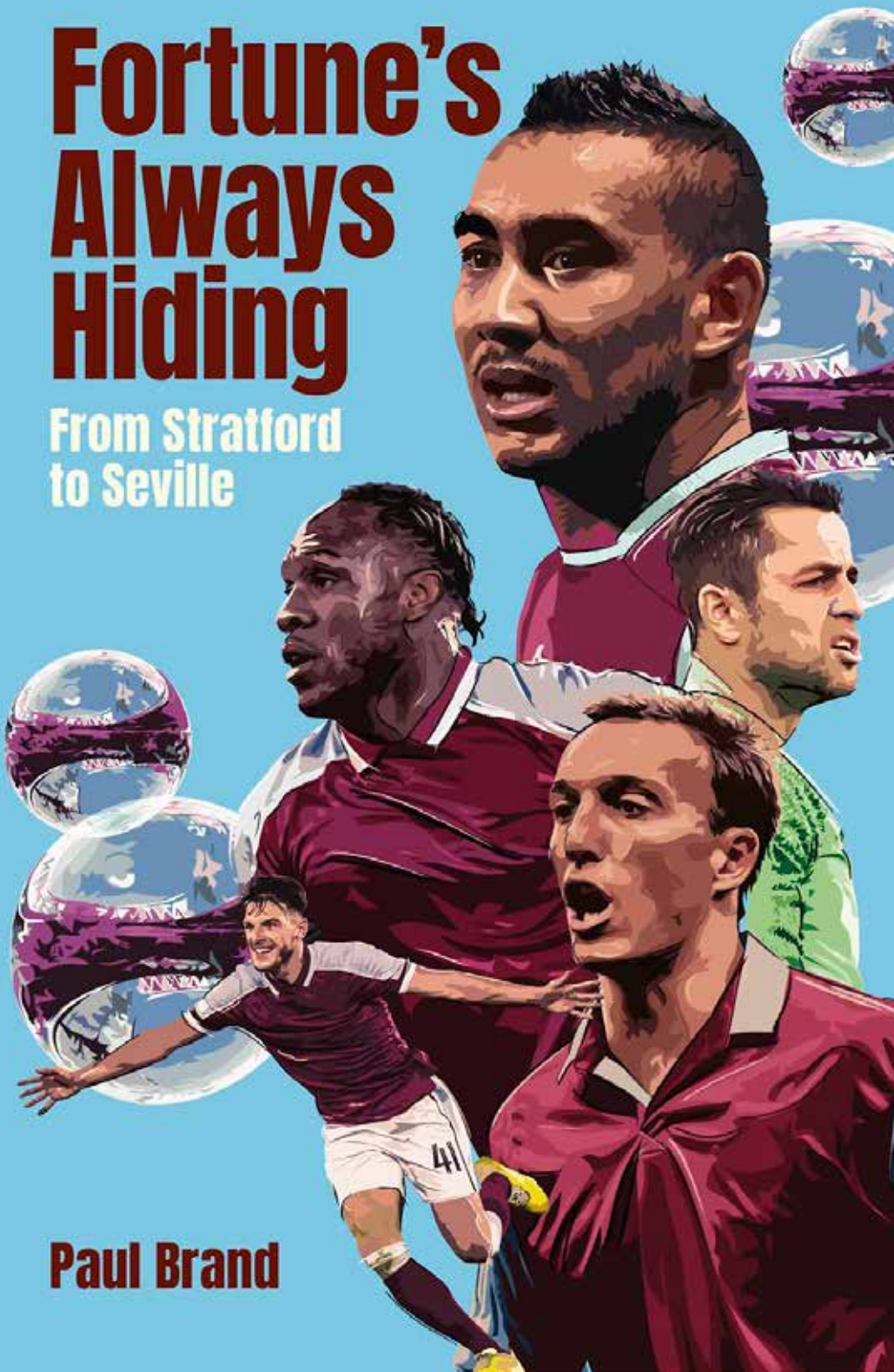


Fortune's Always Hiding

From Stratford
to Seville



Paul Brand

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to Seville**

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Year Zero – 2015/16

Splitting Heirs

18 September 2015

Aside from the inevitable prelude of death, an inheritance carries largely positive connotations of treasured belongings and new-found riches. But inheriting an affection for a football team is more often a curse, carrying failure, disappointment and heartache. And it's tantamount to child cruelty, inflicting a life sentence of supporting West Ham on to an unknowing infant.

I was born in late 1980 so am yet to see us lift a trophy, save the widely ridiculed Intertoto Cup (I'm also discounting play-off wins because, as jubilatory as winning the richest match in football might be, they're essentially second-tier bronze-medal matches). That Gerrard equaliser in injury time of the 2006 FA Cup Final remains the most painful moment of my life, and I happened to need airlifting to hospital earlier this year! I'd like to be able to blame my father for 30-plus years of suffering but, beyond encouraging an interest in football, he's not the one responsible. It was my own choice. At least to an extent it was; neither as a foetus nor as a toddler did I have much say in picking a house on the Essex-East

London borders. You see, as far as I'm concerned, there are only two valid reasons for supporting a sports team: the first, familial allegiance, was in my case overridden by the second, geography. When I asked at the age of seven who our local team was, and Dad answered 'West Ham', a seed was sown.

Things could have been different. He might have said Dagenham & Redbridge. Or Hornchurch, depending on how low down the football pyramid he was prepared to go. But he stuck to teams with league status and, of my own volition, I became a West Ham fan. In doing so I deviated from family tradition, for I'm descended from a clan of masochists who have had it even worse than me by backing Fulham. The words 'West Ham' must have stuck in my father's throat, for Alan Taylor is his Steven Gerrard, ruining Cup Final Day in 1975. He's suffered 60-plus years *sans* success, and my two grandfathers, who were also Fulham fans, even longer, albeit alleviated by that Irons-engineered World Cup victory in '66.

The thorny issue of family bonds versus geographical proximity rears its head again now that my own son approaches his first birthday. Should I buy him a little West Ham replica kit? Obviously I'd like him to follow West Ham. Misery loves company. But having relocated to Chester, they're not his local team as they were mine. Do I guide him towards the Olympic Stadium, or allow him to veer off in his own direction as I did? I was allowed to stray. Until Dad took me to Craven Cottage (post-visiting Upton Park) I thought Fulham was just the name of the push-along toy dog that I'd long outgrown and had been banished to the loft along with other things we no longer had any use for. This shaggy metaphor probably

captures the old man's feelings towards Fulham FC as they languished unloved in the old Fourth Division. We all want our children to be happy, and West Ham represented a much greater shot at happiness, fresh off our highest-ever league finish.

But even with the promise of a bright future ahead in Stratford, looking instead towards Salford would surely gift my boy the greatest chance of tasting success. Of course this might be wrongly equating glory-hunting with happiness. Already one senses a hollowness to Manchester City's victories as hope has morphed into expectation. For most sets of supporters, a League Cup run is like the search for the Holy Grail, and actually getting your hands on it would spark wild celebrations, the memory of which would be cherished forever. The big boys, meanwhile, treat it as a mere consolation prize.

Our location in the north-west offers a choice of so-called big clubs, equidistant as we are between Manchester and Liverpool. The red half of Merseyside might be seen as offering the best of both worlds since my wife is a Scouse lass with Anfield-going relatives, although she herself is pretty much disinterested in the 'beautiful game' and would probably declare herself a Hammerette thanks to my influence. Opting for Liverpool would be quite apt, a deliverance of karma and the sins of the father being visited back upon him following those torturous cup finals of 1975 and 2006.

An alternative that would broach no complaint from me is choosing to support Chester. As the Boleyn was from my previous home, the Deva Stadium is within walking distance of our home now. Emotional investment could be rewarded with a return to the Football League or an

FA Cup giant-killing (knowing us, against the mighty Hammers!), which would measure as high on the Richter scale as winning the competition would for us. I'm a strong believer that supporting smaller clubs bequeaths a certain romance, not to mention mental fortitude.

I suppose the ideal course is that my offspring's loyalty to West Ham is taken as given, never questioned but not forced on to him either. The process of good old-fashioned indoctrination has already been started by his grandmother (my mother), who bought him West Ham coats and bibs. She always endorsed my own support for West Ham, I think out of spite to my father for devoting a bit too much time to sport in general, if not Fulham. And that was pre-Sky Sports, so I might want to rein in my own consumption so as not to be on shaky ground with the missus! Buying him the kit won't imprint the Irons on his soul but it's a start in forging a bond. I'm not going to go as far as prising his eyes open *Clockwork Orange*-style and making him watch *Upton Park's 100 Greatest Goals* on repeat, although that might be fitting revenge for the past 12 months of sleep deprivation!

Hopefully he'll be a happy Hammer and we'll get to enjoy successes together rather than endure relegations. But whatever club he chooses, even if he shuns football entirely, I'll find solace in the thought that it could be worse: rather than moving a couple of hundred miles, I might have moved just a couple of miles north and thus presented him with the legitimate option of being a Spurs fan.

MC 1-2 WTF

20 September 2015

[Man City 1-2 West Ham]

Team	P	GD	Pts	Form
Man City	6	10	15	WWWWL
West Ham	6	6	12	LLWWW
Leicester	6	4	12	WDDWD
Man Utd	5	3	10	WWDLW
Arsenal	6	0	10	WDWWL
Everton	6	3	9	WLDWD

Did anyone actually enjoy the match yesterday? I mean, from the 94th minute on it was absolutely brilliant, but the preceding 60 minutes felt like a heart attack waiting to happen! Maybe I'm just a particularly nervous spectator, and it was certainly exhilarating even if it didn't quite meet my definition of enjoyable.

One thought that had been running through my head in the early stages of this season and that I now feel compelled to share is the bold prediction that there will be an interloper in the top four come May. I refrained from writing this last night lest I be accused of intoxication (I did indeed have a stiff whisky to celebrate/calm my nerves!), and I may well be suffering from vertigo, but beating the champions-elect encouraged the belief that it could *possibly* be West Ham.

Let's be clear, this isn't a roar of 'Champions League here we come'. Past false dawns have taught me to be pessimistic and I'd still be delighted with a top-half finish and an exciting cup run.

Improvements in the middle echelons of the Premier League, notably the strengthened squads of Stoke, Palace and ourselves, have been well documented elsewhere and the league is expected to be more condensed than ever before. And as Slaven Bilić's Claret-and-Blue Army have

spectacularly proven, the big boys are beatable, even on their own turf.

With their unrivalled investment (the starting XI we overcame was the most expensive ever assembled) and an otherwise bright start to the domestic season, I fully expect City to recover from the bloodied nose we dealt them and I wouldn't be surprised to see them stay atop the Premier League summit all season. Chelsea should be pushing them close and the sole downside of yesterday's result is that we've done the Darker Shade of Blues a favour in reducing their arrears. Conversely, had we maintained our dismal home form and lost to Newcastle on Monday night [2-0], the consolation I had prepared was that Chelsea would have plummeted into the relegation zone, which indicates how far off the pace they are. However, it would still be pie-in-the-sky thinking to suggest we have any chance of finishing above them.

Arsenal were my other title contenders at the start of the season but we quickly exposed their old frailties [Arsenal 0-2 West Ham]. Wenger was quoted on Friday as saying, 'You have to score the perfect goal to beat Čech,' which will come as news to Kouyaté and Zárate! But if it's same old, same old for Arsenal, then it goes without saying that they'll finish third.

That leaves one space to be filled in the top four. Manchester United seem the obvious contenders but they also appear immensely fallible these days. As with Big Fat Sam at the Boleyn, Van Gaal isn't on the same wavelength as the Old Trafford crowd and there are bust-ups simmering that could derail their campaign. Of the other usual suspects, Liverpool and Spurs are locked in a state of perpetual transition that they look incapable of

moving on from. If I were a betting man then I might back Everton for that final Champions League spot – a solid, settled team with some strength in depth and an eminently sensible manager.

Once can be dismissed as lucky, twice as fortunate, but three remarkable away wins [see also Liverpool 0-3 West Ham] ... Naturally they've raised hopes that we might enjoy a glorious season but, as Bilić wisely instructed in light of the Arsenal and Europa League matches, we shouldn't get too high after positive results or too low after negative ones. A fiver on us exiting the Capital One Cup at the hands of fellow high-flyers Leicester appears a safe bet right now.

[Leicester 2-1 West Ham, League Cup third round]

Have Boots, Will Travel

24 September 2015

The breaking news that Carlton Cole is set to sign for Scottish champions Celtic (presumably to play football and not to run their social media, despite providing far more entertainment on Twitter than on the pitch in recent years) begs the question, far more pressing than how the game north of the border has reached such a perilous state: just how far north would I have to move to make it as a top-level footballer?

I cling forlornly to the belief that I always could have made it, if only I'd been spotted at the right age. Unfortunately I had the competitive disadvantage of coming from a hotbed of talent. In my school year, playing in my local league were John Terry, Ledley King, Bobby Zamora, JIloyd Samuel, Paul Konchesky and Fitz Hall. And they all played for the same team, Senrab. And,

believe it or not, Comet were better! In hindsight, those 13-0 thumpings that had ten-year-old me on the verge of tears over Sunday lunch probably represented the highlight of my footballing career, an opportunity to share the pitch with players who would one day fulfil every schoolboy's dream of pulling on an England shirt and gracing the turf of Wembley. Maybe if I'd grown up in Stirling I'd have stood a better chance of standing out and being talent-spotted.

So, besides learning earlier than most what an irritant JT could be, my youth was lost to thrashings that damaged my football prospects but encouraged me instead to concentrate on the academic side of things, leading to the University of Warwick. There I learned just how bad most boffins are at sport, making me look like Zidane in comparison as I averaged two goals a game in the halls league and comfortably won a Sciences six-a-side tournament with the Sugar Daddies, diligently named after the nightclub at which we imbibed Vodka Red Bulls at 50p a shot the night before. Confidence boosted, the realisation that I was no longer eligible for England U21s brought with it a pang of remorse. Maybe if I'd attended the University of St Andrews I might have been papped dumping Prince William on his arse during a kickabout and the professional clubs would have wondered who this whizz they'd overlooked was ...

Rags to riches tales such as Jamie Vardy's and our own Michail Antonio's, slowly working his way up from playing non-league with Tooting & Mitcham, mean that hope springs eternal but, at the age of 34 and having not kicked a ball in nine months, I think I'm ready to concede that it's never gonna happen. But if Kevin Nolan pitches

up playing Champions League for Zenit St Petersburg or any other team higher up the lines of latitude, then I'm relocating to Greenland to resurrect my own dreams of footballing glory.

Job Description: Carefully Handle 50,000+ Dreams on a Weekly Basis

25 September 2015

Once upon a time I believed that managers made little or no difference to their team's fortunes. Then along came Glenn Roeder and Avram Grant who, in the harshest manner imaginable, taught me the error of my ways. I continue to believe that the manager's influence is often overstated, particularly by the national media, which caricatures the Premier League's protagonists as 'the special one' or 'the wally with the broolly', when the truth is undoubtedly more nuanced. But, especially in the wake of Big Sam, I'm willing to concede that the manager's role is an important one. So, here's my attempt at answering the \$64,000 question: what makes a good manager, and have we found one in Slaven Bilić?

In fairness to Roeder and Grant, both seemed thoroughly decent people who perhaps weren't suited to the cut-throat world of football management, in which it sometimes seems that you have to be a tyrant, like Fergie, or an intolerable prick, like Mourinho, if you want to prosper. Nice guys finish last, although Eddie Howe, Garry Monk and Roberto Martínez are among a few gallantly working to dispel this myth, even if they remain some way off finishing first.

If we're to accept that statistics show Mourinho to be the best, does that mean he'd be welcome at any club?

Hand on my heart, I can say that I wouldn't want him at West Ham. At least not the latest model of Mourinho. When he first arrived at Stamford Bridge a decade ago, he was already big-headed, dubbing himself 'the special one' before the tabloids got there, but he did so with a knowing smirk that made his outlandish arrogance bearable to most neutrals, even us West Ham fans, who are naturally disinclined towards anyone calling SW6 home. Even when being rude or obstinate, his actions would reach the height of farce, such as when he was allegedly smuggled into the Champions League quarter-final tie with Bayern in a laundry basket in order to beat his self-inflicted touchline ban, which made it impossible to think of him as 'an enemy of football'.

But since returning to English football in 2013, admittedly after even more success in Italy and Spain, he seems to have bought into his own myth, with his second spell at Chelsea characterised by the petulance that helped bring a premature end to his first. Like it or not, in this media-saturated age, a manager's job goes beyond tactics and team talks; a manager is its club's public figurehead. Abramovich reportedly doesn't take kindly to his frontman abusing the medical staff but Mourinho will be indulged his outbursts and myopic viewpoints on *Match of the Day* as long as he's able to haul his team back into title contention.

Personally, I'd prefer the club's spokesperson to be more judicious, and therefore appreciate that Slaven is more eloquent than most, even in his second language. As spokesperson, it's also imperative that a manager understands the ethos of the club he represents, which is where Bilić has a big head start on Allardyce. I'm not a Big Sam hater. Whatever our most vocal fans might shout,

he's a good pragmatic manager with a strong track record and was probably exactly what we needed at the time. We took our medicine but it would have been easier to swallow if he hadn't so forcefully denigrated the 'West Ham Way'.

For Sam and Sir Alex and anyone else who proclaims not to understand what this is, I'll attempt to explain in the simplest terms: passing football, with an emphasis on entertainment. The vast majority of West Ham fans know that trophies are out of reach, although it goes without saying that we'd still like to have a damn good go at winning them and we'll accept any league finish that doesn't result in the tears of relegation, as long as we're entertained along the way. Then there's the academy and the long-held tenet that homegrown youth deserves a chance. Handing 16-year-old Reece Oxford his league debut, away to Arsenal no less, was Bilić underlining that he knows all about our club, having of course served as a player under Harry Redknapp. 'Arry, for all his faults, would have tutored him well, having been a product of the academy himself. Although out of fashion, I like the idea of appointing from within because it breeds a consistent philosophy and I see it as a point of pride that the club has had just 15 full-time managers in its long history.

The point being made, rather long-windedly, is that the blend of club and manager, not to mention players, is far more important than anything one individual can bring. For all his love of Opta data and talk of maximising performance, when Big Sam was unable to understand the basic concept behind the club, it always made me question whether he could ever really be much of a tactical genius. And in the words of the late great Brian Clough, whose antics put Mourinho to shame, 'There's so much

crap talked about tactics.' Even if a manager does possess genuinely revolutionary ideas, good luck trying to explain them to John Terry or Ashley Cole!

In short, I'm happy with the appointment of Slaven and what I've seen since he's taken charge further convinces me that he and West Ham will be a good fit. It's a shame that he wasn't regarded as the automatic choice when we parted ways with Allardyce; I can see the appeal of some of the other contenders and our supposed first choice was undoubtedly a big name, hence his final destination, but in terms of his footballing philosophy Rafael Benítez is basically Sam on steroids.

Back to the bigger question: what makes a good manager? In conclusion, I'm buggered if I know, but not as buggered as Football League chairmen, who on average pay for a new one every 14 months.

Ignoble Omission

2 October 2015

Poor Mark Noble. Every international break, when the likes of Darren Randolph, Joey O'Brien and James Collins desert club for country, he remains rooted in Chadwell Heath. He couldn't be blamed for taking the well-trodden path of the average (in more than one sense of the word) Premier League player and opting to play for the Republic of Ireland, based on ancestral ties, regardless of whether or not he's ever actually set foot on the Emerald Isle. But I'd like to think he's better than that, both in terms of quality and in treating international representation as a sacred birthright rather than a matter of convenience.

There's a section of the Irons support that's started to slander Noble recently, mainly in the belief that he doesn't

merit automatic selection if we hope to move to the next level and be competing for a European place. But in any team aiming to play at a high level, no one warrants an unchallenged place. His Canning Town roots have even been used as a stick to beat him with – ‘He’s only been made captain coz he’s a local lad!’ With some people you’re damned either way.

The sloppy cross-field pass that gifted Robbie Brady Norwich’s first goal last weekend [West Ham 2-2 Norwich] provided ammunition for his detractors, but it was uncharacteristic of his fine early-season form. Even following that error, two Sky Sports pundits (not the greatest purveyors of wisdom and rationality, I know) included him in their team of the season so far and he’s regularly found towards the top of the statistical league tables for passing, tackling and distance covered. I wouldn’t disagree with some of the claims being made for Winston Reid to be club captain instead but Noble embodies a lot of what’s good about our club and you can’t go too far wrong with Mr Reliable, producing 7.5/8 out of 10 performances every week, even if he’s rarely the star man.

Personally I wouldn’t swap Noble for one of our old boys who appears to have re-established his place in the national squad. He might not match Michael Carrick for range of passing but Carrick somehow manages to disguise floating about in front of the back four without ever putting his foot in as elegant positional play. Noble is a more complete midfielder who operated in the channels and then went box-to-box before improving immeasurably as a defensive shield after a couple of seasons spent with Scotty Parker. Perhaps Noble’s big problem, and the reason

that England recognition continues to elude him, is that he's a jack of all trades, master of none.

Still, when you look at some of the other capped midfielders in recent years, he has a right to feel aggrieved at not receiving the call: Leon Osman (a similarly tidy footballer who should be Noble's role model for not losing hope), Jonjo Shelvey, Jake Livermore, Tom Huddlestone ... then we come to Ryan Mason, who elbowed his way into the squad on the basis of half a season's good performances, and now Dele Alli gets promoted above him based on three bright shows! Not that Alli doesn't display great potential, but isn't the under-21 team designed for nurturing youthful promise and the senior squad reserved for proven performers?

It's common practice for members of early-season surprise packages to earn that England call, hence Ryan Bertrand and Nathaniel Clyne of Southampton breaking into the squad this time last year. We're third, and ... nothing! Upton Park ought to be a regular destination for Roy Hodgson this season to check on the form of Cresswell, Jenkinson, Tomkins and a fit-again Carroll, as well as Noble. Then again, based on current form, maybe he's best sticking to our away matches.

As news of the latest England squad broke yesterday, Nobes could be forgiven for wearing an even more perplexed look than he did after being farcically sent off against Liverpool. But, in consolation, he's keeping good company with Billy Bonds, another Hammers captain who was unfairly overlooked for international duty. If he manages to attain Bonzo's legendary status then he can retire content, regardless of whether or not he ever gets to wear the Three Lions.

England Squad – Euro 2016 Qualifiers: Estonia (H), Lithuania (A)

Goalkeepers Jack Butland (Stoke City), Joe Hart (Manchester City), Tom Heaton (Burnley)

Defenders Ryan Bertrand (Southampton), Gary Cahill (Chelsea), Nathaniel Clyne (Liverpool), Kieran Gibbs (Arsenal), Phil Jagielka (Everton), Phil Jones (Manchester United), Chris Smalling (Manchester United), John Stones (Everton)

Midfielders Dele Alli (Tottenham Hotspur), Ross Barkley (Everton), Michael Carrick (Manchester United), Adam Lallana (Liverpool), James Milner (Liverpool), Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain (Arsenal), Jonjo Shelvey (Swansea City), Raheem Sterling (Manchester City)

Forwards Danny Ings (Liverpool), Harry Kane (Tottenham Hotspur), Wayne Rooney (Manchester United), Jamie Vardy (Leicester City), Theo Walcott (Arsenal)

The Sick Note Blues

5 October 2015

I'm crocked. Have been since January when my scooter came off worse in a high-speed altercation with a Land Rover, which is presumably why sportsmen seem to be contractually obliged to drive heavy-duty vehicles and are banned from two wheels, although former Fulham right-back Moritz Volz endeared himself to many a London commuter and no doubt gave manager Roy Hodgson palpitations by cycling to home matches. In my motoring mishap I managed to break multiple bones but not the notorious metatarsal, which is where my half-baked analogy with football's walking wounded begins ...

The metatarsal, of course, shot to fame on the eve of the 2002 World Cup thanks to David Beckham and has since enjoyed reprise appearances in the careers of Gary Neville, Wayne Rooney, John Terry, Michael Owen and Ledley King, although in the case of the latter two it was very much a cameo, with the hamstrings and knees the headline injuries. This English curse of the metatarsal is striking in two respects. First, the innocuousness of its occurrences, far closer (at least to the untrained eye) to having your toe trod on than the horrific collisions that caused David Busst or Luke Shaw's leg-breaks. Second, the injury's complete abstention from the world of soccer until the noughties; one wonders whether the metatarsal is a product of Darwinian evolution, an anatomical mutation designed to improve free-kick taking that lay undiscovered until Beckham brought it to everyone's attention.

Perhaps because of its diminutive dimensions, perhaps because of its association with sarong-wearing Mr Spice, a fractured metatarsal fails to attract too much compassion from the average spectator. A break to the more prominent tibia or fibula, on the other hand, perhaps also because it's more inconveniently incapacitating in everyday life, is a valid reason for commiseration. Here I have some sympathy for the metatarsal: size isn't everything. The filthy-minded among you can stifle your laughs. I'm referring to the tympanic membrane, which does admittedly sound a bit pervy. Indeed, the only serious ongoing ill-effect I'm feeling from my accident is due to the perversion of this teeny inner ear tissue after it was shunted out of place. In the aftermath of my own impairment, I'm more sympathetic towards 'smaller', less conventional injuries that don't carry noticeably visible scars.