"A beautifully written memoir of a life in modern sports journalism, *Living on the Deadline* is an evocative page-turner that provides a fascinating glimpse of another side of some of the world's biggest sporting events."

Oliver Holt, Daily Mirror Chief Sports Writer

LIVING ON THE DEADLINE

The inside stories, off-beat observations and global adventures of a top sports writer

Frank Malley

Foreword by Sir Bradley Wiggins

CONTENTS

Foreword by Sir Bradley Wiggins 7
Acknowledgements 9
Introduction 10
1. The Road From Wigan Pier 13
2. The First Post 21
3. Long Time No Sea 30
4. The Growler. 45
5. The Black Lubyanka 54
6. 'A Drop Or Two Of Acid' 61
7. Simply The Best 69
8. 'Je Cherche Hotel Qui S'appelle Whatsitsname' 77
9. 'Always Look On The Bright Side Of Life' 92
10. Game, Set And Match 97
11. The Hazy World Of Prince Edward 108
12. The Great, The Greater And The Greatest 116
13. 'Don't Help Me – I Live Here' 130
14. A World Of Wisdom 137
15. The Day The Earth Moved 143
16. My Part In Winning The World Cup 157
17. Sweet And Very, Very Sour 172
18. Ali And McEnroe Come To Dinner 180
19. What A Load Of Istanbul 191
20. Thanks For The Memories 197
21. 'We Love You Monty' 208
22. We're On Our Way To Wembley 227
23. The Reds And The Dead 239
24. You Can't See China From The Moon. 247
25. Merry Christmas – From Gordon And Sarah 261
26. The Hand Of Clod 276
27. A Mean-Spirited, Cynical, Disgrace Of A Football Match . 291
28. Return Of The Bean Counters 298
29. London Calling 302
30. I'm A Believer 315
Postscript 318
Bibliography 320

INTRODUCTION

AN English missionary alighted on a secretive and primitive tribe in the depths of the Aboriginal bush and after determining that they were a peaceful people he urged the chief to allow him to address them en masse.

'I come from a land where all men are treated equally,' he cried. 'I have come to tell you how you could have a better life.'

'Woolamoola!' replied one of the natives in the front row and the rest took up the chant. 'Woolamoola! Woolamoola!'

Encouraged by the enthusiastic response the missionary warmed to his task.

'I want to bring you schools so you can educate your children.'

'Woolamoola!'

'I want to show you that you do not have to be poor and hungry. You can have prosperity.'

'Woolamoola! Woolamoola! Woolamoola!'

The missionary beamed, his voice rising and his hopes soaring.

'You can live in peace and harmony where there is no difference between black and white and justice reigns supreme,' he shrieked.

And the cry came back louder than ever.

'Woolamoola!'

'And now,' said the delighted missionary, 'may I look at your cattle.'

'Of course,' said the Aboriginal chief, 'but careful you don't step in the woolamoola.'

Apologies for the old joke but it comes to mind every time I hear bankers arguing they deserve their massive bonuses or politicians saying their ambition is to serve the public when everyone knows most have a raison d'etre which starts and stops with number one. Mostly, however, I mouth 'Woolamoola!' when someone says sport doesn't matter.

I know we are all different and I have nothing against those who would not be seen dead at the races or watching the tennis and who doubtless believe modern-day football is the root of all evil and agree with Mark Twain's assertion that 'golf is a good walk spoiled'.

I just think they are wrong, which is probably not that surprising considering I have managed to carve out a career as a national sports journalist over the past 30 years.

Reporting the action. Interviewing the protagonists. Travelling the world. Leapfrogging from one huge sporting event to the next huge sporting event.

Is it the best job in the world? Who knows? That is subjective. After all, one man's computer programming heaven is another man's idea of terminal boredom.

There are probably people who have dreamed of being actuaries and traffic wardens and parole officers and weather forecasters since before they were able to say meteorologist. And good luck to them.

For me, however, there is nothing more thrilling than witnessing top-class sport and having the privileged position of the best seats to observe it.

As a sports journalist for the *Daily Express* and chief sports writer at the Press Association, the respected national press agency of the United Kingdom, travelling has been an integral part of my career, even if I did find it a tad annoying when my mother-in-law unfailingly urged me to have 'a good holiday' seemingly every time I left on a working trip which required so much as an overnight stay.

Perhaps that is why when anyone asked what I did for a living I was always slightly reticent with my answer.

The fact was that watching sport had always been my hobby as well as my job. If people really wanted me to elaborate I told them enthusiastically that I covered World Cups and Olympic Games and Ryder Cup golf and Champions League finals and England football and Six Nations championships and world title fights and FA Cup finals and other stuff such as the

Wimbledon tennis and Ashes Test matches and the occasional Grand Prix.

'What, off the telly or something?' they would ask.

'No, I go wherever the sport is being played in the world.'

'And they pay you to do that? That's not a real job.'

Except that it was. A job which was often fraught, invariably frantic, but never boring. A job in which from one week to the next I could never be entirely sure which town or country or continent I would wake up in with someone on the end of a telephone screaming for me to file copy.

'When do you need it?'

'Like now, like yesterday!'

I called it 'Living on the Deadline'. It was a wonderful job. Best of all, it was my job.

1

THE ROAD FROM WIGAN PIER

IT all began with a knock. 'Rat-a-tat-tat.' Actually it was more like three knocks 'Rat…rat…rat', slow and ponderous on account of the fact that a couple of butterflies were exercising their wings in my stomach and I was far from sure whether the door on which I was knocking was the gateway to the editor's office or the entrance to a broom cupboard.

Not a big problem except that I remembered the headmaster at my old school, a stern and imposing character, once storming into the class where a mini-riot was unfolding owing to the absence of a teacher and quelling it with one short bark and the steeliest of stares.

'The next person to make a sound gets detention for a week,' he snapped before backing out of the room as if keeping us covered SAS-style while reaching behind him for the door knob.

His next step took him straight into the cupboard containing the mop and brushes. He realised his mistake only when his heel kicked the bucket, at which point 20 pubescent fifth-formers collapsed into fits of laughter and the fearsome reputation of the strictest of disciplinarians was severely compromised.

I was determined to make a better impression as this was my first interview for a job as a reporter on a newspaper. On the *Evening Post and Chronicle*, the south-west edition of the *Lancashire Evening Post*. Or *Post 'n Chron* as they used to call it in Wigan.

The door opened slowly and a lived-in face with a brow so deeply lined you could have planted potatoes in it filled the gap.

'I've come for the inter…' I mouthed.

'All right, I've just won a million pounds on the pools,' interjected the face which I was to learn belonged to Michael Taylor, editor, chain smoker and a tall and heavy-set eccentric who shuffled along on the outside heels of his ten-year-old Hush Puppies.

Judging by what looked like a drip of egg on his tie he clearly also saved part of his breakfast for later but if his physical appearance was out of the Worzel Gummidge school of tailors his instructions were clipped and precise.

'Knock again. Come in. Interview me. I'll give you the story,' he said, handing me a notebook and pen.

Now those butterflies were really fluttering. It was 1976. The longest, hottest summer of the 20th century. A time of great music such as 'Bohemian Rhapsody' by Queen and not so great music such as 'Silly Love Songs' by Wings. The time of one of my all-time favourite pop songs, 'Show Me the Way' by Peter Frampton, the title of which crossed my mind as I stood outside that door.

I had graduated from Liverpool University a few months before with a degree in sociology, a subject which was not and still is not exactly guaranteed to enhance career prospects.

Visit any university toilet cubicle to this day and you are likely to find a scrawled arrow on the wall pointing to the toilet paper holder with graffiti to the effect, 'Sociology degrees. Please take one.' I had not worked for the university newspaper. Never tapped a typewriter. Never written a story. Never posed a question in a journalistic sense, unless you count asking the recently-retired Liverpool manager Bill Shankly, on a speaking engagement at the students' union in 1974, if he would have liked to have managed England. Unwittingly, I became the great Scotsman's straight man.

'Son,' growled Shankly in that deep Ayrshire brogue. 'If England were playing at the bottom of my garden I would draw the curtains.'

I loved reading newspapers and nurtured a notion that I might like to be a reporter, but it had nothing to do with uncovering

corruption or seeking the truth or any of those worthy ideals trotted out by lofty media types.

It was mostly because I could not think of anything else I wanted to do.

I knew I had been interested in English at school and possessed a handy A Level to prove it and although I flunked history I had always taken solace in the history master's remonstrations that my writing style was too fluffy for the rigorous evidence required in that academic subject.

'Thank you sir,' I used to reply when he scolded me for my 'too journalistic essays', a response which used to wind him up no end.

If I'm honest I quite fancied myself as the next Michael Parkinson, interviewing the great, the good and the not-so-good and I also admired Tony Wilson, a reporter and television presenter of varied talents on *Granada Reports* in Manchester in the 1970s and 1980s who became a legendary music impresario before his untimely death from cancer at the age of 57.

I had also heard that reporters spent a lot of time in the pub meeting contacts and chasing stories.

To a three-lectures-a-week sociology undergraduate I think the pub was the clincher. I could do that job.

Now I was about to find out. I entered the editor's office. Tidy. Minimalist, yet cavernous. The 'broom cupboard' was like Dr Who's TARDIS. Behind a huge desk sat Mr Taylor, hands behind his head, twiddling his thumbs, legs outstretched, unreadable eyes weighing me up.

I was beginning to think it was not the brightest idea to have dressed in a v-necked t-shirt and jeans and the washed-out jacket with deep, wide pockets, which had served me through my student years but could easily have doubled up as a window cleaner's uniform.

He motioned with the toe of one of his Hush Puppies to the chair opposite and I took a seat and smiled and waited politely for him to start the conversation. Nothing. Not a sound. Not a glimmer behind his thick, black-framed glasses.

It struck me that this was quite possibly the most miserable pools winner on the planet. Maybe that was the story.

'Incredible Sulk Wins a Million'. 'Mr Glum Pockets a Fortune'. I could see the headlines now. I can now, I couldn't then.

Instead I broke the insufferable silence with a cheery, 'I believe you've had a bit of a windfall.'

Mr Taylor nodded. 'Aye lad.'

'So what are you going to do with it?' I ventured.

'Dunno. Stick it in'th bank, I suppose,' said Mr Taylor, for some reason affecting a considerably thicker northern accent than he already possessed.

'What about a cruise? A new car? A big house? A mansion in the country? An apartment in…'

'Fancy theeself as an estate agent or something?' Mr Taylor said with heavy sarcasm.

I sensed it was not going that well but I stuck with it and managed to glean that the pools winner was a maths teacher with two grown-up children who drove a ten-year-old Ford Escort and had been looking forward to early retirement for years.

There was my story, I thought, followed by a pause after which Mr Taylor asked if I had finished my questions.

'Nowt else you want to ask?'

I paused for a moment, shook my head and he motioned over to a small desk in a little alcove at the side of the room and said, 'Right then, give me 400 words for the first edition, you've got 15 minutes.'

I can still remember jabbing one-fingered at the Olivetti Lettera 32 typewriter, the Colt 45 of the journalistic world, struggling to locate the backspace key and smearing so much blue carbon ink over my hands that I looked as if I had wandered into a tattoo parlour and asked for a Jackson Pollock. But I made the deadline and even stuck what I thought was a half-decent headline on top.

'Pools Win Adds Up To Golden Handshake For Maths Teacher'.

I handed the copy, the first of my 22 years, to Mr Taylor with a sense of achievement and a modicum of relief.

He sniffed, frowned, grimaced and sniffed some more as he read my story. I do not remember verbatim our conversation over the next ten minutes, it was more than 35 years ago after all, but the gist of it was not a million miles away from the following.

'Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?' Mr Taylor barked.

'Pardon?' I looked puzzled.

'Those are the tools of a reporter's trade,' he said. 'The five "Ws" and an "H". I don't give a fig if you have a degree in maths, English, history, outer Mongolian, breeding ferrets or even sociology. All I need to know is whether you can ask the right questions and get the right answers.

'Who is it about? What is the story behind the story? When did it take place? Where did it take place? Why did it happen? How did it happen?'

They were, as I was to learn, the fence posts of journalism, the principle being that each question starting with one of the 'Ws' or the 'H' should elicit a factual answer – facts necessary to include for a report to be considered complete. No question starting this way can be answered with a bald 'Yes' or 'No'.

It is a simple maxim but that day in 1976 I could not see what he was getting excited about. Okay, I had not asked him much about his family, I had forgotten to ask his age and not thought about inquiring about his address, which admittedly was and still is just about the first requirement of a reporter on a local newspaper. But I had dug out the right story and written a nice headline, hadn't I? 'No you haven't,' sniffed Mr Taylor. You've probably guessed by now, he sniffed a lot.

'You haven't uncovered half the story. You didn't ask about my wife, you haven't even got her name. You never discovered why I wanted to retire early. You don't know my age, my address. You didn't even ask why I looked so miserable when I had just won more money than you could shake a stick at. I should have been cracking jokes, cracking the champagne, not cracking the flags with the sourest of expressions.'

I didn't like to tell him what I was really thinking. Namely that I thought he was a miserable old sod, probably 50 going on 70 if

I'd bothered to ask, who years earlier doubtless harboured visions of being the editor of *The Times* and had ended up in Wigan on the south-west edition of a newspaper whose main HQ was 20 miles away in Preston. So I didn't.

But he insisted on telling me the real story.

Apparently, and I found out later he spun a version of this line to many would-be reporters, the 'pools winner's' wife had been cheating on her husband for the best part of ten years. She now lived with the local vicar turned successful businessman, drove an MG sports car, enjoyed three cruises a year and all the trappings of a luxury lifestyle.

But the intriguing bit, the story behind the story, was that she had demanded a divorce two years earlier and the decree nisi was expected to land on the mat any day soon. That very morning she had halted proceedings and rung him to offer congratulations on his windfall and inquire when she would be getting her half.

Quite whether Mr Taylor ever divulged that full convoluted fictional story to any of the countless would-be young reporters he must have interviewed, even if they had asked all the right questions, I seriously doubted.

At least, however, it had explained his demeanour which was not dissimilar to that of a blob fish, a creature which ekes out an existence 900 metres below the waves and which I urge you to Google if only to take a peek at, by some distance, the most miserable-looking creature on Earth. Apart, obviously, from me at the end of that particular afternoon, which to this day remains the most bizarre job interview I have ever experienced.

'Why do you want to be a journalist?' asked Mr Taylor.

I thought it best not to mention the pub nor the fact that I had just watched *All the President's Men*, the film about the Watergate scandal in which reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein followed the money trail all the way to the White House after a break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate office complex in Washington, DC.

It led to the resignation of the President of the United States, Richard Nixon, on 9 August 1974, the only resignation of any US

President. There is nothing like setting the bar high but I thought expressing an interest in the filmed version of the greatest political scandal of all time might just mark me down as a day-dreamer.

So I mumbled something vague about being interested in people and enjoying writing. Mr Taylor did not look impressed. Instead he sighed and launched into a soliloquy which was part-rant, part-evangelical defence of the profession he clearly adored.

'I'll tell you what journalism right here in this town is all about,' he sniffed.

'It's about mooching around local fetes, talking to church wardens, looking for something a bit tastier than a plate of scones.

'It's about sitting in court for hours on end, taking endless notes, sifting through thefts of lawn mowers and bicycles, recording the drunk and disorderly and all manner of petty crimes.

'It's about attending council meetings at odd hours and listening to boring old farts saying yay or nay to planning applications. It's about reporting on the new town centre plan or a residents' association campaign for street lighting or trawling through all the local GCE results.

'It's about attending inquests, chasing fire engines, nurturing contacts in the police and the local hospital. It's about having the guts to knock on the door of a mother who has just lost her ten-year-old son in a tragic accident and having the compassion to come away with the story without causing offence.

'It's about being fair-minded and meticulous and above all accurate in everything you say and do.

'It's about remembering that journalism is not all about what people tell you. It is about what they don't tell you. It is about what they do not want you to know. What they do want you to know much of the time is not journalism. It is PR. Advertising. Candy floss.

'Anyway, thank you for coming. We don't have any openings at the moment but I have your address and I'll keep you in mind if anything comes up in the future.'

Mr Taylor went on to become the editor of the *Methodist Recorder*. As I sat transfixed, however, it occurred to me that he

could easily have been a Methodist minister, so eloquent and passionate was his delivery.

After a second or two he motioned with his arm to the door.

My heart was sinking. I'd blown it. Or so I thought. I did not expect to see Mr Taylor, the *Post 'n Chron*, or the inside of a newspaper office ever again.

As I turned to shake Mr Taylor's hand I looked him square in the egg on his tie and asked what was the best tip I could take away with me for a career in journalism. He sniffed.

'Next time you go to an interview, lad, wear a shirt and tie.'