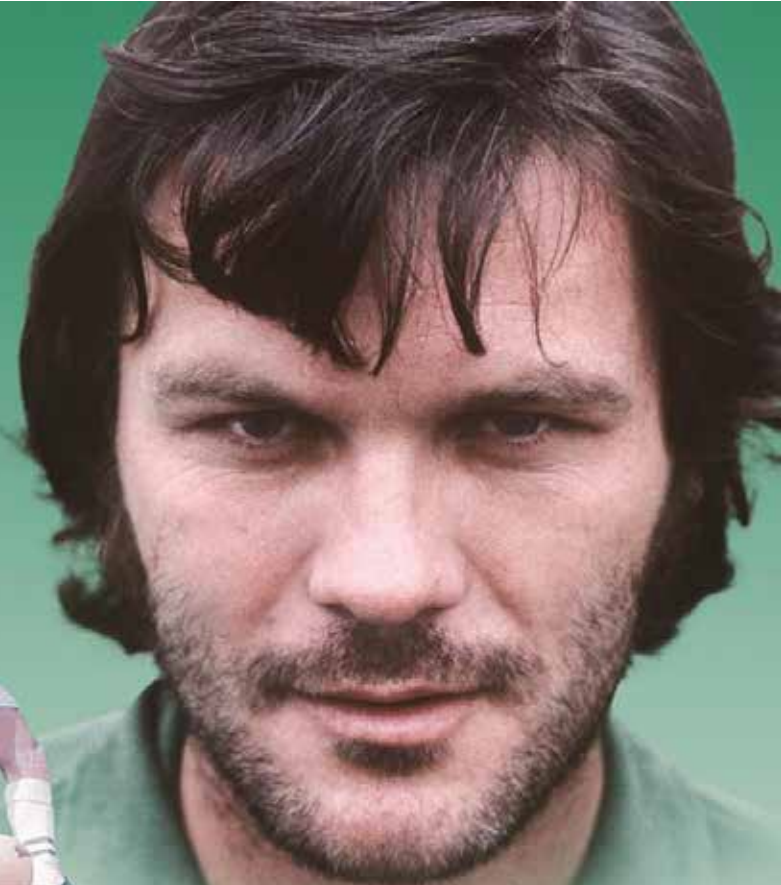


Alan Hester



# STEVE DEATH

## TINY KEEPER

Record Breaker,  
Shy Genius  
and Maverick



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## Prologue

# The End of the Beginning

**Manchester City:** Dowd, Book, Pardoe, Doyle, Booth, Oakes, Summerbee, Bell, Lee, Young, Coleman

**West Ham United:** Death, Moore, Stephenson, Bonds, Lampard, Boyce, Brooking, Peters, Sissons, Hurst, Redknapp

When the young Stephen Death ran out for West Ham United at Maine Road to play Manchester City in April 1969, he was part of a team containing some of the greatest players to ever play the game. Geoff Hurst, Bobby Moore and Martin Peters had been part of England's legendary 1966 World Cup-winning side; other stars such as Harry Redknapp, Frank Lampard, Trevor Brooking, Billy Bonds and John Sissons were also in the Hammers' team for a 1-1 draw against the previous season's First Division champions.

City had Mike Summerbee, Colin Bell and Francis Lee – their own trio of club legends. They also had other greats such as Tony Book, Neil Young and Glyn Pardoe, whose

71st-minute shot came off the post to become the solitary goal Death was to concede at the highest level of English football. The Citizens had won the FA Cup four days before the match, beating Leicester City 1-0, and paraded the trophy to their fans moments before kick-off. This was the pinnacle of the game, and Steve was sharing a pitch with the top players of the day, in the top division of the English Football League.

There was only ever one thing that prevented Steve from being a regular for West Ham as their number one goalkeeper, or from moving on to another top-flight club. This was the same thing that in the opinion of everyone who saw him play also stopped him from playing for England. His height.

At 5ft 7.5in he was considered too small to be a top-class goalkeeper, but according to every professional who ever played with him, he had every other attribute to be the very best. Skill, bravery, positional sense, speed and for a quiet man, the ability to dominate his area and as one centre-half says, to loudly and clearly 'let you know'. Harry Redknapp saw him in training every day and describes him as 'an incredible goalkeeper, a great, great goalkeeper'. Dave Llewellyn, a striker who played in the youth team with him at West Ham, calls him 'the best young goalkeeper I have ever seen'. Stuart Morgan, another team-mate, both at West Ham and later at Reading, describes him as 'a different class'.

Llewellyn says now, 'If Steve had been my height he would have played for England.' Llewellyn was 6ft 1in. The difference between international stardom and a career in the Third and Fourth Divisions was just six inches.

Death was kept out of the first team by regulars Bobby Ferguson and Peter Grotier, and there was little future at West Ham as a third-choice goalkeeper. Although he would have more brushes with greatness in the next few years, this was the closest he would get to the status his talent deserved.

As football debuts go, it doesn't get much better. That day's crowd of 31,846 would be the biggest he ever played in front of as a professional, and he saw a Martin Peters header give his team the lead before being pegged back by Pardoe's late goal. It could have led to a glittering career at the top echelons of the game, but it didn't, and everyone knew it.

A newspaper strike meant there were no Sunday papers to record the game for posterity, and the match report on the following Monday in the *Manchester Guardian* didn't even mention his name, showing Ferguson's name on the team sheet, as did the matchday programme.

In reality, this was a relaxed, end-of-season game with nothing riding on it for either side and by November the following season he had left Upton Park, going on loan to Third Division Reading in search of first-team football.

He made such an impression there that the move was made permanent as soon as Reading could afford the transfer fee

of £20,000 – the highest they had paid in their entire history at that time. It took the Royals until the beginning of the following season to raise the money and for an unfashionable club with a parsimonious board of directors and few previous signs of ambition this was a huge vote of confidence in their tiny keeper.

Death may have missed out on the big time, but in moving to Reading he became a club legend and a hero to many, breaking local and national records and playing 537 first-team games over a 13-year career. In his time at Reading, Death was voted player of the year four times, with the first award coming while still on loan from West Ham while the board scrambled to find the money to sign him. He was also selected twice by his fellow professionals for the PFA's divisional team of the year.

Far from being a disappointment, this move was the start of a truly special career.

## Playing with Death

### **Stuart Morgan (West Ham, 1967-69; Reading, 1969-72)**

*A former Welsh amateur boxing champion, centre-half Morgan joined West Ham as a teenager in 1967, and following a loan spell with Torquay United he eventually moved to Reading with Death in 1969, signing on the same day. He made 48 appearances for the club before moving on to successful spells at Colchester United and AFC Bournemouth. When his playing career ended he went into management with Weymouth, Torquay United and Dorchester Town before working in scouting for his former West Ham colleague Harry Redknapp back at Bournemouth.*

He was a bit of a loner. Loud enough on the pitch but off it he kept himself to himself. He went home at weekends a lot more than most players. He wasn't quiet on the pitch at all. Between him and Dave Llewellyn their friendship and support kept me at West Ham when I was a teenager missing my family back in Wales.



Steve and I couldn't have picked a much tougher baptism to our professional football careers than the East End of London during the late 60s and with a top First Division club, renowned for its coaching abilities with Ron Greenwood the head of coaching and management. I left home on the beautiful Gower coastline in south-west Wales at 17 years and Steve had come from a very close family in rural Norton, in beautiful Suffolk. Along with another Welsh signing, Dave Llewellyn from Penarth, we were all in the same boat of being terribly homesick, but we all became great comrades who helped one another at lonely times with our digs nearby.

None of ours turned out to be glamorous careers with Steve and I joining Reading and Dave signing for Peterborough in the lower divisions, but we all played numerous Football League games, which we all can be proud of.

Steve's enthusiasm for coaching and management was low, which sadly saw him drift away from the game and friends he knew well, which was such a sad end for such a popular goalkeeper.

### **Dave Llewellyn (West Ham 1969-71)**

*Llewellyn was close to both Death and Morgan, living in nearby digs and playing in the same youth and reserve*

*teams. The centre-forward made six appearances for the first team at West Ham before moving to Peterborough United, scoring 15 times in 63 appearances.*

I got transferred to Peterborough and I scored against him when we played Reading, and he absolutely hated it. He was the nicest person you could ever wish to meet, but he could have made it as a top pro. He would have made the England team without a doubt. He was a good friend. He went on loan and signed for Reading. If you saw him he would always have a nice talk with you - and a cigarette!

He turned down the England youth team when we were at West Ham. He didn't give a reason; he just didn't want to do it. When he played for England Schoolboys, he kept Peter Shilton out of the side. If Steve had grown taller, Shilton wouldn't have got a game, he was that good.