heroes. I was absolutely mortified. She was just proud of her little boy, though.

Tootie was quite happy playing with her doll's house for hours on end as a kid. For me, the house could get a bit claustrophobic. I had no real boundaries and would be out until ten o'clock every night from a very young age. Football was my sanctuary.

Elliott Street and the surrounding roads were very vibrant, very diverse. I had freedom and loads of friends. There was

Eamonn Kelly, Rodney Tricker, David and Grant Burroughs, Gary De'Ath, Pasquale Iachetta, who I'm still best mates with now, and many more.

We'd play curbsies and posty. The rules of posty were simple: one touch, hit the lamp-post and you stay in. Strike that lamp-post at just the right angle and the ball could end up all the way down the road. So many windows would get smashed before we all ran off. We were all little rascals around that area. Not bad kids, just little scallywags.

During the school holidays we'd all go over to Portman Road to watch the first-team players train on the practice pitch where the astroturf is now. A chance to watch my heroes, yes, but there was an added motivation. I wanted to get my hands on a football.

I had a plan. Professionals don't shoot over a fence that high, I knew that, but on a rare occasion I'd seen the ball hit the top of the crossbar hard and be diverted up and out into the road. I had to be ready for that. Patience was the key. I'd wait all day if I had to.

When that moment finally arrived, I'd keep my eyes on the prize, like a wicketkeeper in cricket, and snaffle it straight under my top before the other four or five kids could react. Before the players and staff had finished their shouts of 'oi, get back here!' I was gone. In '81, when those iconic adidas Tango balls came out, I'd wait and wait for hours to get my hands on one of those.

After a while the staff started to cotton on, so I had to try and disguise myself a bit, putting on a hat and loitering by different parts of the fence. That was the Elliott Street

mentality – you get what you can and face the consequences if you're caught.

It was a sheltered life. I wasn't really learning anything. I was just stuck. Go out, play football, come home. No holidays, no visiting other family. That's probably why I became so good at football. That was all I had.

My football education came on Alderman Park Rec, just behind the North Stand. Everyone from the area would congregate there, all ages, and there'd always be enough for 11-a-side. The big boys picked the teams. I wasn't too flash. It wasn't my style to go out there and try to be the top boy. If I nutmegged someone or tried to go past someone with a stepover I don't think that would have gone down too well. I didn't want people to get the hump with me, so I just got it and passed it on. I kept my game pretty simple.

That meant I learned receiving skills. I always gave myself three options – can you pass back, can you go sideways, can you go forwards? Being on the half turn, rather than facing one way and not knowing what's coming behind you, was a form of protection. That way I couldn't get kicked. When they realised they couldn't kick me, they started to drop off. Then, recognising that I was being afforded extra time and space, I started having more than one touch and trying different things. They didn't know what to do with me. It was all development.

The first bit became my game really. Awareness, always on the half turn, one-touch passing. Nowadays, in academies, that's all they teach. But that was a self-taught skill for me and I think it enabled me to think for myself more when I did become a professional.

It wasn't just on the rec that we played. Carl and Steve David, who I'm still good friends with today, lived just the other side of London Road on Surrey Road. They had a concrete area near their house that everyone played five-a-side on – we all called it 'The Dump'. There was a little car park area we played on too. It was quite territorial. The 13- and 14-years-olds ran it and us seven- and eight-year-olds had to patiently wait our turn to stage a game or, on the odd occasion, be asked to join in to make up the numbers.

Some of the best footballers in the world learned the game on the streets. The South Americans are a prime example of that. In England we had Wayne Rooney. Those sorts of players are just wired differently. They're mentally strong because they were left on their own to fight. From a young age you learn through trial and error. I think I got a bit of that.

I went to Westbridge Primary School on the Old London Road from the age of three to six. I was meant to be there longer, but when my sister moved school I was a mess – Mum says I was just crying all the time – so in the end I got transferred to Ranelagh Road to be with her. I loved that school. It had a little outdoor swimming pool and a lovely concrete playground with a pitch marked out and goals at either end.

That's all I needed. Happy days.

That was a diverse school with lots of different nationalities. I don't think many of us were destined for Oxford or Cambridge, but we had loads of good athletes and at the annual Inter Schools' Sports Day held at Sprites Lane we'd always clean up. I was captain and won the 100m and

200m. Our girls did pretty good too. I remember us coming back on the bus celebrating with the cup.

It was football I was obsessed with, though. As well as playing for the school, I played for the 7th Boys' Brigade on Kelly Road. We won a competition and Ipswich midfielder Brian Talbot gave us the trophy. That was two bits of silverware in quick succession. That first bit of success tasted sweet and I craved more.

After that I had a choice whether to go to Stoke Park or Chantry High School. My best friend, Pasquale, he went to Stoke Park, but my mum said I was going to Chantry. I was gutted. There were more tears over that.

No father figure, a mum having her struggles, no extended family, no real boundaries, hanging about with my scallywag mates and showing little interest in school. It's easy to come to the conclusion that had I not made it in football I might have fallen in with the wrong crowd and gone down a bad route. I really don't think I was that way inclined, though, to be honest.

Academically I wasn't interested, but I wasn't a troublemaker either. I was painfully quiet, observing, just trying to work things out. Socially I was rubbish because I'd not really developed those skills.

It wasn't an unhappy childhood at all. I'm just not sure it prepared me particularly well for what was ahead.