

TREVOR FRANCIS

ONE IN A

MILLION

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY WITH KEITH DIXON

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Contents

Acknowledgements	9
Introduction by Keith Dixon	11
Introduction by Trevor Francis.	15
Preface	19
1. It All Started In Plymouth	23
2. Birmingham City FC	28
3. America	50
4. Nottingham Forest FC	60
5. Manchester City FC.	95
6. Italy	99
7. Glasgow Rangers FC	114
8. Queens Park Rangers FC: Player and Manager	125
9. Sheffield Wednesday FC: Player and Manager	138
10. England	156
11. Birmingham City FC: Manager	173
12. Crystal Palace FC: Manager	208
13. Reflections.	222
14. 2003 to 2018	235
England Career And Goals	241
Bibliography	251
Index	253

Chapter Two

Birmingham City FC

In all senior competitions 328 appearances, two substitute appearances and 133 goals

WHEN I joined Blues in the summer of 1969, I was not over-confident but I was determined to succeed. I had my objective of consolidating myself in the youth team and nothing or nobody was going to stop me. This, to me, meant working harder than all of the others. During my schoolboy days it had been suggested I lacked pace, which seems odd now looking back as my pace has set me apart from other footballers throughout my career. However, at that time in my development I took the advice and I would come back to St Andrew's in the afternoon wearing my spikes and I just ran sprints over and over again. It was worth it.

As a young man I understandably missed home and because of the distance between Birmingham and Plymouth Don Dorman agreed a special arrangement for

the two-year duration of my apprenticeship: I was allowed home every three weeks. So on a Saturday evening after a game (all first-team games' kick-off times were 3pm in those days) I would make the six-hour train journey back home. Thanks to Don I did not have to return to Birmingham until the following Thursday. Good as this was, the arrangement only lasted for 12 months because after that I was playing for the first team.

I had a successful first season scoring quite regularly in the youth team and hadn't had more than a handful of reserve games before I was given the opportunity by manager Freddie Goodwin to be a substitute at Cardiff City.

Throughout my career I was never 'precious' about what shirt number I was allocated, as long as it wasn't 12!

I came on at half-time for Johnny Vincent in a game which we lost 2-0. That was where it all started for me – my first career record, as I became, at the age of 16 years and 139 days, the youngest player to play for the Blues' first team.

Freddie obviously saw something in me. You have to remember that even though I was scoring often I was not fully mature. I was quite frail – just a boy playing in a man's world. Physically the opposing players were far stronger than me, as I was probably four years away from my full physical development. It was an incredible adventure that I absolutely relished. The nice thing about that time in my career was that it wasn't just about scoring

goals, but also about my general all-round game. I know, when I look back, that I was often making mistakes, but that was part of it. At the age of 16 who would not make mistakes, whether you were a footballer or in some other career?

That meant as a kid I was able to try things, I had a ready-made excuse. The management, my team-mates and the fans accepted the fact that I was just a youngster learning the game, but what that attitude gave me was enormous confidence to experiment – I was trying things that at times were outrageous but they seemed to come off well on a regular basis.

My full debut was the following Saturday at home to Oxford United. I remember the game and I remember the goal, but thinking back I also remember the Atkinson brothers, Graham, a striker, and Ron, a determined defender/midfielder, were playing for Oxford. Ron, who has become a friend over the years, regularly tells people that he had me in his pocket that day, saying I only had one kick all match – mind you that was the goal! Typical Ron.

I started scoring fairly often but the game that stands out in most people's memories is when I got all the goals against Bolton to become the youngest player to score four goals in a senior league match.

It's surprising how vividly I can recall the goals I scored decades ago.

It was on 20 February 1971 at St Andrew's that the Blues' fans saw my first hat-trick. The first goal came after

16 minutes when Gordon Taylor knocked the ball down and I lobbed it over their goalkeeper. Three minutes later Phil Summerill played the ball to me from Gordon's corner and I volleyed in my second. Twelve minutes from time Bolton's goalkeeper spilled a shot from Phil and I scored from the rebound to complete my hat-trick. I didn't finish the game as I was substituted with five minutes to go, having headed home Dave Robinson's cross for my fourth. The applause I got from the crowd was incredible.

I was taken off because I had taken a heavy bang to my thigh and the following Tuesday night we had a Youth Cup game against Arsenal at Highbury.

I needed intensive treatment after the game plus I had to come in on the Sunday for further treatment, in the hope that I could get myself fit for the Arsenal game. I was declared fit for the game and of course there was a lot of focus on me after the Bolton result. I didn't play well at Highbury as, believe it or not, it was a more difficult game than the previous Saturday.

Bolton's manager, the legendary Nat Lofthouse, had been most complimentary, saying, 'He's obviously got a natural gift for scoring just like Jimmy Greaves. It's instinct – something you cannot give players. It hurt to see him score four goals against us but he deserved them, we gave him nothing. He looks to have a fantastic future, I only wish I could swap ages with him.'

After the game I was in the bath when the players came off the field and I remember asking, 'Did Keith

Bowker have any chances?’ Keith had come on as my substitute and I don’t know who answered, but he said, ‘Yes, he had a couple of chances.’ My thoughts were that whilst I was happy, of course, to have scored four goals, I couldn’t help thinking that maybe I could have scored more if I had stayed on!

Although my four goals against Bolton sparked all the hype about ‘Superboy’ it was part of an amazing run of scoring which started on 6 February and ended on 13 March. In six consecutive games I had scored 11 goals out of a total of 16.

Off the pitch Blues got a huge financial boost. There was a surge of interest in the club due to my performances, leading to over 10,000 coming to watch me in a youth game! This was significant when you bear in mind that previous home attendances had on occasions reached a worrying low of around 13,000.

Things had happened quicker than anyone could have expected but I was still an apprentice. For the apprentices, the days at our training ground in Damson Lane were good days. Each apprentice had to do certain duties throughout the week and, even though I was in the first team, and even after scoring four goals against Bolton, the following Monday I was out with the rest of the apprentices with our brushes sweeping the terraces.

We had to clean the boots of the first-team players as part of our routine duties. I was so pleased to be cleaning Trevor Hockey’s boots that I rang home to tell my parents

that not only had I cleaned his boots but that Trevor Hockey had spoken to me that day. Even though I was in the first team, I still had to knock on the door before I could enter the first-team dressing room. I was given no privileges over the rest of the reserves and apprentices; we all had to knock first. I used to mop the dressing rooms, clean the baths, do the first team players' boots and loads and loads of other things – on Fridays, we took it in turns to clean the manager's car.

We had to be at Damson Lane before ten o'clock on weekdays, to set up the kit and get the boots ready for the players' arrival. To do that I had to jump on a bus from my digs down to St Andrew's, and then we would go by minibus to Elmdon, where Damson Lane was situated. During my time as an apprentice I had three digs, in Stechford, Bordesley Green East and Nechells – not the most salubrious of areas but we got looked after well.

Modern day young footballers are not asked to do the duties we undertook, which is a shame because it instilled discipline in me and provided a good grounding for the rest of my career.

It is fair to say that my teenage years weren't exactly the same as those of most teenagers. At the age of 16 I had become headline news in Birmingham because of what I was achieving on the football field. This meant that my photos were in all the papers and I was getting a lot of recognition and a lot of attention.

When I went into bars with the other apprentices, who, with respect to them, weren't as well known as me, there was often a problem. On several occasions, I was asked to leave because my presence did cause difficulties due to the rivalry in Birmingham between Blues and Aston Villa.

I remember being surrounded by well-wishers when some idiot threw a pint in my face, so I got whisked out of the back door quickly. Things like that meant that I had to be extra careful in where I chose to go and therefore my teenage years were different to those of most young men, because I was a professional footballer. Players like a drink, and I was no different, but I couldn't live the life of the other apprentices.

In my first FA Cup semi-final against Leeds in 1972 we were very much the underdogs but in the semi-final in 1975 against Fulham we were the favourites. We didn't play particularly well at Hillsborough but we drew 1-1 thanks to a goal from Joe Gallagher.

So it was on to a replay at Maine Road in Manchester four days later. We played so much better but lost in extra time to the last kick of the game when a gentleman by the name of John Mitchell scored. I and the 25,000 Bluenoses there will never forget his name. Why? Because that was my biggest disappointment as a footballer – no second thoughts needed.

Losing in that manner – a goal that was bundled over the line when he didn't know too much about it – was hard

to take. We had done enough to win the game and we should have been in the final.

As it happened that was my last opportunity as a player to get to Wembley in an FA Cup final although I did get there as a manager. It was the manner in which we lost that made it such a huge disappointment.

For me the Leeds United side of the early 70s was the best club side I have played against. Don Revie was a manager who looked at every situation to gain an advantage over the opposition.

Blues went to Elland Road in 1972 and I recall Freddie Goodwin asking central defender Roger Hynd to go on to the pitch about an hour before the game kicked off and stride up and down to measure both halves.

Roger came back to report that one half was six yards shorter than the other.

How much an advantage it was to the home side to know this fact I cannot imagine, but obviously Revie thought it valuable.

Apparently Freddie reported it to the referee on the day who promised to report it to the Football League but we heard nothing further.

I wonder if the Elland Road pitch is still the same?

After I had been at the club for 18 months, we got promotion in 1972 to Division One. Having got there, it was bit of a struggle to stay there but we managed to survive for seven years. I was improving as a footballer and I'd got into the England Under-23 team after playing for

two years in the England Youth team, which twice won the Little World Cup.

Why did I stay so long? Well, for me, it was never about the money but instead was always about performing to the best of my ability whether for club or country.

The impact on attendances was phenomenal, with 52,470 showing up to an FA Cup game against Huddersfield. In that promotion year, the away following for the deciding match against Orient was and still is the biggest away support I have ever seen. I have never seen anything quite like it on the motorway going down to East London. The crowd that day was over 30,000 and I am not exaggerating when I say that at least three-quarters of the Brisbane Road ground were Birmingham fans.

I remember arriving at St Andrew's at 1.45pm for an Easter Monday home game and you could just feel the buzz around the ground. There were people everywhere outside and, once we were inside, the ground was nearly a quarter full over an hour before kick-off. Just remarkable.

I think it was pretty well known around the Birmingham area that Kenny Burns and I never got on. We did not see eye to eye because we are totally different characters. In his autobiography, *No ifs or butts*, he says that he was very jealous of me. I can't disguise the fact that we were different but nevertheless I had a lot of respect for him as a footballer.

He was very versatile as a centre-forward and when I played up front with him I witnessed first-hand his great

attributes. The negative side of Kenny on the field was his lack of mobility and his lack of desire to run. He openly admitted that he never enjoyed training because he had to run and Kenny *did not* like running! This meant I found the workload as a partner to Kenny very demanding. I was having to do more running than I should have needed to do simply because Kenny totally ignored the need to run and did not want to close defenders down. He was more than happy for me to cover for him.

Those attributes I mentioned earlier? His hold-up play for a centre-forward was top class, technically he was very good and he was a good finisher. But his biggest attribute was his ability to head the ball. He could head the ball as well as any player I've ever seen and he had this ability to hang in the air. He could have been a top centre-forward if he had had a greater desire to run. I could still play football now if I didn't have to run but it was something you had to do and Kenny never relished it.

Brian Clough and Peter Taylor bought him from Birmingham City as a centre-forward in July 1977 for £150,000 and converted him to a centre-half. It was a very, very shrewd decision, because Kenny became an even better footballer as a central defender, going on to play for Scotland on numerous occasions and meriting a Football Writers' Association Player of the Year award in the 1977/78 season – a magnificent achievement.

When I had the opportunity to go to Nottingham Forest many felt that I wouldn't go there because they

were aware of my problems with Kenny and thought that I wouldn't entertain going to a club with Kenny on its books. I think that would have been incredibly unprofessional of me, as the reason I was leaving Birmingham City wasn't financial. It was purely because I wanted to play with better players in a better team with a great manager, to give me a chance of winning things. As we now know it proved to be a wise decision.

In the autumn of 1974 I was called up to my first England squad and it was widely tipped by London's Fleet Street journalists that I'd be making my debut. Unfortunately I sustained a career-threatening injury at Bramall Lane against Sheffield United which put me out of the game for a long period of time. All I remember was going to strike the ball and somebody appearing to tackle me from behind. All I knew was that I had this terrible pain at the back of my leg. It was a very unusual injury because when the tendon was torn the ends had split, so it was like stitching together the strands of a horse's tail.

Freddie Goodwin wanted to explore every aspect of treatment, which was the club's prerogative. The first diagnosis was in Birmingham and the second in Leeds where I saw someone Freddie knew. Then it was down to London to get another opinion before returning to Birmingham. This caused a delay in my treatment but I knew it was only to seek out second opinions before taking action, which often happens with footballing injuries. Often in modern day football injuries like that

are discussed with the player and the player's agent, but in my day you looked up to your manager as a kind of a fatherly figure and that was exactly how I saw Freddie, who I looked upon for guidance.

He was good to me and when he was sacked I was quite upset about it, but after the initial disappointment had worn off after a day or two, I went over to his house in Tanworth-in-Arden and presented him with an engraved cigar box just to show him my gratitude for what he had done for me. I just wanted to show my appreciation.

Eventually, I overcame that injury, got myself fit and was available for my second semi-final in the FA Cup. I played four league games prior to the semi-final, scoring two goals. It was a relief to be back at my peak after such a difficult injury.

There seemed to be a longish period of speculation about me leaving the club, simply because I had made it known that I wanted to win things before I retired from the game.

It was more difficult to leave a football club in those days because everything favoured the club. Later, the Bosman ruling changed football forever, making it so different today.

A footballer now, with the help of his agent, can manufacture deals quite easily. It wasn't like that in my time, even when I left Birmingham City. When I think about it there were only two clubs who were prepared to pay a million pounds as it was a huge sum of money. I believe

if the asking price had been anywhere near the previous record of £500,000 the majority of the teams in Division One would have wanted to sign me, but it was an enormous amount of money – things were very different in those days!

I spent my years at Birmingham City hoping that when I left the club I would never lose my affection and passion for Blues. I think that was borne out by my performances. Probably my best years for goals was from 1976 to 1978. I am often asked when did you start to feel unsettled? It was undoubtedly the day in February 1974 that Freddie Goodwin called me at home in Knowle and said he'd just sold Bob Latchford for £350,000. I was so disappointed to hear that, even though in Howard Kendall and Archie Styles we had two good players coming in.

Ultimately I benefitted greatly from Howard because he could see a pass – he was a very perceptive passer of the ball. I enjoyed my time with Howard behind me but I also enjoyed playing with Bob Latchford. He was a good player and we had a good understanding.

We were mates off the field and we did well together on the field. I could see what he was experiencing in his time at Everton – he went there and became a very big player. It reinforced in me the understanding that I had to continue to play well at Blues to get a move, and I never failed to show the required endeavour.

People often discuss which was my best season. Some say the first season, others our promotion season of 1971/72. Some say the 1977/78 season when I was an ever-present.

My first season included the most memorable two weeks of my time at St Andrew's, when I scored in consecutive weeks – two goals against Sheffield Wednesday, four against Bolton Wanderers and two against Swindon Town. Eight goals in three matches!

The next four games were something of an anti-climax as I only managed to score three goals. The last of those goals was against Cardiff City at home, a game that attracted a remarkable crowd of 49,000. However, for the whole season I scored 16 goals in 21 league appearances.

The Cardiff match was the most physical game I had experienced up until then. It was a battle and I was being fouled on a persistent basis. Eventually a scuffle took place and lots of players were involved in pushing and shoving. Things had calmed down and then in the distance we saw big Roger Hynd pounding down the field towards where the scuffle had taken place. When he arrived players from both sides told him that it was sorted and to leave it alone, to which Roger replied in his gruff Scottish accent, 'I have to do it, the crowd expect it of me!' Roger was a character.

A month before this game we were away at Swindon Town. Nowadays there are formal regimented warm-ups for all the players in the squad, organised by the fitness coach. This was not the case in the 70s.

Each player was responsible for his own warm-up and Roger used to go through a heading routine in the dressing room, as heading was a strong part of his game. Unfortunately the dressing room ceiling at the County

Ground was lower than normal and as Roger leapt to head a ball he put his head through it.

The reaction from the players was mixed. One or two laughed; one or two were concerned for Roger's well-being and the rest were heard to say, 'Do you think he's realised he has put his head through the ceiling?'

My second season from an individual point of view resulted in me not being able to sustain the previous season's goalscoring exploits. Having said that I scored 14 goals in 45 appearances in all competitions, but the real success was for the team, as we secured promotion to Division One away at Orient in the last match of the season.

The turning point of the season was probably in late October 1971 when Freddie Goodwin bought Bob Hatton from Carlisle United for £30,000. During his time as manager, securing Bob Hatton must have been Freddie's best signing ever. Has there ever been a better front three in the history of Birmingham City Football Club?

From my point of view my best season was 1977/78 when I again made 45 appearances in all competitions but this time I scored 27 goals. Undoubtedly staying fit for the whole season played a big part in my having such a good domestic season but also in gaining my first international cap for England under Don Revie.

It was not the best season from the club's point of view because the team had three managers: Willie Bell, Sir Alf Ramsey and Jim Smith.

I was voted into the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) team of the season and came desperately close to winning the PFA Player of the Year award but was pipped at the post by Andy Gray.

My time at Birmingham City was most enjoyable. If I did have any extra pressure I didn't let it concern me; I am a football man through and through. I just enjoyed playing football and so I enjoyed my time at Birmingham City, especially the year that we got promotion. Although I am not a great one for looking back at statistics, I find it fascinating to note the increase in the crowds that season as the word got around that you could see this 16-year-old talent that Blues had unearthed.

Whilst I was at Blues I used to write a column in the football comic *Roy of the Rovers*. I shared the column with the Arsenal striker, Malcolm Macdonald. We appeared in alternate editions.

Of the six hat-tricks I scored in my English league career the most unusual was the one I scored against Arsenal on 18 January 1977. The game ended in a 3-3 draw and who scored the Arsenal goals? None other than Malcolm. Now two hat-tricks in one game caused a dilemma: who got to keep the match ball?

On that occasion I got to keep the memento because it was a home game. However, that was not the case in Italy. I scored three for Sampdoria against Udinese. Their brilliant Brazilian, Zico, also got a hat-trick and he got to keep the ball.

I was doing well, Blues were getting better as a footballing team and the crowds were getting bigger which was evidence that the team was giving the fans what they wanted. If you know St Andrew's then you do not need me to tell you that when the attendance is good it becomes a fortress and a place that other teams find intimidating. The atmosphere created was very special and it was such a wonderful feeling for me being a youngster. The fans used to sing my name and I could tell by their reactions that they wanted me to do well. I felt it was just a wonderful time for me to be there. Even to this day, not a day passes without someone wanting to talk to me about the 70s.

I don't think that, unless you were a Birmingham City supporter when I came on to the scene, anyone outside of Birmingham could have fully understood the relationship between a set of supporters and a single player. Blues fans tell me to this day that, regardless of the era in which they supported the club, there has never been a time to compare with the 70s. I am told that this is because the club won national recognition for its footballing achievements and had a star player.

The honours gained by Birmingham City have been limited, but it is a fact that the FA Cup Final teams of 1931 and 1956, the League Cup-winning teams of 1963 and 2011 and even the Leyland DAF and Auto Windscreens tournament victors never had a true star in their line-ups. Let me hasten to add that this is not my assessment of the past teams but what I am told by diehard Bluenoses.

The Newcastle fans were special in the way they supported their stars Alan Shearer and Kevin Keegan. Although that hero worship was similar, in my opinion it never compared with the adulation I received at Birmingham. I believe that that support was unique – the way that Blues supporters travelled in their thousands to see me play, the way they filled St Andrew’s to express their feelings for me, an individual who was giving them something in football terms that had not been seen before. It was an extremely humbling experience to feel the ‘love’ they had for me. One of my close friends is Jeff Lynne of the Electric Light Orchestra and he often relates the tale that he would sit in the stands at St Andrew’s shouting ‘give it to the kid’ – it was so special and not just in football terms.

Evidence of the incredible backing I had from the Blues fans was apparent against Blackpool on 4 April 1972. We had been awarded a free kick from at least 40 yards from the Tilton Road goal and close to the Kop.

As I ‘spotted’ the ball I was looking to clip it into a forward area for our two big central defenders, which was what they were expecting. Then I could hear the masses of fans in the Kop urging me to have a go at goal myself. ‘Shoot’ was the shout. They instilled such belief and confidence in me that I thought I might as well go for it.

I drilled the ball with such power and accuracy and I struck it so sweetly I could see it rising. And despite a

despairing dive from the Blackpool goalkeeper John Burridge, the ball hit the back of the net.

It was the first goal scored with 10,000 assists!

At the time I took it all in my stride. For me it was just another game but now, when I look back at what I achieved, I am very appreciative.

Scoring four goals in one match as a 16-year-old professional footballer is a record that will never be beaten! Why? Because now you are still at school at that age.

My greatest attribute was my pace with or without the ball. Together with my close control and vision, my pace meant that I could trouble defenders almost at will. On occasions I was selfish but because of my age it didn't matter. The players I was playing alongside may have got a little exasperated with me at times, because I didn't drop the ball off a little earlier or I tried to beat three players when I should have passed. I know they gave me the benefit of the doubt on a number of occasions because they recognised the fact that I was just learning the game. Also, I was learning the game in front of huge crowds and making a real contribution to the team's performance, and that made the difference in my team-mates' eyes. Even Kenny recognised my value to the team, particularly as I was doing his running for him. Whilst he may have appreciated my work during games he made training thoroughly unpleasant.

In five-a-sides he could be quite aggressive, which is an understatement; he was quite ruthless with some

of his challenges. He often tried to cut me in two with a tackle and he succeeded on a few occasions. He wouldn't think twice about it. As we've grown older together, he has told me that he admired the way I dealt with the vicious tackles that were all part of the game in those days. Knowing Kenny's sense of humour, he probably thinks his attitude to me in training was helpful to me on matchdays. For whatever reason, the primary target of his tackles was me.

Undoubtedly, Kenny had a vicious streak in him at Birmingham but he was not like that at Forest. How do I know? Because I trained with him and did not get the same treatment from him that I experienced at Birmingham's training ground.

Kenny could have been an even better player for Birmingham if he had been managed correctly, as on occasions his aggressive play was counter-productive to the team. This aspect of his play was never addressed by his Birmingham managers, Willie Bell and Sir Alf Ramsey. Willie, a fellow Scotsman, was in my opinion far too lenient with Kenny and Sir Alf never really understood him and ultimately was the one who sold him to Brian Clough. Basically, he was allowed to be a thug. A thug called Kenneth was how he was addressed by both Clough and Ramsey.

I always remember Bob Hatton being an underrated footballer. He was part of the three that were often talked about in Birmingham – Latchford, Hatton and Francis.

When I was a very impressionable young man at Blues, Bob said something to me that has always stuck in my mind, hence the reason I am relating it now. I have always had such a love for football and absolutely loved training, and therefore was amazed when Bob said to me, 'Do you know, if I could get the same money as I do playing football, working where I used to on the Hull trawlers, I'd go back immediately.'

The reason that statement was such a shock to me was because I thought that if he felt like that then there must be others in football who thought the same. At that time I believed that everyone was playing for the love of the game with money being secondary. To me it was never about the money, it was about playing the sport that I absolutely adored. I don't think it would be too different these days, though. I believe that there must be players out there who, if they could get what they earn now doing something else, would do it. Amazing!

Sir Alf Ramsey found my situation difficult to the extent that on one occasion he recommended I be sold. At the time Arsenal were openly courting me, speaking publicly about breaking the £500,000 transfer record. Ramsey described their behaviour as 'disgraceful and irresponsible'.

In January 1978, Leeds United offered a blank cheque for me four days before Blues went to Anfield and beat Liverpool 2-3, a game in which I scored the penalty winner.

Birmingham City FC

I gave my opinion on the situation, for which Ramsey fined me, declaring, 'Francis has had his say, his wife has had her say, now I'm waiting for the dog.'

Sir Alf left St Andrew's in March 1978 and Jim Smith was appointed. The rest, as they say, is history, and appears later in the book.