Namaste, Geezer

Life as a fan and journalist of Asian heritage

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Hammer Time

BEING A prepubescent boy of Asian heritage in east London presents plenty of challenges. Add in being a football fan, and a bundle of emotions and experiences increases the series of conflicts. Growing up in the late 1960s and early 1970s – rarity that I was on the terraces of Upton Park – my love for the game, my romance with it, was tainted by fear, hatred and loathing. Back then, young fans expected to encounter vilification from opposing supporters, even maybe to have to run from them. But there were times when I ran from my own West Ham people.

Eventually, my life in football would lead me to occupy a press seat at the World Cup Final of 2022 in Qatar, and arguably the greatest final of

them all as Argentina prevailed over France on penalties after a 3-3 draw to see the crowning moment of Lionel Messi's illustrious career. And somehow my enduring love for West Ham would take me to Prague for a triumphant European final in 2023. Long before both, however, my attitudes towards the game and many of its followers were established, even poisoned at times, through some bitter experiences.

Going to football with your father is supposed to be one of life's joyful rites of passage. For me, it was tinged with jeopardy. My dad, Dharam Bir Bhatia, loved the game and wanted me to share that love. He would take me to Upton Park, where we would try and avoid the men selling the National Front's *Bulldog* magazine outside the gates, their eyes bulging with hatred towards us as we passed, their snarls unavoidable.

Such was the hostility in London against people like me and Dad at that time, that we were openly called Pakis and talked down to in mock-Indian accents. 'Gunga Din' and 'curry-munchers' were some of the favoured insults aimed at us. Some people would just utter the word 'Enoch', a reference

to Enoch Powell MP, in 1968 the racist deliverer of the rabble-rousing 'Rivers of Blood' speech.

It was strange. These comments and names hurt, but a kind of defence mechanism kicked in. I would avoid these vile characters to try and gravitate towards the safer section of the club's support. After all, I was coming to love West Ham the team, if not all the supporters. There was folklore to them that as a boy I was only hearing about – the 1964 FA Cup win, the 1965 European Cup-Winners' Cup victory, and the Hammers winning the World Cup a year later thanks to Bobby Moore, Martin Peters and Geoff Hurst – none of which I have any memories of as a small child. Yet, several years on from those momentous achievements I had been told about, I felt a hatred towards me that I never understood. No wonder I was a conflicted youth.

Nor did I ever understand why the fans around me, when West Ham played Tottenham, would consistently and collectively hiss for long periods of the match. Only years later did I find out, to my horror, that these disgusting people were celebrating the slaughter of millions of Jews by the Nazis and using the sound to resemble the gassing

of the innocents and to taunt rival supporters of a club that has a large Jewish fan base.

I look back now with a mixture of fondness and retrospective fear as I recall my father shouting at Bobby Moore in Punjabi to 'buck up'. If the looks we received from fellow supporters could have killed, we may never have made it back out of the ground. I now see that Dad kept a stiff upper lip in order not to upset his son by revealing his sadness at all this hostility. He was a man – a barrister and a scholar – so much cleverer than his, our, detractors.

When my father deemed me big enough to travel unaccompanied on the 69 or 58 bus to Upton Park, he stopped attending – probably in pain at the animosity we endured each match – and so I would embark on a fortnightly solo ritual. Not that initially I could afford to pay to go in through the turnstiles. Instead, at around 4pm I would board the bus from the hill outside Leyton Underground station and it would drop me a few miles away on Green Street at around 4.25pm. There I would wait until I saw the huge Boleyn gates sweep open outwards and masses of fans leaving minutes before the final whistle. I was like a salmon swimming against the tide as I weaved

my way through them to find myself a space on the Chicken Run terracing down one side, or the North Bank or any small space I could squeeze on to. A lot looked at me as if I was some kind of alien, and there were snarls and grunts, but many also looked at me affectionately and with smiles of welcome. I began to feel that people ain't all bad. Inevitably the referee would signal full time within a few minutes of me joining the throng, but getting a glimpse of the men in claret and blue – albeit just for a few seconds – made my week complete. Being young, small and on my own meant that I largely went unnoticed and was therefore left alone by the racist thugs. Some kind souls even lifted me up to sit on the crush barriers so that I had a better view of the game.

All that would change later in my teens when I became more aware and I stood out more. I got a job stacking can after can of baked beans at a Wallis's supermarket on Leyton High Road, which meant that I could occasionally afford to pay at the turnstiles to take in a whole game. The experience was frequently scary – and I became very wary.

It would often start with seeing Asian market traders' stalls being overturned on Green Street, to

a soundtrack of 'Sieg Heil' chants, until the police could get there and offer a protective barrier. Then, when I got in the ground and stood on the terraces, I was always on my guard if skinhead 'bovver boys' with their shiny calf-length, steel-toe-capped boots set their sights on me. Kicking in a 'Paki' head was an appealing prospect for them. I would move closer to clusters of people who seemed decent, would constantly think about my escape route, and head for the toilets if they got too close. I missed a fair few goals because of that. I never felt I could just relax and watch the game. I never joined in the singing. I always felt that I was an outsider.

Afterwards, I would get away quickly but could sometimes see that the skinheads had clocked me and were trying to make their way through the crowds of departing fans to get to me. Running from them became second nature. I never did get beaten up. The fear of that happening to me meant I was always one step ahead, too nimble and too clever for them.

Once, I saw a police officer and his dog challenging a skinhead to behave himself. The thug took no notice and answered back loudly, causing

the dog to bark at him ferociously. Unabashed, the lout produced a knife from inside one of his boots and began waving the blade, causing the policeman and dog to retreat. This was fifty years ago, long before the knife epidemic that now takes a shocking number of young lives in London.

As much as I was becoming aware of my Asian heritage and origins and it seeming to offend certain sections of the West Ham support, a lot of the racist slurs when I attended games went over my head, I think, or perhaps I was just too preoccupied with Moore, Hurst and Peters to notice more than I did. I did hear words of the 1970s like nig-nog, coon and sambo being shouted around me. And I do remember thinking how strange – and confusing – it was that some people could shout such things then cheer and hero-worship the team's two feted black players of the time, Ade Coker and Clyde Best. Not that Coker and Best were the first. I know that in the late 1960s there was John Charles, who played for England Under-18s and was the first black player to represent the country at any level. Then there was the Cypriot Yilmaz Orhan, who was also of a different racial origin and played a few games.

They all stirred my interest, even in only reading about them later, but Coker and Best were part of that vanguard of players who bravely endured so much abuse from opposing fans. I admired their stoicism. Perhaps it made me think that I should also persevere amid all the adversity and not let others ruin what I loved.

This was the time of the TV character Alf Garnett, the foul-mouthed, racist, misogynist bigot from the sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part*, played by Warren Mitchell. For me, it was a misfortune that Garnett also supported West Ham. While the makers of the programme would insist that their motives were to satirise and ridicule the character and his attitudes, his use of the words Paki and coon would fan the flames of hate against me and other people of colour, giving licence to the imbeciles. I was astonished later in the mid-1970s to see and hear Mitchell unleash some of his Alf Garnett act at half-time at Orient's Brisbane Road on the ground's tannoy system and then tell fans he actually supported Spurs.

It was in this world that it all began, a lifelong relationship with West Ham, a club that would be

often dysfunctional and didn't always deserve my love. I withdrew that love after some sorry episodes, but I kept coming back because I grew up in a school of hard knocks where football offered a release and an escape. And in those circumstances, no matter how badly the game can treat you, you can't help but feel a debt of gratitude for how it informed your early life.