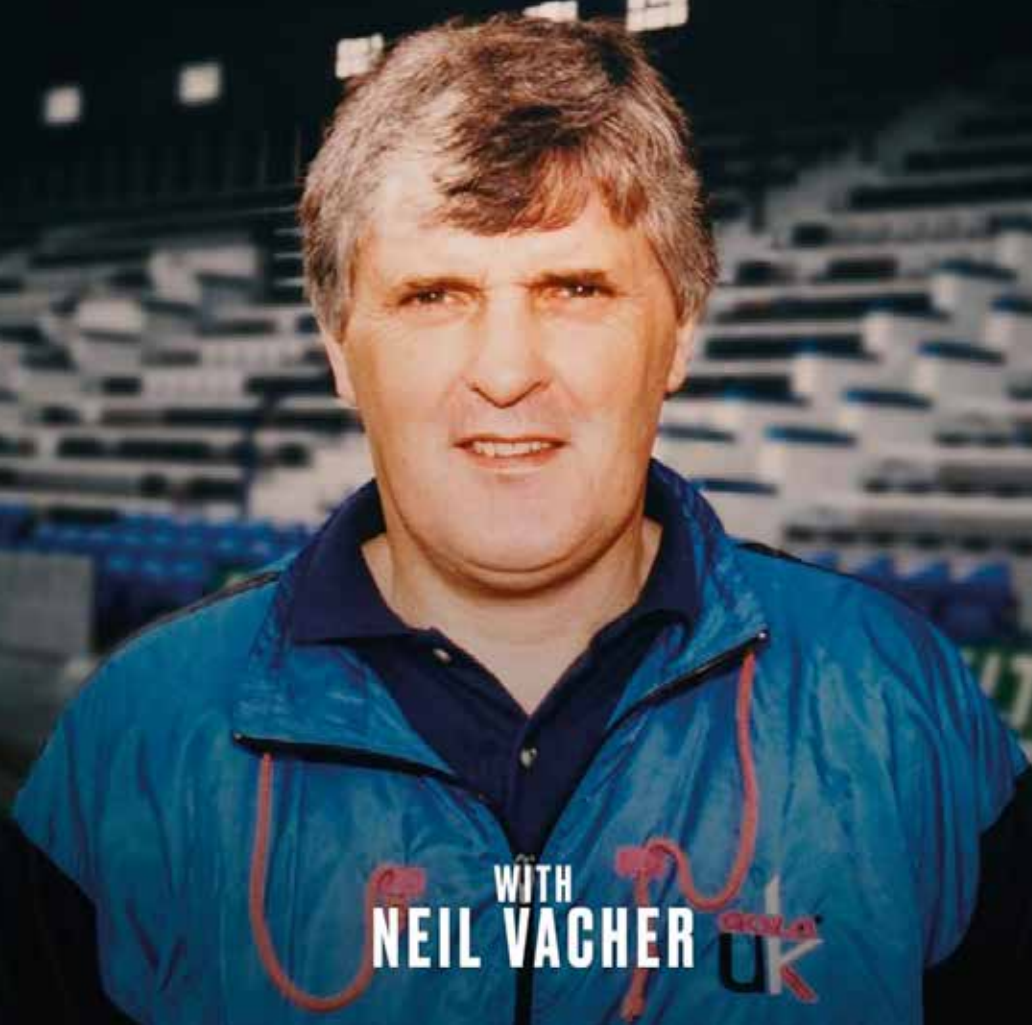


JOHN SAINTY

LAST MAN STANDING

from Saint to Saints and Beyond



WITH
NEIL VACHER

uk

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CONTENTS

Dedication	7
Foreword By Dennis Tueart	9
Introduction by Lindsay Sainty.	11
My Chance to Meet a Boyhood Hero	15
My Dad.	18
My Dad.	19
1. First Steps	21
2. Journey to the Stars	31
3. Back Down to Earth	47
4. A Fresh Start by the Seaside	63
5. My Footballing Disaster!.	86
6. In Tune with the Canaries	94
7. Citizen Sainty	118
8. Tricky Times at Chester and Burnley	138
9. The Pub Landlord	149
10. Lessons in Life with Danny Bergara.	155
11. Another Door Opens	182
12. Moving to Southampton	203
13. Academy Director	210
14. The End at Southampton	228
15. On My Travels	240
16. A World Away from Football	249
17. The Impact of Injuries	256
18. And Another Thing	261
Appendix	268
Acknowledgements	269
Bibliography	270

FIRST STEPS

WHO WOULD have thought that a boy from Poplar in London's East End would one day have the privilege of playing, training and coaching football alongside so many great legends in the game, of being involved in some magical moments, travelling to amazing countries and working with the truly memorable Danny Bergara, one of the first international coaches/managers to be appointed in England. But I am getting ahead of myself, so here is where it all began.

I was born in Bow Hospital, East London to Mum, Lillas, and Dad, Bert, on 24 March 1946 and my first home was a flat in Poplar, which we shared with my 'Little Nan', her sister, Aunt 'Tilly Whip', and my mother's two brothers, Albert and Bertie. It was all very crowded, but no one ever complained. Just like the opening scene in the BBC TV series *Call the Midwife*, I remember the view from our back window was often dominated by the sight of a large ship in dock, the size of which seemed to overshadow all the other buildings in the area.

From Monday to Friday, Dad would cycle to work in East India Docks. Uncle Bertie also worked in the docks, whilst Uncle Albert was a barge builder on the Thames. Bertie had a habit of bringing all sorts of goodies home because his philosophy was

'if it's not screwed down take it, if it is, find a screwdriver!' He was a loveable rogue.

A very important item in the household was my dad's docker's hook. This item was precious as, without it, Dad could not work. I remember it well, a light, coloured wooden handle, a little longer in length than a man's hand with an S-shaped hook hanging below to enable you to grab the bales from the holds of the ship. Dad kept the hook hanging from a belt around his waist and it was certainly not to be tampered with.

Life was not always easy for my parents as they were both extremely hard-working. Dad had to make sure he arrived early for work each day as the amount of work available depended on how many ships were in dock and how many men were needed to unload them. It paid to try to get as near to the front of the queue as possible because those not required were sent home without pay. Fortunately, I don't have too many memories of him returning home early, but it was always a relief to set off for school without seeing him return.

I remember every Sunday the 'Winkle Man' would call round. So, winkles for tea, which I loved, and many a Sunday evening we would sit round and play cards. My dad always loved to cheat! My only pet as a kid was a budgerigar we called 'Cocky'; he lived a long time as far as I remember, although I was always frightened that he might escape and fly away.

When I was around seven years of age, we moved to a prefab in Dagenham, Essex. Mum got a job in a local factory which made doors, but Dad now had a much longer journey to work and bought a Lambretta scooter, quite the rage then, and a small car, which he would only use on the weekend. I would never miss an opportunity to take the Lambretta out if I could get

away with it and the crash helmet I wore was a perfect disguise; bearing in mind that I was big for my age, I could get away with looking as though I was legally old enough to drive. Prior to having the car, as Mum and Dad worked Monday to Friday, our weekend routine would most often be the same. If I was lucky, I would be given two shillings to go to Saturday morning pictures instead of going shopping with Mum. I used to catch a bus to the cinema but craftily would walk back to Nan's using my return bus fare to buy chips. Another vivid memory of a Saturday morning was shopping in Crisp Street, well known in the East End, and buying pie and mash at the famous shop, Tubby Isaacs. That was not to be missed. For, as well as pie and mash, it was locally famed for jellied eels, which were delicious with plenty of vinegar and pepper. I still love both to this day.

Saturday afternoons saw us all take the trolley bus back to Poplar, having picked up some shopping for 'Little Nan' – she was less than 5ft tall, so hence the nickname – to return to the flat we left when I was small and where Nan and her siblings continued to live.

My dad's parents lived in Rainham, Essex and often visited us on Sundays, although sometimes Dad and I cycled the 14-mile round trip to go and see them.

It was Dad who initially wanted me to be a professional footballer, probably more than I did, and by the time I had reached five or six years old, he had already mapped out my career. I think he really hoped I would take a different path to working in the docks. At every opportunity he would take me over to the local park where we would kick the ball to each other for what seemed like hours on end. Dad never seemed to get fed up whereas I was always asking 'Can we go home now?'

Is tea ready?' But it was always Dad's decision when the session was to end.

I remember how Dad would kick the ball in all directions and sometimes he would point in one direction and see if I anticipated correctly and, if I did, he would often change direction so that I would have to go the other way and end up running three times as far as I originally intended. No wonder I often got fed up; only one of us was enjoying the session and it definitely wasn't me!

My first taste of professional football came when Dad took me to watch West Ham at Upton Park. We went to most of their Football League games. I think I would have been about seven years old and I remember the crowd would pass the kids down towards the front or sometimes, if we were late getting there, I remember being passed along towards the corner by the goal and tied on to the side posts of the surrounding fence for safety! How times change.

Dad was also very keen on tennis and, when we weren't playing or watching football, we would be out on the tennis court. I loved tennis and I became quite a handy player as a result, good enough to seriously consider taking it up instead of football a few years later. Apart from that, though, it was pretty much football all year round, even during our summer holidays when my parents regularly took me a few miles up the road to Seacroft Holiday Camp at Hemsby on Sea, near Great Yarmouth. Every Friday, there was a monumental football match against Hemsby Holiday Camp, which was situated 200 yards down the road. The game was always at their place because they had a better pitch and the whole camp would march in procession down the road with the football team at the head of the column. The rivalry between the two camps was unbelievable and these games

were uncompromising battles, but I am pleased to say my record was played five, won five.

I was always big as a youngster, perfect for a centre-half, and to begin with nobody would believe that I was only 12 years old, as I was already 5ft 6in tall. I still had to get my dad's permission to join in and play but prior to Friday's game there would be a series of trial games during the week at the respective camps to select the teams. Dad fancied himself as a bit of a player and would always play in these trial games. One year we were on opposing sides and when we tackled each other for the ball, the outcome was that Dad broke two ribs, which more or less put paid to his football career. Not a nice way to end a holiday but in Dad's eyes I could do no wrong on the football field, although he could occasionally be my greatest critic. He still found time to clean my boots and whiten my laces every week, though.

I enjoyed playing a variety of athletics and sports at school and soon became joint intermediate high jump champion, perhaps unsurprisingly given my height. My early football teachers were Mr Perryman at Campbell Middle School, Mr Winter at S.E.E. County Technical School and Mr Otigari at Barking District School. In all honesty, they didn't teach me very much about the game. Most of the time they would pick two teams and play an 11-a-side game for an hour. Norman Otigari also ran our local district team and we did train on a Friday night in the school gym, mostly physical exercises for half an hour before playing three-a-side for the second half an hour ahead of our game the following morning.

By the time I reached 12 years of age, I was already playing for Barking Boys under-13s, although I was actually in the under-12 age group. One day, Dad saw a man called Dicky Walker

watching one of our games from the touchline. Dicky had played professionally for West Ham, the team Dad supported, and he approached Dicky to ask if I could have a trial for the Hammers. Dad was disappointed when he said no, but the blow was slightly softened when he said I could have one with Tottenham Hotspur, as Dicky was by now working for them and not West Ham!

So, every school holiday, off I went to Spurs for some 'proper training' along with two other lads who played in the same Barking team. The Embery twins, William and Benjamin, affectionately known as Bill and Ben, were a year older but they always looked after me. I was extremely fortunate and privileged to have this opportunity at such a young age.

To get to White Hart Lane we had to first take a train to Barking, then another to South Tottenham before catching a bus or walking 20 minutes to reach the ground. We often walked if we had time to save the bus fare that we could claim as part of our expenses at the end of the week. Once we were there, we would be encouraged to practise our ball control and passing; one of the sayings that used to filter through at Tottenham was 'Can't pass, can't play.' These early training sessions consisted of playing the ball for hours, drilling it against the high brick wall that surrounded the car park, where the players and directors parked their big cars on matchdays. But it wasn't all about fun and playing football, we were also expected to help with other tasks around the ground and spent many an hour giving the railings on the terraces a fresh coat of paint.

At schoolboy level, I was playing between 60 and 80 games a season, usually at right half-back. I like to think I modelled myself on Tottenham and Northern Ireland defender Danny Blanchflower and, according to the local press at the time, I was one of the

'youngsters to watch'. In the opinion of reporter Willie Evans, the Barking and Dagenham area that had previously unearthed England internationals Jimmy Greaves and Terry Venables now had 'some other good 'uns coming along, including Dagenham centre-forward Tom Mcleod and inside-right Jimmy Scott, and another youngster you are sure to hear about – right-half John Sainty, the Barking captain, who is bound to get county honours'.

Nonetheless, any delusions I may have had about being an automatic selection for Barking were quashed after I failed to report for training the day before an English Schools' Trophy tie against Southend at Mayesbrook Park. Mr Otagiri decided that disciplinary action was required and, after taking a vote amongst my team-mates, I was suspended. The boys decided that if I could not be bothered to turn up for training, then I could not expect to play. Deservedly, I was made to sit in the stand and left to think about what I had done while watching Southend win 3-2.

We played in the Corinthian League and on occasions the opposition was not always that strong and I remember how, in the first game after my suspension, we sailed to an easy 10-0 victory against Barnes and Richmond. I was so delighted to be back playing, I scored a hat-trick. The game was watched by Terence Hopley of the *Dagenham Post* who reported: "Technical schoolboy John Sainty was undoubtedly the most powerful player on the field and yet he was the only one trying in the closing stages. But even he felt sorry for Barnes and blurted out a spontaneous "well done son" to the little full-back who was lucky enough to beat him on one occasion!"

I was certainly strongly built for my age and my first taste of higher grade football came when I was 13 years old and was

selected for the London Schools under-15 team to play Ebbw Vale. This was a big step up in age range for me and it seemed a different world travelling down to Wales by coach and staying in a hotel. Ronnie Harris, who had just signed for Chelsea, was also in the team and it's where I first met Alan Dennis, our captain, who later became my youth-team captain at Tottenham Hotspur. Alan was always immaculately turned out as if he had just stepped out of Burton's shop window! He even managed to avoid getting any mud splattered on his lilywhite Spurs shirt!

The following year, 1961, I captained Barking, Essex and London Schools. The best game we had was against a very strong Manchester Schools team, who were regarded as the cream of English football. Most of their players had already signed for one of the Manchester or Liverpool clubs and the game should have been played at White Hart Lane. However, because the pitch was unfit, it was staged at Spurs' Cheshunt training ground and we were brilliant that day, winning by something like ten goals to four.

After that game, I received a call-up as a travelling reserve for the England Schoolboy trials at Derby and eventually played in the second half of a game for the Rest against England. I must have done well as, four days later, Dicky Walker called round to our house and informed my parents that I had been selected to play at centre-half for the actual England Schools starting XI in their forthcoming match against Wales at Swansea. I would be following in the footsteps of another Barking boy, John O'Rourke, who, although a year older, was a good mate of mine and had been picked for the England side the previous year. Much later, we would become team-mates at Bournemouth.

The England party stayed in a hotel on the Mumbles and we beat Wales out of sight, 7-3, with John Sissons scoring a hat-trick. Mum and Dad were amongst the crowd of 10,000 at Vetch Field and I remember one of the press quotes after the game stated that 'Sainty's clever play helped to achieve the England's win'. My other main recollection of that trip is of our midfielder Trevor Dawkins sitting up in bed most of the night wearing his England cap and still having it on his head when he woke up in the morning! Of my team-mates for that game, John and Trevor were bound for West Ham along with Martin Britt, while Glyn Pardoe and Alan Ogle went to Manchester City, Howard Kendall to Preston and Peter Storey to Spurs' London rivals, Arsenal.

From there, it was a game for London Boys against Birmingham at Selhurst Park where the result was a 10-1 thrashing for an out-of-touch Birmingham side, in which I scored the seventh and tenth goals. I was then chosen to fly with a party of 15 lads to Hamburg for the England v Germany Schoolboy international in Hagen, but I did not make the starting XI and was also a reserve for the England v Eire international at Coventry.

Unfortunately, my England career did not progress beyond this, but it was good while it lasted. Possibly, being big was not so good now.

On the educational front, I was one of only four lads in my year at Campbell Middle School who passed the 13-plus exam. Of the other three, one was the headmaster's son, where a bit of nepotism may have crept in, and another one was a boy the head wanted to get rid of! As a result, I moved on to a new school, South-East Essex County Technical High, which proved

to be quite a mouthful whenever I mentioned it on numerous future CVs.

Educationally, I hated the place. I was supposed to make up two years, as all the other pupils in my class had been there since they passed their 11-plus exams. It was deemed that, academically, I was a late developer but, by the time I started there, I was almost certain that I was going to be offered an apprenticeship at Spurs, so unless the lesson was PE or some other sport, I was not that interested.

The school had a brilliant system in place which allowed you to 'sign out' if you had to go somewhere like the doctor or dentist during school time. I signed myself out of most lessons but not necessarily for these reasons – and got caught out a couple of times – but on my 15th birthday the school decided that, at my father's request and as I had a job to go to, I could leave a year early. I was on my way to Spurs.