



THE 'LIMPING' PHYSIO



JOHN SHERIDAN

A Life in Football

Forewords by
**David Pleat &
Gary Mabbutt MBE**

THE
'LIMPING'
PHYSIO

JOHN SHERIDAN

A Life in Football

Forewords by
David Pleat &
Gary Mabbutt MBE



Contents

Foreword by David Pleat	7
Foreword by Gary Mabbutt MBE	9
Preface	11
1. My Early Years.	13
2. From Production Line to Professional Football	27
3. In at the Deep End	43
4. Surgeons, Injuries and Professor Smillie	53
5. Life at Luton in the 1980s	68
6. Off to Spurs	87
7. All Change at Spurs	97
8. Paul Gascoigne and that Free Kick	107
9. That Tackle	116
10. The Fightback Begins and Fishy Tales	123
11. Disaster and the Fightback Begins Again.	135
12. The Beginning of the End at Tottenham	148
13. A New Start	159
14. Stories from Around the World	168
15. Matchdays	180
16. Injury Management, Assessment and Rehabilitation	188
17. Other Memories	206
18. Fun on the Fairway	221
19. Looking Back	229
Postscript	235
Acknowledgements.	250

My Early Years

WHAT I want to do in this book is to tell the story of my life to share with my family and friends. It has been an astonishing journey with many highs and lows, and I have been lucky enough to meet some wonderful people along the way and have made some fantastic lifelong friends. From humble beginnings working as a trainer for Taverners to travelling the world and going to some of the greatest football stadiums as a physiotherapist with Luton Town and Tottenham Hotspur, it has been a pleasure and privilege every step of the way.

Let me start from the beginning. I was born during the Second World War in Glasgow in February 1943. At the time, my father Thomas was serving in the Highland Light Infantry as a chef and was posted to Africa. While he was away our home was Maryhill Barracks in Glasgow. Dad was a brave man who like many of his peers very rarely spoke about the war. In fact, I can only remember one occasion when he spoke to me about his experiences of that time. We had gone for a drink together at the Shepherd and Flock pub in Luton, when he started to get emotional as he told me some of his memories including the landing in Africa and losing some of his friends.

After the war had finished, Dad returned home. He had to look for a job and it was decided we would move south to

England as there were many more job opportunities. So just after I turned three, my dad, mum Edna and my two older brothers Tony and Tommy moved to Luton in Bedfordshire. Our first house in the town was 38 Abbey Drive, a newly built semi-detached three-bedroom council house. Luton was a good place to live at the time – a thriving market town with a vast workforce and numerous job opportunities at large companies such as Vauxhall Motors, Electrolux and SKF. There was a big open market and numerous shops, which was the heart of the town up until the early 1970s when they were unfortunately demolished for the new Arndale Shopping Centre.

Not long after we arrived, Dad found employment at Vauxhall as a press tool operator. We settled quickly, so much so that our family increased during this time as my beloved sisters Anne and Pat were born. We were a working-class family. Dad worked long hours and Mum had various cleaning jobs just to make ends meet but my childhood was an extremely happy one.

Although we didn't have a lot of money, Mum and Dad would always try and take us on holiday during the summer. We would go from Luton to Rye, in East Sussex, to stay with my step-grandma Annie and grandad Tommy at their pub, the Plough Inn. Mum and Dad would be there for a week before heading back to Luton while us children would remain there for the rest of the summer break. It was more of a working holiday as Grandma and Grandad trained me to work in their pub. So, from 12 years old I could clean the pipes, change the barrels and sometimes run the bar when Grandad was having a break. I was told that some customers would come in for a drink just to get served by this young barman!

We also had more family in Rye as my mum's sister lived locally, so sometimes I would go and stay with Auntie Jean

and Uncle Tim. Uncle Tim was an extremely clever man and I quickly formed a strong bond with him. He showed me how to fish in the many rivers nearby and taught me how to enjoy living in the country; we would spend many hours roaming the Sussex countryside. He told me I was like a second son to him, right up until the day he passed away.

As our family was growing bigger my eldest brother Tommy went to live with Grandma and Grandad in Rye. He was extremely talented as a child and became head boy at Rye Grammar School before joining the RAF, where he was a telecommunications engineer and served in the Cypriot War of Independence between 1955 until 1959. I was always very close to Tommy, who was a great brother and would always look after me. Whenever he came back for a visit he would take me to watch a football match at either Luton Town or Leicester City. My other brother Tony went into the army and served in the Malayan Emergency until he demobbed in 1960 and joined the local police force in Luton.

My first school was Hart Hill Infant and Juniors. I was academically average but like most boys of that age I just wanted to be outside playing sport. When it was time to leave the juniors, I went to Old Bedford Road Senior School. It had a reputation for being a tough place to go to but I have good memories of this period of my life until my education was cruelly cut short.

On a cold, damp winter's day in 1957, I had an accident which would change my life forever. My dear mother had scrimped and scraped for a long time to save money for my birthday present. Not long after my birthday I was happily riding my bike when disaster struck. I had just cycled through Abbotswood Field, but the tyres must have picked up some mud because as soon as I got back on to the road my back wheel

slid from under me. I lost my balance and fell off on to my left hip on the rock-hard road. After managing to get up, I still felt shocked but dusted myself down and limped home with wounded pride. Over the next few days I began to feel unwell and the pain in my hip gradually got worse, until I woke up in bed one morning with a high temperature. As soon as Mum saw me she knew that something was seriously wrong. I remember her dropping everything and rushing me to A&E at the Luton and Dunstable Hospital. As soon as the doctor examined me, I was immediately admitted to the ward and was then seen by an orthopaedic consultant.

My condition quickly deteriorated and I was transferred to the intensive care unit. To help get my high temperature under control, the nurses used ice packs and surrounded my bed with fans. Unfortunately, over the next few weeks, I became gravely ill and was fighting for my life. At one point my brother Tommy, who was serving in Cyprus in the RAF, was flown home as I wasn't expected to make it through the night. I continued to fight and with the help of penicillin I gradually recovered. My stay in hospital lasted for four months and tests showed that I had developed osteomyelitis in my left femur, which is a serious bacterial infection that spreads to the bone.

After finally leaving hospital I was allowed to go back to school. However, a few months later disaster struck again. As my hip was still weak, I had to get the bus to and from school. One lunchtime I was travelling home and the bus I was on approached my stop so I got up from my seat on the top deck. As I started to walk down the steep stairs I tripped and fell all the way down to the bottom, ending up on the platform of the bus. I managed to crawl off the platform and ended up sprawled on the pavement in extreme pain. Unbeknown to me

I had sustained a triple fracture of the same left femur that I had just recovered from.

Somehow I got up on to my feet and with all my weight on my right leg I started to hop home. I had to hang on to fences and lampposts to keep my balance. If things couldn't get any worse, as I approached home, I fell over the wall into our front garden. I can't remember getting into the house but when Mum came home from work, she found me unconscious on the dining room floor. An ambulance was called and I was rushed to Luton and Dunstable Hospital where they managed to stabilise my condition. However, due to the severity of my injury I was transferred to the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in Stanmore for further assessment and the treatment that would hopefully get me back to a normal life. I certainly owe the hospital so much for how I was treated in those early days.

It was one of the leading orthopaedic hospitals in the country. Throughout my time there I was in a ward with boys of a similar age. The majority were long-term patients, with many suffering from polio. While I was there I made some good friends. I remember one occasion when myself and another lad almost got into trouble with the police. After a long time spent in bed, I had finally been able to get up with the aid of crutches, so the two of us decided to get some fresh air and explore our surroundings. We found a hole in the fence and somehow managed to get through to the other side, where we then found ourselves on the property of the London Transport Sports Club. The building was unlocked and we both hobbled on our crutches into the sports hall. Inside we found some archery equipment, so there was nothing else for it and we enjoyed a couple of hours of archery practice. It seems as if we didn't tidy up well enough as a couple of days later the police

visited the hospital investigating a break-in at the sports club. We pleaded our innocence, saying, 'It couldn't have been us, there is no way we could have broken in on crutches.' Our pleas seemed to work but that was the end of our archery escapades!

Without fail my dear mum would come and see me every weekend, even though back in those days it was a long and arduous journey. She would have to catch three buses from Luton to Stanmore then three buses back again, which must have taken her all day. I have always had a passion for seafood, so the day before a visit she would make a special trip to the market to buy me some cockles and whelks, and if I was really lucky Mum would occasionally bring a pot of jellied eels. I bet the other people on the bus loved the strong smell of fish every week.

The hospital staff were great, and sometimes they would arrange entertainment for us to improve morale. I remember on one occasion the famous pianist Russ Conway treated us to a performance of his new number one hit, 'Side Saddle', but unfortunately I was unable to get up and dance.

I spent about 14 months there trying to recover. The treatment consisted of traction, plaster and physiotherapy. Even after all this help, my left leg had become approximately four inches shorter than my right leg, which was due to the growth plate being damaged in my left femur. Near the end of my stay in hospital I remember the nursing staff telling me, 'Unfortunately you will never walk without aid ever again.'

Throughout this long period my schooling had suffered badly. Even though they provided two part-time teachers I hadn't really learnt a lot during that time. I had gone from being a young lad who loved sport to being a lad who couldn't walk without sticks. Before my injury I had a bubbly personality

but the couple of years of pain and treatment had taken its toll on me. I became introverted and was worried if I would ever find work. I was a young man in the prime of life but with a disability and had to use two walking sticks and a modified shoe to walk.

Despite everything I had been through, I was determined to lead as normal a life as possible. Just before my 16th birthday I decided to go to the Labour Exchange to try and find a job. There were plenty of opportunities and one of the first ones I came across was for a French polisher. To be honest I didn't even know what the job entailed but undeterred, I went for an interview and was offered the position. My first job was as a trainee French polisher at Blundell's Furniture Workshop in Castle Street, Luton, under the excellent tuition of John George.

Getting out into the real world was a godsend and helped me regain some degree of confidence and normality. Since coming out of hospital I had managed to get rid of one of the two sticks that I needed to walk, but I still relied heavily on that remaining aid. While working on the furniture I would leave the stick hanging safely on a coat hook in the polishing room. After about three months in the job I had just finished a long day then tidied up and put the tools away. Just before putting my coat on I went to get to my stick, which was nowhere to be seen. I looked at John George and discovered he had sawn it in half. John was a good man who looked after me when I first started at Blundell's, but he thought I could walk unaided so in his wisdom he decided to destroy my stick. At the time I remember feeling devastated as I had accepted I would need a stick and felt unable to walk without it. I managed to limp to the bus stop and make it home. John was right – the loss of

having a stick was a blessing in disguise as I slowly learned to walk without it.

However, even though I had managed to get rid of the sticks I was still having problems with my leg and the modified shoe I wore. To help me walk I would visit a cobbler in Castle Street to adapt all of my left shoes. He would put a four-inch sole on them but I would continually wear them down. So, when I was about 22, I went to see my consultant and asked about the possibility of shortening my right leg to match my left. He tried to dissuade me from having it done as it was a big and risky operation. But with great reluctance he agreed to perform an osteotomy, which consisted of cutting my right femur and removing part of it, realigning it then plating the bone to encourage it to heal. Although there was a risk, my mum knew how important this operation was to me – she gave me her blessing as she just wanted me to be happy. The operation was a success, so after four weeks in hospital, I walked out on crutches having gone from 6ft 1in to 5ft 9in tall but importantly my limp wasn't as pronounced. I couldn't wait to get home so I could throw away all of my modified shoes and go shopping for trousers of the same leg length. I am paying for it now though as whenever I go to the doctors and my BMI is checked I have to tell them that I used to be 6ft 1in and that I haven't been over-eating!

With my new-found confidence and zest for life, I regained some much-needed independence and enjoyed a social life. I had a good group of friends, and we would go to the Monkey Puzzle Club in Round Green to play snooker or enjoy watching the cream of the best 1960s groups at the Majestic Dance Hall. My confidence had grown so much that I even worked as a barman in the Jolly Topers pub in Round Green.

I also decided it was time to get more mobile so I bought a moped. After riding on a provisional licence for approximately six months it was time to get a bigger bike. However, gaining my motorcycle licence wasn't as plain-sailing as I had hoped in the era when the examiner would say, 'Off you go, son. I will walk around and watch from the pavement.' I set off confidently, noticing the examiner at various points of the route, and things were seemingly going well – then disaster, as I rode on a busy road near the town hall and a pedestrian stepped off the kerb into my path. It was too late to swerve out of the way so I hit him with a loud 'THUD'. He went flying and somehow I managed to stay on my bike, but unfortunately the examiner witnessed the whole episode. I returned to the test centre fearing the worst, and my fears then became reality when the examiner turned to me and said, 'I'm afraid you have failed, Mr Sheridan. The reason is because you hit a pedestrian, which is a shame as you were doing well.' I was disappointed but understood, so I retook the test a few months later and passed with flying colours.

After a short time I had saved enough money to buy a bigger bike and was now the proud owner of a 650cc Matchless twin motorbike with a sports sidecar. I enjoyed riding thousands of miles all over the country, including going to Scotland for the New Year's Eve celebrations. My friends loved going in the sidecar, until an incident that left my passenger in fear of his life. We were enjoying a day out and had just joined the M1 motorway near Dunstable, when all of a sudden, I heard a loud 'CRACK' and to my horror the motorcycle and sidecar separated. I slowed and came to a stop on the hard shoulder of the motorway but the sidecar careered up the grass verge with the passenger displaying a look of horror on his face.

Fortunately, he safely came to a stop about 50 yards in front of me. I don't think he ever went in a sidecar again! I carried on riding the bike for the next few years but decided it might be safer without the sidecar.

After my biking days came to an end, I decided it would be the right time to take my car driving test. My brother Tommy was now working abroad as a telecommunications engineer and while he was away, he would let me look after his car. So after a few lessons I felt confident enough to book my test. As I arrived at the test centre, I couldn't believe my eyes when the examiner called my name – it was the same one who had taken me for my motorcycle test a few years previously. I must have made an impression on him as he said, 'Morning, Mr Sheridan. Can you read that number plate over there, and I hope you are not going to run over anyone today.' Luckily enough the test went without any hiccups and I passed first time.

I left Blundell's to work for Claridge and Hall, continuing to work on furniture but also house décor. I enjoyed my time working in this industry but unfortunately the money wasn't great so I decided to move on and in those days there were plenty of jobs, so I managed to get a position on the production line rubbing down and priming cars. Even though I was able to earn more money, I was still unsure what I wanted to do as a profession.

After two years I left Vauxhall Motors to join a government training scheme and trained as a plant fitter in Letchworth. I completed the training in six months, and with my new-found skills I was back off to Vauxhall but in a better position as I was employed as a pre-delivery check operative. This role meant I was tasked with repairing any faults in new cars that had just rolled off the production line. I enjoyed this job as it meant

I could take the new cars for a test drive after they had been repaired.

During this time, I met Betty. We started seeing each other after meeting at a friend's wedding. We immediately hit it off and it wasn't long before I proposed. Our wedding on 18 May 1968 was at St Thomas Church in Stopsley, with Tommy as my best man. We then moved into our first house in Cobden Street, Luton. It was a three-bedroomed terrace house with no bathroom, and despite the outside toilet we had so many happy memories there. It wasn't long before we were lucky enough to have our first child, my daughter Debbie. Another happy addition to the Sheridan family came two years later as my first son Andrew was born in 1970.

A couple of years after going back to Vauxhall, there was an opportunity within the company to gain an adult apprenticeship as a tool maker. This was a highly skilled job and there was plenty of competition. I managed to impress at the interview and was offered the role, for which part of the apprenticeship included going to college one day a week to learn subjects such as maths and technical drawing. This was a real bonus for me as it helped make up for the amount of time I had missed at school earlier in my life.

Even though my career at Vauxhall was going well I still missed the buzz and excitement of competitive sport. Before the accidents I was extremely active, would run everywhere and loved playing football. Since the accidents my sporting activities were almost zero, but this changed during my time at Vauxhall when myself and a colleague called Tony Beaumont decided to form a ten-pin bowling team. After recruiting one more employee, Bill Gentle, we started practising at the Greenways Bowl in Stopsley, Luton. Our team name was the Crestas after

the famous Vauxhall car that was built at the plant. This was the time when ten-pin bowling was all the rage, so after hours and hours of practice there was a steady improvement and we discovered the team could play to a good standard. The Crestas became one of the most successful teams in Bedfordshire and won numerous trophies; finally, I could compete in competitive sport on an equal footing.

One night that sticks in my mind is a league decider. We had gone into the game in second place while our opponents were top, so whichever team won would be crowned champions. I had been going through a tough time as my father Thomas had been ill for a few months with terminal lung cancer. Two days before the final match he had taken a turn for the worse and I sat by his bedside as he tragically passed away at such a young age. Our family were devastated as we tried to come to terms with our loss, so I took some time off work to help Mum sort things out and support my brothers and beloved sisters Anne and Pat. My mind was in a daze and I had forgotten about everything else; my only focus was the family. On the day of the match I was sitting at home on the sofa when Mum said to me, 'John, what about your match tonight?' I replied, 'Mum, I don't want to play and leave you.' She told me, 'You need to go and play, it will do you good to leave the house for a couple of hours.' I decided to go but that night is still a blur and all I know is that my two mates must have played out of their skin as I was still in a daze and didn't contribute much. Somehow we won by a few pins and I'm sure Dad was looking over me that evening.

Unfortunately my two team-mates from that night have passed away. Tony became a lifelong friend; I had the honour of being his godfather even though he was older than me! He arranged to get married before he had been baptised so a

last-minute baptism was organised, allowing the ceremony to take place. Over the years I have had the odd game of ten-pin bowling with my grandchildren and now and again I would get a strike, so my mind would sometimes drift and think of my two friends who carried me over the line that night to victory and helped me enjoy a couple of hours of normality at such a difficult time of my life.

By 1974 I was still at Vauxhall as a tool maker after completing the adult apprenticeship the previous year. The job involved making the die that produced the parts for the new vehicles. We had to work to extremely small tolerances and the die could take months to build. Even though I enjoyed engineering I still didn't feel that I had discovered my true vocation in life.

A good friend of mine told me that the local brewery, Whitbread, were looking for a cold store operative. This was a semi-skilled position that involved filtering, chilling and adding additives to the wide range of beers that the brewery produced. Part of the role also meant that you had to taste the beer to make sure it was okay! Despite this added bonus, the main thing that drew me to the position was the extra responsibility of working in the company surgery. I had experience of doing so while at Vauxhall and it was something I thoroughly enjoyed. The brewery was also a lot closer to my home, which meant I could cut down on the commute to work.

After attending an interview at the brewery I was told that subject to a medical the position was mine. I immediately accepted and after passing the medical I left my job at Vauxhall to start a new career at Whitbread. As soon as I walked through the door on that first day, I knew I had made the right decision. Whitbread were an excellent company to work for; they looked after their employees and provided a fantastic working

environment. Each department had its own bar that could be used while at work, and we were even allowed two free pints per shift. During the next four years I can honestly say I loved every minute of my time there. As well as being a cold store operative I also became the company safety officer and industrial first aider. To enable me to undertake these responsibilities I had to attend numerous courses and when required I covered in the company surgery to treat any injuries or accidents.

And in 1974 my second son Paul was born, to join my other children Debbie and Andy. We also moved the same year to a new house; we loved our time at Cobden Street but it had become infested with mice due to the demolition of factories close by. With the arrival of Paul, we had also outgrown our home so it was time to move on. The council relocated us to a lovely new house at 12 Butely Road, and we bought the house a few years later while Margaret Thatcher was in power.

I would have been content to stay with Whitbread. In 1978 I was asked to take a supervisor's exam and attend an interview for a position at their plant in Magor, Wales. I was offered the position but it meant relocating, so I was given time to think it over with Betty. However, I was unaware that shortly my career was about to go in a different direction.