

STANDING FREE

The Life and Times of

THEO TEN CAAT

With Nick Brown



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Growing Up and Getting My Foot on the Ladder

*'I would hate to be third or fourth choice,' I
told him, 'so feel free to go and pick yourself
another captain.'*

I WAS born in the countryside in the region of Hollandscheveld in the north-east of the country, not too far from the border with Germany, where there were lots of farmers. My mother and father were both children of the war. Like so many others, my granddad had a problem coping with the war and never spoke about it. Now that sort of thing is recognised and they call it PTSD – post-traumatic stress disorder. It affected him pretty badly. It's very sad.

My grandparents and my parents lived together in a small house because there wasn't enough housing for everybody to have their own place, as there was a big rebuild going on due to what happened in the war. This meant that for my first few years we were all sharing a house together.

We didn't have much materially when I was a boy and we were never really able to go away on holiday. We did some day trips, and they were nice, but we were never able to go on what

you would call a proper holiday. When my mum and dad were building a house they only managed to build the ground floor because the money ran out and the bank didn't want to finance them anymore. In the recession of the 1980s my dad became unemployed. I was 16 at the time and my brother and I always brought football boots that were two sizes too big so they would last us. My dad would put some cotton in the boots and stuff it down the end where our toes were so we could play in the same boots for a year or two extra.

My dad was only 40 when he became unemployed and had some problems with his back. He tried to get other work, of course, but because of these back problems he was unable to. When his benefit money ran out my mum had to go out to work. She was a trooper. She did everything. She worked in a cafeteria, she worked as a waitress, she worked helping out farmers in the fields, she was very hard-working. She also took care of my grandparents, cleaning their house, doing shopping for them, all those sorts of things.

When he was younger, my dad was a really talented footballer – he could have been a professional – and one or two clubs wanted to sign him. His parents, my grandparents, were a little bit difficult about it, though. They were Christians and, with the matches being played on Sundays, they didn't like him playing then. They held Sundays as a sabbath and, when he did go out, he used to have to leave his football boots with his neighbours rather than bring them back into the house so my grandparents didn't know he had been playing.

He was good enough that in the early 1960s he could have become a professional with PEC Zwolle. He joined up with them but after three months he went back home. He was actually offered a contract but decided against it. He was there by himself and didn't really have much support, so he went back home. For me, this turned out to be a good decision, because not long after he left Zwolle he met my mother, so had he decided to carry on and sign his contract I wouldn't have been here!

I was born in December 1964 and things were a bit different by then. I had a lot more chances to play football and, as soon as I could walk I was playing with a ball. There weren't very many houses around; our area had lots of fields and farmland, so there were plenty of places to go and kick a ball. When my brother Freddy was born in 1966 we moved into a town but only stayed there for a couple of years before moving back into the countryside and living between the farmers again.

I have another younger brother called Rene, who is a few years younger. He was born in 1970. Because of the age difference between us, whereas Freddy and I had helped each other to develop, Rene was too young to join in with us seriously. He was also talented, though, and played some reserve games for Emmen.

When I was a boy growing up I didn't have that many friends. This was partly due to my mum being worried about virtually everything and partly due to my being busy with playing football. The thing is, in every spare moment Freddy and I were out kicking the ball to one another. We played

before school, we played after school, when we came home to have our lunch, whenever we had an opportunity. Living out in the countryside we were free to play football whenever we wanted to.

Reading this you might think I was a bit hard done by and lonely but that wasn't the case. Being able to play in this way was good for our development. If you're playing on your own, or with just a few of you, it's all about your character and quality and you develop your personality. This is a natural way of development between boys. You quickly find out things like who is the leader of your little group, who can play in the different positions, what kind of games we would play rather than just have a traditional match between us, those kind of things.

Our village was split in two. There were the Christian people and non-Christian people, but most of them were Christians. Because of this there was both a Saturday team and a Sunday team, and the Sunday team really hated the Saturday team. That hatred was even evident at school. There was a Christian school and a public school. Everyone was able to go to the public school but to attend the Christian school you had to belong to that part of the community and had to be a churchgoer.

This was the reason we had two teams. It was a ridiculous situation. In a place with fewer than 5,000 people living in it they couldn't get together to make one decent football team. Every so often the idea of merging would be suggested and voted upon but they would rather have the segregation. The members of each team hated each other, too. I remember my brother

once saying, 'I hope the two teams do come together because it would only take one training session for this one particular guy to end up in hospital for a couple of years!' Those were the times I grew up in.

When I was graduating to under-12s, after a few training sessions the two coaches decided that they would make me the captain of the team. I was obviously pleased about this but I later found out from some of the other boys that they had already asked others to be captain before they offered it to me. I went home and told my dad what had happened and he asked what I wanted to do about it. Was I happy being third or fourth choice? I said to him that I was the best football player in the team. I was captain the season before with the under-10s but now I had been relegated down the list. I asked him if it was to do with the friendships and business ties between the coaches and the families of the other boys and he told me that, yes, that was the case. That same evening I went back to the training ground and threw the captain's armband back to the coach.

'I would hate to be third or fourth choice,' I told him, 'so feel free to go and pick yourself another captain.'

I was only 11 years old at that time but I couldn't stand it. I'm a bit of a perfectionist and want to be the best, and by that time I already had that attitude in me. There weren't a massive amount of people living in our area and I knew I was the best player. As I've already said, we were out in the country and there were only little towns nearby, with just a small amount of industry. There were primary and secondary schools but if

you wanted to take your education any further you had to move away. That was the size of the area we were living in. It was really quite remote. I didn't really like going to school much, even though I was pretty good academically. After I finished my primary schooling I went to Hooegeveen to take my exams and had an opportunity to go to university. It was when I moved to the secondary school that my problems began.

In his younger days my dad was a fighter, a real fighter. If something he didn't like happened to him, then he would sort it out with his fists. There's a story that when he was a teenager, 17 or 18 years of age, he hit someone on their ear with an iron bar and the other guy's ear almost came away from his head. It was apparently half off, just flapping around. My mother didn't like that my father was a bit that way inclined and she always taught me that I shouldn't fight, and that made a big impact on me. Naturally your parents want what's best for you, so because of my mum I wasn't allowed to fight. Add to this the fact that when I was young my mum and dad couldn't speak proper Dutch. That may sound strange coming from a Dutchman, but they always used the local regional dialect of where they lived and where I was born. At my local primary school that wasn't a problem because it was the same for everybody, they were all using the local dialect. When I went to Hooegeveen, however, they were, of course, all talking Dutch.

Because of this problem with the language the other boys at school were always laughing at me because of the way I spoke. I was a small kid as well, really tiny, so for these reasons I tended

to keep myself away from the groups and gangs of boys that would hang around together as they do at school. It was also for these reasons that I was bullied quite a lot, and with my mum bringing me up telling me not to fight, even if I was bullied, it was best for me to keep away from most of the other kids. My escape was football. This was my only way of winning the respect of all the other kids. They respected me as a football player because I was the best one there. When they were picking teams I was always picked first. Even among all the local teams – we didn't have any academies attached to clubs at that time, so everybody played together regardless of their talent – I was always the best. That was how I gained my respect among the other boys. On the football pitch it didn't matter that I wasn't talking Dutch. Those were the times when they saw the real Theo ten Caat.

Taking all of my circumstances into consideration – my height, the way I spoke, not being allowed to fight back – I had to have some form of self-defence so I created a big mouth for myself. I thought that, aside from my footballing ability, this could be the only weapon I had. Conversely, though, this is probably also another reason why I didn't have many friends, and they gave me nicknames, not very nice ones. In fact, it was only a couple of years ago that I almost did get into a fight because of it. I happened to bump into an old schoolmate of mine and he called me by one of my old nicknames. I said to him, 'You had better go now before I smash your teeth out of your mouth.'

Everything that happens in your youth shapes you as you grow up. It makes you who you are and what you become as a person. For example, my dad was obviously very proud of me when I started playing football and showed promise, but he would never congratulate me. He would never say that I played really well, even when I had. He would always say that I could do better and he gave me challenges – how many times could I keep the ball up in the air without it touching the ground, those sort, of things. I have a bit of a feeling that because of the challenges that he had with my grandparents when he was a youngster and started playing football, he was focusing his own career on me and Freddy. In a lot of ways I can understand this.

There was another thing that really affected me in my youth that I still think about to this day. I had a cousin on my dad's side called Pedro who I was very close to. We lived in the same street and we used to hang out a lot together. He was just a few years older than me and had a big influence on the young me. We would play a lot together and he taught me how to ride a bicycle. I would go back to his house to his room and listen to his records, particularly Bay City Rollers and The Sweet. We were really good friends. He was like an older brother to me. One Sunday when I was 12 and playing for Hodo, my first youth team, Pedro and I stayed around after my game to watch the first team play and went into the cafeteria afterwards for a drink and a plate of chips. We were sitting around playing cards with a couple of other cousins and some friends. When it was time for me to leave Pedro said that he would stay for another half

an hour or so and then go home for a bit before going round to my other cousins' to watch the football on the television, so I said that I would see him tomorrow. When he got home, he fell asleep on the couch and my aunt woke him up in time for him to go out to watch the football. On the way there on his bike he got hit by a car and was killed. He was just a teenager. That's how fragile and uncertain life can be. If my aunt had woken him up just a couple of minutes earlier or later that might not have happened.

When I woke up the following day, a Monday morning, my mum told me what had happened. I cried but still had to go to school. My dad was with my uncle, my mum was at home and I had to go to school because you have to do what society says. That's the reason I was sent in that day. It wouldn't have made any difference to my schooling whatsoever and they would have understood if I had stayed home but no, society says you have to go to school so I went to school. Then of course I had homework to do and then back to school the next day, so I didn't really have time to grieve. My mum and dad didn't allow me and my brothers to go to the funeral, that's how protective they were.

If you protect your son or daughter too much and take them out of every situation where they may have to put up some kind of fight or effort, then they don't learn anything. That's why I'm like I am with my son. He has of course been in situations where he's been facing problems and I've let him try to sort them out himself. Yes, of course I'll help him and give him advice, but I'm not going to take him out of every situation he ever gets in.

My mum and dad are the nicest people on Earth but they both avoid conflict.

I realise that my youthful experiences may be one of the reasons that I always seem to have issues with authority. I make my own choices and don't let other people make decisions for me about what I have to do. If there's something I don't agree with then I'm not doing it.

I also can't stand petty authority, and I guess it goes right back to the teachers who gave me a hard time. Along with those and the ones who laughed at my regional dialect, this is why I wanted to keep a low profile. I've also had a couple of coaches who were very authoritarian and would insist their ways were correct and we had to listen to them no matter what. I would much rather discuss issues, not on authority, but based on facts and opinions, and I always like to understand why the other person is thinking the way they are.

A lot of the time when I was at school I was afraid that they were asking me something and I didn't even realise they were because of my inability to speak proper Dutch. I can laugh at it looking back now but it's different when it's happening at the time to a boy of 13 or 14 years of age and all the other children are laughing at you. There was nothing wrong with my brain, it was just that I learned my local dialect rather than actual Dutch.

It's still the same today, in fact. Not with me but with my dad. Whenever he goes to Amsterdam and is ordering a cup of coffee the waiters often think he's an Englishman talking Dutch because of the accent he has. A lot of the pronunciation

really is that different. It's like if you hear a German speaking English, you know immediately where they're from. That's what they think with my dad's accent. It's sad but it's true that many people, even in this day and age, still look at the region of Hollandscheveld and thereabouts as being not exactly a backward place, but not as good as them. It's looked at as a small town area where everyone is a farmer and doesn't know anything about modern-day living. It's up in the north-east, far away from The Hague and Amsterdam, and a lot of those people are arrogant towards us and still think they're higher class. It's not that they actually come right out and say it but you can just feel it in the way that they have opinions about you. In other places they do have a class system but we don't have that in Holland. However, the way that some people react to us being from up north where there's no industry and there are no universities would suggest they're all intellectual and we're all village idiots.

It was even worse when I was young. The world was a smaller place then. These days you've got the internet and long-haul travel and all the social media and everything else, but we didn't have any of that. We had a television with two or three networks, whereas now there are thousands. If I do a radio interview now I still hate listening to myself speaking in Dutch. If I'm in Scotland, though, I do it easily. Sometimes when I go to Amsterdam – and this is true – I just pretend that I'm Scottish. I don't want to talk Dutch to them. They think they rule the world but if you ask them what a potato looks like they don't

know! They don't know that it's grown in the ground, they think it's grown in the local supermarket.

When we were growing up, my brother Freddy and I were always playing football and, because I was older, I was a bit more assured and so would attack him, and he always had to defend. We were always playing one against one. He had to defend all the time and I was attacking all the time. It was because of those little games between us that he became a defender and I became a more attacking player. While I was running at him trying to get past him, Freddy was trying to get the ball from me by tackling, by pushing or by adjusting his angles slightly to give him an advantage. It was natural for us. We actually played together professionally for a while at FC Twente. Unfortunately for Freddy, he picked up a big injury and it finished his career. He could have gone on to have a decent career in the game. You cannot say which one of us because we were totally different types of players. It's impossible to compare positions. Ironically, he would probably have done better at Aberdeen than I did because of his style of play.

My dad was a supporter of FC Twente because he had family living near there and as youths we always went to watch their games. We used to love going to the old stadium, buying our tickets out of a wooden hut. At that time they were a really good club. In 1975 they reached the UEFA Cup Final but were beaten by a really good Borussia Mönchengladbach team. They had players such as Allan Simonsen, Uli Stielike and

Berti Vogts, who was their captain. They were just too strong for Twente.

My hero was Epi Drost. He was a defender but would always do the craziest things in his own penalty box. He never just kicked the ball away. He would try to pass it clear or even just dribble out. Any tackles that came his way he would just take on, even in tight situations. He never seemed to want to take the easiest option. He played a few times for Holland in the early 1970s and actually became my first coach in professional football. He was assistant coach at Twente working with Fritz Korbach. I played under Epi for three months when I arrived there and we used to play chess together as well. Unfortunately, he suffered a cardiac arrest during a match in 1995 with some of his former international colleagues and died. He was voted as Twente's Player of the Century and he has a statue at the stadium.

Another two heroes of mine at Twente were Arnold Mühren and Frans Thijssen. The team really did have some midfield at that time with Mühren, Thijssen and Kick van der Vall. Arnold and Frans moved to England to play with Ipswich Town at the time when Bobby Robson was their manager. I remember the 1980/81 season when they were fighting for the title with Aston Villa. I had my own room then and every time Ipswich were playing I would tune in my transistor radio and receive the BBC football service. I would try to listen to the whole game just because Mühren and Thijssen were playing there. They had a really good team; it was a shame they didn't win the league

championship but they did win the UEFA Cup. Ironically, they beat a Dutch team, AZ Alkmaar, in the final over two legs and Thijssen scored in each of the games.

Mühren was such a cultured player, he had silky skills, such a lovely touch. He went on to join Manchester United and scored in the 1983 FA Cup Final. Another of his greatest moments came in the European Championship of 1988, which Holland won. Everybody remembers that brilliant volleyed goal by Marco van Basten past Russian goalkeeper Rinat Dasayev in the final but it was Mühren who provided the cross for him.

As for Thijssen, I actually worked with him for a while when I was coaching at Twente. I was working with the under-19s and he was assistant manager of the under-21s. He was a really nice guy, modest, maybe a bit too modest in my opinion. I don't think he was really hard enough to be a coach. That being said, it's as a player that he'll always be remembered. He was a brilliant player, he really was. It's funny, we played for three of the same clubs – Twente, Groningen and Vitesse – and I only just missed having him as a team-mate every time!

I was 16 when I made my first appearance as a football player in the highest amateur league in Holland, with a team called VV Hoogeveen. When I moved there a couple of years previously I was *persona non grata* at my previous club. I was playing for Hodo, who were a local amateur team, and my move to Hoogeveen really didn't go down well with some of the people there. When I say 'didn't go down well' that was a

bit of an understatement. I had people saying to me, ‘Theo – I hope you break your leg.’

I was only 14!

These were grown-up people, adults, members of Hodo. It was absolutely disgraceful. If you think about it, what kind of crazy guys would do something like that? It’s unbelievable. I won’t name names, but members of Hodo actually said that they hoped I would break my leg after I moved to Hoogeveen. Can you imagine grown men saying that to a kid!? I still can’t fathom it. I can only put it down to jealousy, their not wanting me to be successful. If they or their kids weren’t going to make it then they would rather nobody did. It’s a crazy way of acting.

A lot of things have changed there now but I can see that certain people have a problem with me and I have no idea why. Maybe it was because of their parents telling them stories from back in the day when I was playing there, I don’t know. I mean, at my age I’m not going to be best friends with people in their 20s but even with the older generation I still feel a bit distant. I can only assume that it was because I had a successful career in football and they didn’t make it. I find it quite strange and also quite sad. They never ask me back to help out with any training sessions or anything like that.

Most of my life – when I haven’t been playing abroad – I’ve been living locally. Other teams from around the area have asked me to do certain things for them, but not Hodo. I’ve never been asked to do a clinic there or to do anything for the youth teams or even been asked for advice. My brother even played there for

ten years because he had problems with his knee, but they just don't want to know me. I was a professional footballer for 18 years, but I might as well have never even existed. Sometimes there are people who are so arrogant – and this is everywhere, I'm not just singling out Hodo here – that they're afraid of power or what they see as power. If they see anybody who has more knowledge than they have they feel threatened.

Because of all those things – the bad wishes and then their ignoring me and, actually, maybe also because of my dad not having the greatest of reputations because of his fighting – I've just avoided them. Isn't that sad, avoiding my amateur team for such a long, long period? It's still a mental thing with me. Even if I think about it now it makes me angry. How the heck does a 30- or 40-year-old guy at the same club as I am tell me that he hopes I break my leg when I move on and play for another team? That's just hatred. When I left them I was still living for five years in the community and saw those kind of people around in the street, so I just tried to avoid them. When I moved back I didn't go to the village, because I didn't feel respected there. I stayed out of the way at my dad's place and hung around with my old friends, who are farmer friends. As a result, I never socialised among the people that had been so nasty to me before.

Even now I hardly have a social life here. Anyway, I'm busy coaching and doing my own football schools and boot camps. Every year there's a carnival here. It stays in town for a week, there's a lot of music and attractions and all the kids come and

join in, all that sort of thing. One year there was a discussion about it at my boot camp.

‘Theo, why don’t you come along on the Saturday?’ they asked.

I said, ‘Well, I’m not really one for that sort of thing. I don’t really drink alcohol and after an hour everybody is drunk!’

The discussion continued, so eventually I said, ‘Okay, for you guys I’ll go. For the boot camp team, I’ll go. I’m in. On Saturday, let’s do it.’

When Saturday came around I got there quite early and there were a few people there and they were asking why I’ve come because they don’t usually see me there. I explained that the boot camp were all coming along. As the evening went on it turned out that all the boot campers came as individuals, not with each other. I thought it was going to be like a sort of team-bonding thing, which is why I agreed to go. Then after a while the first boot camper arrived and we said hello and exchanged the usual pleasantries, and then they said, ‘Nice to see you, Theo, I’m off to find my friends now.’

And so it went on with five, six, seven others. They would come in, say hello and then go and find their friends! At some point I said to one of them, ‘I’m here because of you guys, you talk to me for 30 seconds and then you go and find your friends. You’re not even asking me to join you. What’s going on? I came here for you because you wanted me to be here.’

I mean, I could handle it, I wasn’t getting upset or anything, I just thought it was a bit odd. I thought we were here to all be

together. As I've said, it isn't my idea of a fun evening out, going to a tent and watching people get drunk. Then I met somebody else that I knew and we had a chat, and then they said that they wanted to go in for a dance and that they hoped to see me again later on in the evening.

What was happening here? I was invited to come out with my boot campers, they all go their own way, I'm not being asked to join with their group of friends and there's absolutely no team bonding going on whatsoever! Walking back to my car I had to sit down because I just started laughing. I couldn't hold it in anymore, I was just laughing and laughing. We still talk about it to this day. We still make jokes about it.

Anyway, back to Hoogeveen. The level of football was much higher there, which made me choose to play for them. I was the youngest player and played for three years before going to FC Twente. We did well. We played on a Sunday and won the area championship and then beat the winners of the Saturday championship in the play-off to see who were the best team in the county. We beat them pretty easily, 4-0 or 5-0, and I scored three goals.

As had been the case at Hodo, there was also a bit of jealousy among the parents of the boys there. It was okay at first, but when I moved up to the under-17s that's when it began. There are two years of boys playing in that team: those who are 15 and those who are 16. Before I moved up there had been a certain balance in the team. As is the way in any team, if somebody else comes in, as I did, the balance changes a little and the best

player isn't the best player anymore and that affects the culture of the team. The balance in the play and in the team changed and some of the parents couldn't handle it. I was small and quick but not particularly strong when it came to the more physical aspects of the game and, because I was little, the coach there used to tell the other players to 'just kick him'. I liked to dribble with the ball round all the bigger boys. They were growing their muscles, becoming men, but I was still very small. The coach told the others to kick me and so they did. Often, I would have blood inside my boots after the training session.

The physio of that team was a real pain. He had the same attitude as the coach. He would tell me I had to get rid of the ball sooner to avoid the challenges. Either that or fight them back.

After a while of this happening I said to my dad that I didn't want to play anymore and that I wanted to quit football. I stopped going for about three or four weeks. Then I started going again but quickly got injured. The physiotherapist of the first team heard about what had happened and took me under his wing. He knew about me being one of the most talented boys in the amateur team and wanted to know why I had stopped playing football when I did. I told him it had stopped being fun for me because I was lying on the ground more than I was playing football. The other boys were kicking me all over the place and the coach was telling them 'well done'!

When you're small you develop a certain way of playing football. When you're big you develop a certain way of playing

football. When you're fast, you develop a certain way of playing football. So, because I was small and pretty quick, the way I liked to play back then was how I always liked to play when I became a professional. I was also very determined, probably because of the way I was brought up and having to put up with the things I had to go through when I was at school. I was a bit of a perfectionist as well. I always had to win the games I was playing in. Every game.

It was the physio who actually got me into the first team, and I'm very grateful to him for that. The system has changed now but at that time it was the highest level of amateur football throughout the country. It was the first time I was paid for playing football, 100 guilders a month. Another reason they tried me in the first team was, to be completely honest, because they weren't exactly very good at that time. So, what do you do? You bring in youngsters. I was 16 and in the first team and at the end of that season we were relegated, but it was my first connection with senior football.

Joop Oldejans came in as manager for the following season. Oldejans had been a professional player and coach and knew what he was doing. We didn't go back up as champions, we came second, but then FC Twente came in for me and asked me along for a trial. Epi Drost, my hero from when I used to go and watch them, was looking after the reserve team at that time, so that was a bit of a thrill for me. I played in a friendly match for the reserves, which I thought went okay, but they told me that I hadn't been good enough, so I went back to Hoogeveen

for the next season. That season we won the league easily and Twente came in for me again. This time they also asked my brother Freddy to come along as well, so we did a trial together.

After that game the manager came to see me at my house, along with the head coach and the head of scouting, and told me that they wanted me and my brother to sign on for Twente. We agreed, of course, and tried to keep cool in front of them but, naturally, we were really excited. My mother, however, disliked the idea that we would go.

It was after I had decided I was going to sign for Twente that a scout from Ajax came to me and told me not to sign for Twente and to give it a go in Amsterdam instead. They had a really good squad at the time, a lot of young players who would go on to be greats. Stanley Menzo was the goalkeeper, they had players like Ronald Koeman, Frank Rijkaard, Jesper Olsen, Gerald Vanenburg, Marco van Basten and so on. A very attractive draw indeed but I told the scout that if Ajax wanted me they were too late, I had decided to join Twente.