

LEO ACKERMAN AND ALEX URWIN



MAD DOG

THE MICKEY LEWIS STORY

**'A story beautifully told
from the heart, by the many
who loved and admired him.'**

Martin Tyler

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Contents

| | |
|--|------------|
| Introduction | 7 |
| Section One Part I: Guaranteeing a Performance | 17 |
| 1. You can't guarantee a result, but | 19 |
| 2. 'The Europeans didn't love getting kicked around by him' | 24 |
| 3. Becoming Mad Dog | 30 |
| 4. 'Plays like a frisky puppy'. | 36 |
| 5. 'Quite clearly he wasn't Trevor Hebbard' | 44 |
| 6. 'He could really play,' that Mickey Lewis | 50 |
| 7. 'He epitomised what a fan would do, if they were given the chance' | 59 |
| Section One Part II: Guaranteeing a Performance (The Game Owes You Nothing) | 65 |
| 8. 'Only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun' | 67 |
| 9. Dream Baby Dream | 80 |
| 10. Mad Dog to top dog? | 86 |
| 11. Return of the Mick | 97 |
| 12. Wembley. Or fucking hell, what a weekend | 103 |
| 13. Eras end | 115 |
| 14. 'Shit in her fuckin' handbag'. | 124 |
| 15. Goodbye to all that | 129 |
| Section Two: Don't Let It Pass You By | 133 |
| 16. Tough at the top | 135 |
| 17. Hunger in paradise? | 142 |
| 18. Sliding down the pyramid | 151 |
| 19. 'This is their Champions League Final' | 160 |
| 20. 'Up for anything, into anything, there for anyone' | 181 |
| Section Three: Enjoy the Occasion | 185 |
| 21. The West Bromwich Albion Department of Justice | 187 |
| 22. 'Right, go home lads, you're in turmoil' | 192 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| 23. Time to slow down? | 203 |
| 24. The 19th hole | 210 |
| 25. ‘You can’t sledge a 14-year-old boy’ | 217 |
| Section Four: One for the Road | 223 |
| 26. Hat-trick for Lewis! | 225 |
| 27. What drove Mickey Lewis? | 234 |
| 28. Legacy? | 247 |
| Authors’ Note. | 252 |
| Acknowledgements | 258 |
| Appendix I | 263 |
| Appendix II. | 269 |

SECTION ONE PART I:
GUARANTEEING
A PERFORMANCE

Chapter One

You can't guarantee a result, but ...

'You can't guarantee a result. But you can absolutely guarantee a performance.'

Mickey Lewis, in dressing rooms and on touchlines across the country, from the 1970s through to 2021

'Mickey Lewis would tackle anything that moved.'

Brian Horton, Oxford United manager, early 1990s

WHAT FOLLOWS in the first section of this book is the story of a scruffy, bushy-haired boy from Birmingham and how he became a beloved 'Mad Dog' in one of English football's defining eras and then a beloved and highly respected coach.

It's a story that jumps from the Midlands to the suburbs of Cannes. From The Hawthorns to Wembley. From Des Moines, Iowa, to the University of Oxford. And through all the centre circles and touchlines along the way.

And it's a story that, ultimately, celebrates a man who inspired hundreds if not thousands of fans, team-mates, colleagues and players he coached by how he played, how he

taught the game and how he lived. Knowing above all that whilst you can never guarantee a result, you can always, always guarantee a performance.

* * *

We start as the late 1970s edge into the 1980s. Back when Rod Stewart could dominate the charts. When Wembley still had two towers. When Sir Alex Ferguson was still a glint in Manchester United's eye.

As for the football itself? Well, neither of us were there. Of course, we've seen *The Football Factory*. But, really, we're 20-something Ipswich Town and Tottenham Hotspur fans who grew up long after European glory had been and gone at Portman Road and during a time in which the most exciting things happening at White Hart Lane were American football matches and Lady Gaga concerts. A far cry from the days of Sir Bobby Robson, Ossie Ardiles or Glenn Hoddle.

So, we thought it useful to do some asking around.

Now, who exactly to ask?

Fans in England watch a lot of football. From the pre-match chip shop dwellers of the Tottenham High Road to the Suffolk ale drinkers on Portman Road, they know all there is to know. Or so they'd like to think, at least.

Season ticket holders immerse themselves in the particular sights, sounds and smells of the beautiful game for 38 or 46 games a season. The lucky ones even get a cup run or two. Every Saturday or Tuesday is a new milestone around which years and lives are shaped and measured. A new

opportunity for a defining hero or a villain. For a plot twist or a cliffhanger ending.

The managers are experts, too, of course. Not quite like the fans. They certainly don't walk down the high street and hear the pre-match chatter or see the misplaced hope in the eyes of a young child on the bus. But they get the front row seat. The privileged spot from which to think about the next problem, the next solution, the next big moment in a game, a season, a career.

But there's one group of people that we think stand out from all the rest: the commentators. They're the perfect hybrid of fan and manager. Of passion and analysis. Of heart and of head.

They see games like the fans. They even sit amongst the fans, with the gantries – the booths from which the commentators work – often planted on top of or next to a packed home stand. At Everton's Goodison Park, one has to walk through rows 16 and 17 of the Bullens Road to get to the commentary seating. And sometimes the commentators behave like fans, too; Gary Neville can't resist a groan when Manchester United concede.

Yet they get all the access and insight to the game's premier coaches and tacticians, walking freely in the corridors and beside the pitches of the country's most famous footballing theatres, week in, week out.

And no one – living, at least – stands out from the rest quite like Martin Tyler.

From the 1978 World Cup to the 2023 FA Cup Final, from the gantry at The Den to the VIP deck in Doha, he has seen the game at its best and at its worst, with a healthy dose of everything in between.

And as Mickey Lewis signed his first professional contract at West Bromwich Albion in 1981, aged 16 and a product of the Baggies' academy, Tyler was in the process of being selected to lead the ITV team at the 1982 World Cup in Spain.

So, who better to start off with than him? Who better to introduce us to the world and era in which Mickey's story exists?

Tyler's foremost reflection of that time?

'I get annoyed when people say there was nothing before the Premier League. On the pitch, the game hasn't changed much. It's always been the first whistle to last, always tribal in its nature. The desire to win was just as strong.'

As Tyler continued, it was clear that, in many respects, English football as the late 1970s turned to the early 1980s was the same competitive, romantic, unpredictable beast we know and love today. There were the same unlikely title charges and cup upsets. The same conversations and concerns amongst the fans. The same possibility that, for 90 minutes or a season, life can mean something a little bigger, a little more.

We found one programme during the course of our research – from a match between Oxford United and Leicester City from the era in which Mickey was playing – that included a piece from Mark Shanahan on the growing competition between broadcasters to cover the sport. 'It wouldn't surprise me if Sky wins,' he writes, rather presciently, considering that the network currently broadcasts the majority of the Premier League games

shown live in the UK each season. The same programme includes a price list for Oxford United's merchandise. Fifty pounds for a large adult shell suit seems a little expensive.

So, maybe Tyler was right. Much was similar.

Of course, that's not to say it was *exactly* the same.

There was no VAR, no 80 per cent possession or inverted full-backs, no underlapping centre-halves. There certainly weren't the red cards there are today for tackles that once raised neither an eyebrow nor a fist. And there was no social media or content overload; when a teenaged Mickey signed that first professional contract at 16, West Brom had only just hired their first photographer and his photos weren't available until a week after the game.

Anton Rogan, one of Mickey's Oxford United team-mates and an eventual Celtic stalwart, is somewhat nostalgic about the relationship between players and match officials back when he and Mickey were starting out. 'You could actually talk to refs and linesmen as human beings. If you told them to fuck off, they'd tell you to fuck off back and that was it.'

And the stadiums and the pitches were not quite as glamorous as we've come to know in the Premier League era. Tyler recalls having to lie down for most of the game when Oxford hosted Portsmouth at what he described, perhaps a little euphemistically, as the 'homely and friendly' Manor Ground early in his commentary career.

So, with that context set – with all the similarities and differences to today's game established – our story can begin.