



NORMAN
GILLER

MY

70 YEARS OF SPURS

A Long Walk Down
White Hart Lane



Foreword by
Steve Perryman MBE

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Contents

Acknowledgements9
Introduction: Steve Perryman MBE	11
Kick-Off by Norman Giller	13
1. Love at First Flight	17
2. Arthur Rowe: Professor of Push and Run	23
3. Jimmy Anderson: A Bridge too Far	44
4. Bill Nicholson: The Master of White Hart Lane	51
5. Terry Neill: Far Too Red-Blooded	118
6. Keith Burkinshaw: Taking the Tango Route to Success	133
7. Peter Shreeve: A Welsh Hand on the Tiller	152
8. David Pleat: Sadly, Sent to Coventry	157
9. Terry Venables: It Became Hell for El Tel	168
10. Osvaldo Ardiles: Cry for Me, Argentina	179
11. Gerry Francis: The Impossible Job	183
12. Christian Gross: Not Quite the Ticket	188
13. George Graham: The Man in the Raincoat	192
14. Glenn Hoddle: Success Passes Hod By	198
15. Jacques Santini: The One Who Got Away	214
16. Martin Jol: The Jolly Dutch Giant	217

17. Juande Ramos: A Spaniard in the Works . . .	222
18. Harry Redknapp: Taxing Time for the Crafty Cockney	226
19. Andre Villas-Boas: A Portuguese Man o' Peace	247
20. Tim Sherwood: Backed and then Sacked by Levy	257
21. Mauricio Pochettino: A European Cup Final Ends in Tears	264
22. José Mourinho: Not So Special After All . . .	293
The 70-Year Dream Teams	331
The Cast.	334
Other Books by Norman Giller.	345



In memory of 'Sir' Bill Nicholson,
The heart and soul of Spurs

KICK-OFF

by Norman Giller

THE YEARS between the two photographs on pages 14 and 15 have been filled with me watching the rollercoaster fortunes of a Tottenham Hotspur Football Club that have demanded a faith, loyalty and love – yes, love – that you would not find outside the strongest of marriages.

I am not a boastful type (he boasted), but I know I am the only person walking this earth who could write this book. For a start you need to be firstly, 80-plus (check), secondly, to have watched the Push and Run side that was the first Tottenham championship team (check), thirdly, reported from the original White Hart Lane press box *and* the new stately, state-of-the-art ‘media centre’ (check).

I have supported Spurs since the 1950/51 Push and Run season and have reported from the press box on their trials, tribulations and triumphs since 1958, the year that ‘Sir’ Bill Nicholson took the reins as manager. We became good friends, as have many of the main characters in the following pages, so hopefully the book carries an authority that will crush those critics who would claim I am not a true supporter.

MY 70 YEARS OF SPURS

The fact is I have never put my hand in my pocket to watch Spurs play, so that – many will consider – disqualifies me from calling myself a Lilywhite supporter. But I like to think I have made up for it by continually making donations to the Tottenham Tribute Trust from the proceeds of my Tottenham-themed books. The Trust, quietly without fuss or fanfare, helps our old heroes who are now paying the often-painful price of all the efforts they made on the pitch to entertain and excite us. I will be sharing any profits from these memoirs with the Trust, so my conscience is clear about calling myself a Spurs supporter.



Throughout my Fleet Street reporting years I had to hide my unswerving support for Spurs because in a press box you have to at least give the impression of being neutral. Now, as I enjoy the last of the summer wine, I can come out of the closet and for several years I have had a home and a voice on the highly respected Spurs Odyssey website, run by Tottenham disciple Paul H. Smith.

So that I do not wander, I have disciplined myself to sharing my 70 years of Tottenham memories through the processional order of the managers who have been holding the reins, starting from the original ‘one of our own’, Edmonton-born Arthur Rowe, back in the 1950s. I am retelling many of the tales I have told previously, and my regular readers (okay, reader) of my 114 books to date might feel they are reading familiar passages. There is no way I can rewrite history.

KICK-OFF

I come right up to date with a chronicle of the surreal 2020/21 season that just happened to be the 120th anniversary of Tottenham's 1901 FA Cup triumph, the centenary of the 1921 FA Cup win, the platinum celebration of the 1951 Push and Run title, the diamond jubilee of the 1961 Double year, the ruby anniversary of Ricky's 'Goal of the Century' in the 1981 FA Cup Final, and, of course, the pearl anniversary of the last time Spurs won the FA Cup in 1991.



It's been quite a journey and I invite you now to make yourself comfortable as you accompany me on my first date with Spurs. It was love at first flight.

Love at First Flight

IT WAS 70 years ago that I first clapped eyes on Tottenham Hotspur, and it was love at first flight – witnessing goalkeeper legend Ted Ditchburn diving across his goal as if in imitation of Superman. Come with me back to Saturday, 2 September 1950. The place: The Valley; the match: Charlton Athletic versus Tottenham Hotspur. There I was – a skinny as a pipe cleaner ten-year-old primary schoolboy in my older brother’s hand-me-down short trousers – trembling with excitement and anticipation of my first view of First Division football. I had been taken south of the Thames from my East End home by my uncle, Roy Robinson, who was expecting to convert me to his religion of worshipping Charlton.

The classic opening words to *The Go Between* by novelist L.P. (Leslie) Hartley are captured perfectly by the whirling world of football, ‘The past is a foreign country ... they do things differently there.’ It was a different game then, not just another country but another planet. Ration book times, London still being rebuilt after the Second World War blitz, footballers earning £11 a week, going to and

from the ground in their Demob suits, like the rest of us by bus and speaking a language that would be foreign to today's players.

There were wing-halves, inside-forwards, shoulder-charging and barging of goalkeepers, tackling from behind, two points for a win, no floodlights, no yellow and red cards, no TV cameras (certainly no VAR), a leather and laced, panelled ball that was like a pudding on heavy, mud-heap pitches that made every step a challenge.

This trip to The Valley of dreams cost my uncle three shillings (15p), two bob for him and a shilling for me to stand on the vast, concrete terracing behind the goal at the Floyd Road end of the sprawling stadium. There were 61,480 mostly standing spectators shoehorned into the ground, and I could not see a thing through the heaving wall of fans towering above me.

No problem. Dock worker Uncle Roy picked me up as if I was a packing case and handed me high to the man in front, and I was carried – the stench of Weights and Woodbines cigarette smoke in my nostrils – on a willing relay of raised hands above hundreds of heads, most adorned with flat caps, and down to a cramped standing place against the fence, right behind the goal being defended by Tottenham.

I will not pretend that 70 years on I can remember the exact details of the match, but what has remained with me is the sense of excitement and the sheer ecstasy of feeling as if I was involved in the action. Yes, a spectator but I kicked every ball, scored goals that were missed and made every save. All these years later that sense of involvement in every game has never left me. I have been the Ron Burgess, the Len Duquemin, the Greavsie, the Glenn Hoddle, the Ledley

King, the Harry Kane of spectators. If only they would play the game the way I see it, my team would never lose.

Uncle Roy had been teaching me chants, ‘Come on, you Robins;’ ‘Get in there, you Addicks.’ He wanted me to wear a red and white rosette as big as my head, but instinct made me declare myself too shy to pin it to my jacket. Little did he know that I had been nobbled before he got to me by another uncle, Eddie Baldwin of Edmonton, who was my godfather.

He and Aunt Emmy, Dad’s youngest sister, were Spurs through and through, and followed them home and away. The home bit was easy. They lived within the crowd’s roar of White Hart Lane. They had been filling my head and my imagination with stories of the great Tottenham teams, and telling me how they had waltzed away with the Second Division title in 1949/50 with what was known as Push and Run football. The cynics sneered that it was playground football that would be exposed in the top echelon of the First Division.

Now here I was immediately behind the goal at The Valley watching Arthur Rowe’s Spurs chase and chastise Charlton with their push-and-run tactics that were simple yet sophisticated, predictable yet played to perfection. They followed the Arthur Rowe commandments, ‘When not in possession get into position ... make it simple, make it quick ... keep the ball on the ground ... the three As, accuracy, accuracy, accuracy.’

At right-back, Alf ‘The General’ Ramsey was showing the poise and polish that made him a regular in the England team. Ahead of him, gingery-haired right-half Billy (that’s what they called him then) Nicholson was full of energy and urgency, making the team tick with his unselfish running and tigerish tackling.

Striding across the pitch like a colossus, skipper Ronnie Burgess, as tough as if hewn from a Welsh mountain but able to intersperse delicate skill with his startling strength (no wonder Bill Nick later described him to me as the greatest player ever to pull on a Spurs shirt). Burgess would prompt the attack, and then in the blink of an eye be back at the heart of the defence helping out alongside immense centre-half Harry Clarke.

Imperious in the centre of the pitch was the thick-thighed emperor of the team, Eddie Baily, the 'Cheeky Chappie' of the dressing room who could land a ball on a sixpence from 40 yards. He was the schemer in chief, providing a conveyor belt of telling passes for twin centre-forwards Len 'The Duke' Duquemin and Londoner Les Bennett. The Duke was a Channel Islander, the nearest thing to a 'foreigner' on the Spurs books.

Tottenham's alternative route to goal was down the wings, with flying Sonny Walters and tricky Les Medley turning defences inside out with their stunning running. Their crosses, usually to the far post, were met high and mightily by the Duke or Bennett, both of whom could head the ball as hard as I could kick it.

Incredibly, 15 or so years later, I would be regularly interviewing Alf, Bill Nick, Ron Burgess and Eddie Baily in my role as chief football reporter for the *Daily Express*. Seeing them through my schoolboy eyes they were like giants, but one player stood above them all.

In about the tenth minute of the match, Charlton's powerhouse centre-forward Charlie Vaughan shook off a challenge from Harry Clarke and unleashed a thunderbolt shot from the edge of the Tottenham penalty area. From my best view in the ground, I could see that the ball was going

to fly into the top-right corner of the net. Fifty thousand of the 62,000 crowd – Charlton fans – roared in anticipation of a goal and hundreds of wooden rattles produced an ear-shattering background effect like a snarl of snare drums.

Then out of nowhere appeared somebody doing his Superman impression. Was it a bird, was it a plane? No, it was the flying form of goalkeeper Ted Ditchburn, not touching the ball away like most goalkeepers would have tried to do. My schoolboy eyes looked on in amazement as he caught the ball while at full stretch and in mid-air.

It was a stunning, astonishing save that silenced everybody but the knot of 12,000 travelling Tottenham fans at the other end of the ground, who switched from cheering to choruses of the club theme song, ‘McNamara’s Band’.

From that moment on I was a Tottenham disciple. Yes, it was love at first flight.

Throughout a long football reporting career I had to stick to press box neutrality, and it was not until surrendering newspaper work for full-time authorship that I was able to come out of the closet as a Spurs supporter.

And I can trace the start of my love affair to that magical moment when Ted Ditchburn appeared to defy gravity and make a save that has lived on in my memory. Thank goodness there were no television action replays to taint or tarnish the picture in my head. It still sits there, and is occasionally brought out from the vaults of my memory and admired, without anybody being able to produce proof that perhaps, just perhaps, I have exaggerated the lightning shaft of genius that turned me into a lover of all things Lilywhite.

For the record, Tottenham forced a 1-1 draw thanks to an Alf Ramsey penalty and they pushed and ran their way to the league championship.

MY 70 YEARS OF SPURS

And a ten-year-old boy in his brother's hand-me-down short trousers went home to the East End converted to the Tottenham way of playing football.

I was off on my 70-year journey. Please take every step with me in the company of the managers who have called the shots.