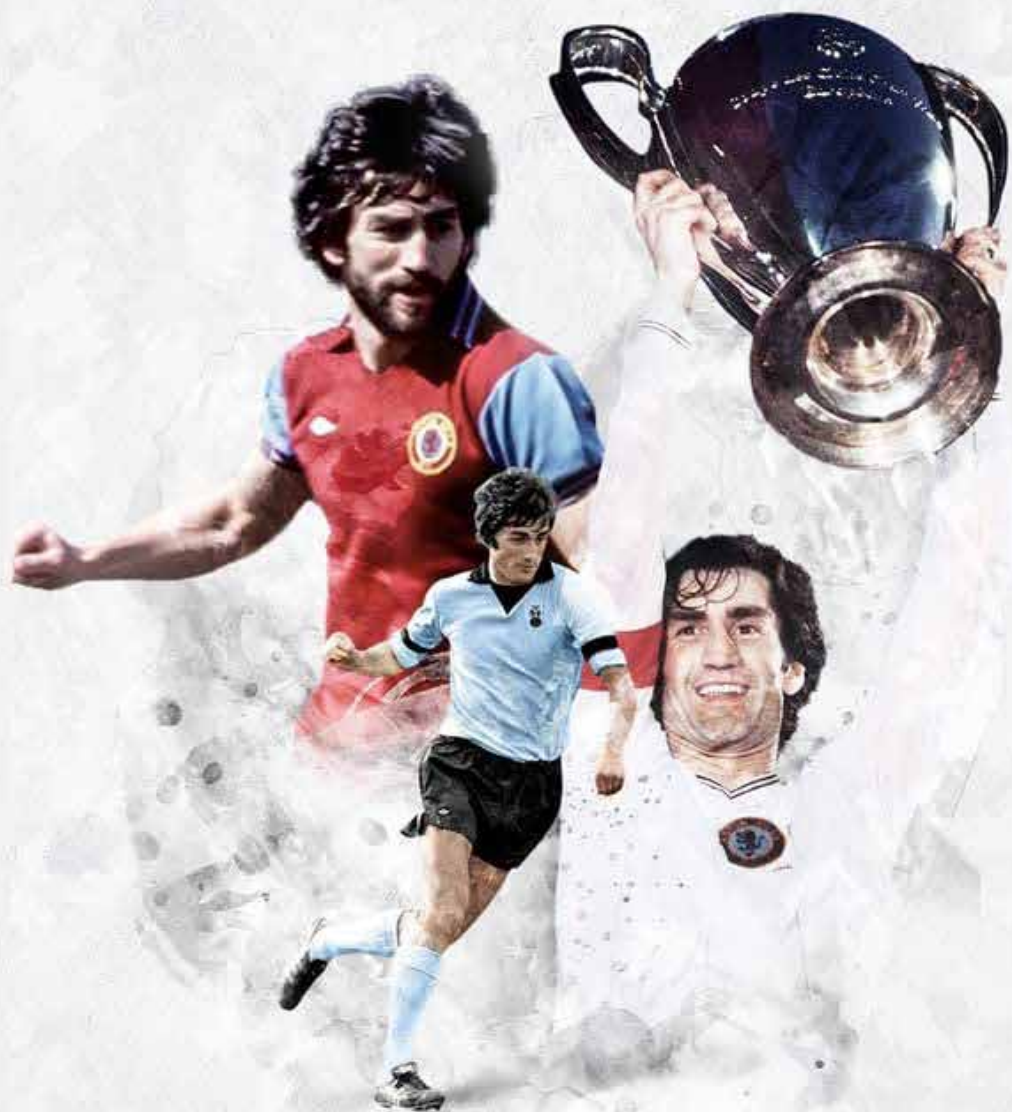


THE FULL MORTY



DENNIS MORTIMER

With Richard Sydenham

Foreword by Bryan Robson

THE FULL
MORTY
DENNIS MORTIMER

With Richard Sydenham

Foreword by Bryan Robson



Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Author's Note	11
'Dennis could easily have got an England cap'	14
Growing Up, in the Shadow of The Beatles	18
The Talented Kirkby Kids	32
Sent to Coventry	40
Teenage Rookie Takes on Beckenbauer and Best.	52
England Glances at Misfiring Sky Blues	66
I'm Signing for Aston Who?	75
The Game of Our Lives – and a Cup Win!	91
Camp Nou to Camp Blues	107
I Was No Snitch	126
Liverpool Were Taking the Piss	142
This is Why I Play Football	151
Reality Bites	169
Farewell Ron, Hello Rotterdam	183
On Borrowed Time as Deadly Returns.	200
An Ignominious End	219
Sussex by the Sea	241
Booed at the Blues	251
From Redditch to Brazil	260
Life Beyond Football	277
My Greatest Aston Villa XI	288
Memories of Morty.	297

Growing Up, in the Shadow of The Beatles

*'It wasn't donkey rides and dodgems for us
as kids like it might have been for many.
Anything that didn't cost any money, then we
might have had a go at it.'*

I WAS born on 5 April 1952 in Everton, to a Liverpool-supporting father called Joseph and a mother named Mary. When I tell people that my Mum and Dad were called Joseph and Mary, they think I'm having a laugh. I can assure you I'm not and I wasn't born in a manger either!

I was the second-oldest of six children; first there was David, who was a good footballer and was once offered an opportunity by Blackburn Rovers but decided against it. Instead, he later owned his own steel fabrication firm.

As a 6ft 1in versatile footballer who was hard in the tackle, I would liken David to the iconic Liverpool hardman defender Tommy Smith – and I know he would have made it in the game, but it wasn't to be for him. Then after me came Stephen, Jeffrey and Brian, and the youngest of us all, my sister Karen, who has worked as an administrator in the medical world. Steve didn't play any football after leaving school. Jeff played at Skelmersdale youth team then moved to Bootle with Dave.

Brian never played football and became a builder: whether a plasterer, bricklayer or plumber, he's a man of all trades. Like me, they're all still loyal Liverpool fans. Aston Villa and Coventry will always have a special place in my heart, but you can't change what you are and I'm a born and bred Scouser.

My Dad had quite a story to tell. He was a cook in the Merchant Navy before returning to Merseyside and then worked as a sales rep for a confectioner on Scotland Road, which is a well-known road in Liverpool. He later had an ice cream van and, if we were lucky, he would take us on his rounds occasionally and allow us a choc ice – which was always my ice cream of choice!

Dad wasn't done there, either. He was a road manager – or a roadie to use the correct music scene lingo – for an up-and-coming band in Liverpool called The Denims. He would go out and get them gigs, on top of his regular work. I remember him telling me once they would make about ten quid for a night. There were four in the group so he would give them all a quid each, pay for the petrol in the van and maybe he would have a quid left over for himself despite all his hard work, getting in at silly hours in the middle of the night. He would then have to go to work his regular job the following morning. I wish I had asked Dad why he bothered doing all that, but I suspect he was just ambitious more than a fun-seeker or a night owl.

I imagine he saw the likes of The Beatles taking off and wanted to play his part in forming the next John, Paul, George and Ringo, but it wasn't to be. Outside of London, Liverpool was the place to be in those days for young musicians or artists. Growing up, I never really went into the city centre as I was too young to taste the nightlife and I left home for a new life with Coventry City at 15 to become a professional footballer so the

whole Swinging Sixties movement in Merseyside kind of passed me by.

I do wish Dad was around still so I could ask him if he ever came across the Fab Four, while he was gigging with The Denims. I'm not sure, but he might well have done in those heady days. It was certainly an exciting time to be connected to the music scene in Liverpool as The Beatles, Gerry & The Pacemakers, The Merseybeats and more started to break through in Britain and further afield in some cases.

Mum's story wasn't quite as remarkable as Dad's but nonetheless she was still a hard worker who looked after us all and would then go out to her night shift at the Birds Eye factory five nights a week. You never appreciate it as kids, but I look back now and think I don't know how Mum and Dad managed to raise us all when they worked so hard to earn a living. Even when they weren't working, though, I wouldn't say we were close. Rarely did we do anything as a family. Typically, Mum would make a roast dinner on a Sunday and instead of all sitting round eating together like most families probably would, that never really happened. If Dad wasn't working, he

would probably be tinkering with a car in our garage. Mum would send one of us out to tell him his dinner was ready and he would say, 'I'll be there in five minutes.' But an hour later he was still in the garage tinkering, and by the time he would return to the house to eat his dried-up dinner that had been placed in the oven to keep warm, the rest of us would have cleared off outside to play, so the traditional family gathering wasn't really a routine we were accustomed to. The only day trips I remember us going on as a family were to visit Grandma Annie in Oswestry, before she moved back to Liverpool, near Anfield. And even those trips felt like a real painstaking exercise because the roads were so slow then that it would take what felt like a day to get there and back, never mind the visit in between.

I guess most kids would have happy memories of visits to funfairs and beaches, but we never went anywhere like that because Dad knew it would cost him money for all his kids to go on the various rides. And he never had the money to do that, so we never saw the likes of Blackpool, Southport or New Brighton because they all had a funfair. Dad instead took us over the water, across

the River Mersey, to places like Moreton and Wallasey. People might be more familiar with golf courses in that area like Hoylake and Royal Liverpool. But for us, we would be ankle-deep in mud, cockle-picking. Dad would be there with us, with our buckets because he wasn't a drinker or a smoker, so he would do things like that with us but that was about as exciting as our day trips got. It wasn't donkey rides and dodgems for us like it might have been for many. Anything that didn't cost any money, then we might have had a go at it.

I never met Grandad on my Dad's side, Joseph Nathan. But I did see more of Grandma Annie, as she lived about a mile from Anfield, which was very useful when we needed somewhere to park on matchdays! She remarried and we knew her new husband as 'Uncle Albert'. I have a more vivid recollection of my mother's Dad as he worked as a 'supervisor' – though you could say 'cleaner' to be more exact – in the WC in the town of Kirkby, the other end to where we lived. Grandad Wilkinson (called Frederick) liked a bet on the horses. It wasn't unusual for him to drop in to our house on a lunchtime so he could listen to a race or two that he no

doubt had a flutter on. He would always leave half a crown for the kids when he left – whether he won or not! Grandma Wilkinson, or Alice, was quite an eccentric lady and I remember her always holding a carrier bag. The reason being she was a hoarder and would pick up bits of wood off the floor that she thought would make good firewood. I wouldn't say I was close to any of my grandparents, though. I don't recall any long, memorable chats with any of them.

We first lived in a terraced two-up two-down house in Kirkby on Rusland Road. It was a bit crowded for us six kids in a house that never had enough bedrooms. I had to share a bed with two of my brothers, Stephen and Brian. That was a sign of the times when families were much bigger. Things were very different then. Typical childhood memories were of being outside and keeping busy because there wasn't much to do inside, unlike the youngsters nowadays, who are spoiled for choice with their various electrical devices and television channels. We had a black and white television, but I never watched it apart from maybe the odd early episodes of *Doctor Who* with all the daleks. But rarely did we sit down together as

a family and watch television. There was nothing in our house that kept us inside. Our life then was on the street. People had big families in those days and the streets would just be full of kids outside, playing. Mum and Dad worked so much we often took care of ourselves if their shifts clashed and even if Dad was home, he wasn't with us most of the time. If we weren't playing football at the local school playing field, we'd be playing 'follow the leader' running around and jumping over walls or similar daredevil adventures that undoubtedly would have helped me become the good athlete I was later in my football career.

We would dare each other to jump across the River Alt – long before it joined the River Mersey – and I don't ever remember falling in! We also used to go bean picking for pocket money on the farmer's fields over Ormskirk way. We'd get up ridiculously early and cycle out to the countryside and fill up these sacks full of beans and the farmer would give us a shilling a sack. So, I was used to an outdoor way of life from an early age.

I don't remember how old I was when I first kicked a ball or when I started playing the game. But what I do

know is that once I did start playing football, that was it. My life was just about football. What else was there to do?

My Dad was a keen Liverpool fan and would take me to every home game. He started going a lot more once Bill Shankly led them, in 1962, back to the top flight, where they have remained ever since of course. Not all the brothers went but I always did so I guess I showed the most interest in football in those days. I wish I could tell you honestly when Dad took me to my first game and recite the score and match details, but I haven't got a clue. However, I know it would be around the early to mid-Sixties when Shankly started to make a real difference to the club and set it on the path to where it is today, as one of the most successful clubs in the world. Therefore, I'd have been around 12 when they won the league in 1964. I will certainly never forget the first team I idolised: Tommy Lawrence in goal; Gerry Byrne right-back, Ronnie Moran left-back, Tommy Smith and Ron Yeats in the centre of defence – but sometimes Phil Ferns; Gordon Milne and Willie Stevenson in midfield, then that amazing forward line of Ian Callaghan, Roger Hunt, Peter Thompson and Ian St John. They were all my heroes. I didn't ever go

round, when playing on the park, saying, 'Today I'm Peter Thompson' or Gordon Milne or whoever, I idolised the whole team. Maybe that's because in those days there wasn't huge exposure of players like we see today in the media. There weren't many television interviews or any internet or mobile phone coverage of course like we see everywhere now. So, your heroes were more real because if you wanted to meet them you physically had to go and see them, and I did exactly that! They were much more accessible in those days, too.

I became a collector of photos, especially pictures of the Liverpool team, which I used to cut out of the newspapers. During school holidays I would get on my bike and ride down to the Melwood training ground. They didn't let you inside, so we had to peer over the top of this brick wall that circled the training pitches. Afterwards, the players came out and would drive down to Anfield for a shower. So, we would get on our bikes and meet them down there. By the time we reached the ground, the players would invariably be showered and began to leave. This was our moment to pounce and ask the players to sign our autograph books or, in my case, the photos that I had scissored out of the

papers. The players were friendly and cooperative apart from one player who sticks in my mind as being difficult to get an autograph from, and that was Willie Stevenson. He would never sign an autograph – everybody else would but he never did. Everyone was so respectful in those days. We waited in line and would all be expected to say, ‘Can I have your autograph please, Mr Hunt?’ or whoever. I have noticed in more recent times how people just shove a photograph or autograph book under your nose and expect you to sign it for them. If I see rudeness or people pushing ahead of other people when they want my signature, I will tell them, ‘Back off, mate.’

I had a fantastic collection of autographs and signed Liverpool players’ photographs. That wasn’t the only thing I collected. I also had a wonderful stash of DC comics and Marvel comics: *Spiderman*, *Batman*, *Iron Man*, *Daredevil*, *The Fantastic Four* and so on. I never liked *Superman*, though.

I was doing a paper round at the age of 12 and earning a pound a week, so I was rich! Especially with the sixpence off my grandad was well. I shouldn’t have been allowed to have a paper round at that age, but I

did. I bought the comics with my wages and developed a great collection.

‘What happened to the collections?’ I hear you all saying. Well, it’s a tragic story but sadly true. When my parents moved into their final house, the one they died in that was still in Kirkby but nearer to the East Lancashire Road, my immaculate, numbered collections that had been stored in a wardrobe, never made the cut of the treasured possessions deemed important enough to be shifted to the new family home. But I only found this out very recently. I obviously relocated to the West Midlands at 15 so wasn’t around as much as my brothers. I asked Stephen what happened to my autographs and comics, and he said, ‘Oh we threw them away because you weren’t around anymore.’ I was angry with myself that over those years I never went back to claim my possessions. Why didn’t I say to Mum, ‘Whatever you do, don’t throw my things away.’ I just never thought that Mum and Dad would move. I was devastated when I found out that they were thrown out with the rubbish, especially when you think of what original Marvel comics are worth nowadays. I had them all from number one all

the way through. Losing the comics was bad enough but I was more upset at the Liverpool football player autographs and photos. I had spent hours waiting around collecting them.

Anyway, back to my early Anfield experiences. I have got great memories of watching Liverpool from The Boys' Pen, which was alongside The Kop. It cost Dad half a crown to get into The Kop and then a shilling for me to get into The Boys' Pen. You could see everyone swaying in The Kop, the atmosphere was incredible. The game that stands out most vividly is the Celtic semi-final second leg in the European Cup Winners' Cup in 1966. It was just after my 14th birthday. Jock Stein's Celtic team became the revered Lisbon Lions a year later by becoming the first British team to win the European Cup, so they were a tough challenge for Shankly's Liverpool.

The first leg finished 1-0 to Celtic in front of 76,446. There were more than 54,000 for the second leg and the atmosphere that night was unbelievable. I remember the steam coming off the crowd on this cold night, such was the heat they generated. I've never seen anything like it since. It was a fog emanating from The Kop, which

witnessed goals from Tommy Smith and Geoff Strong within six second-half minutes to seal the win. I dreamt of being a Liverpool footballer as a kid and it was nights like that which strengthened that feeling. Although I probably didn't think that way when the Celtic fans started throwing bottles on the pitch to try and get the match abandoned!

Liverpool went through to the final to play Borussia Dortmund, at Hampden Park in Glasgow. It was my first proper away game if I don't count Everton. A Ron Yeats own goal in extra time gave the Germans the win but this Shankly team were far from done and went on to win many more trophies; a baton that Bob Paisley, Joe Fagan and then Kenny Dalglish took on for many a year. Those early days at Anfield had a powerful, lasting impression on me. Quite simply, I was inspired to make something of myself in football. Having been fortunate enough to watch first-hand the start of the Liverpool golden era take shape under Shankly, with league titles in 1964 and 1966 and an FA Cup win in 1965, I remember thinking when I received my first pro contract at Coventry City, 'I can't play this game and not win something.'