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The Team

Mick Dennis

CHAPTER ONE

Adrian Chiles, Supporter

ONE DAY IN LONDON, a tramp walked up to Adrian Chiles. 'He was in a terrible state,' Adrian said. 'Very dirty and very rough. He looked as if he was going to talk to me. So I got ready to give him some money, but he put his arm around me and said, "I'm sorry, but the Albion have had it this season." Even downand- outs feel sorry for me because I support West Brom.'

Everyone knows that Adrian is a West Bromwich Albion fan. It is such a big part of his life that he cannot hide it when he is fronting shows on BBC TV and radio. Not that he wants to hide it. 'I look at other sports, other people, and probably all of life in terms of my support for the Albion,' he said. 'I have this passion for the Albion, and if other people have a passion - for another club, another sport, or almost anything - then they are all right by me. I don't care what it is they have a passion for, I just want them to have a passion.'

The BBC website lists his interests as childcare, his wife, West Bromwich Albion, golf and cooking, in that order. But his wife, BBC radio's Jane Garvey, is not sure she really comes before the football. Then again, not much does with Adrian. That is why he and I get on.

We first met through our jobs and soon realized we were both mad football fans. I can't explain why Adrian is such a devoted fan, because I can't explain why I am. When my team, Norwich City, lost in the play-off final against Birmingham in Cardiff in 2002, I went through every possible emotion. At the end I was so drained I could not think. I certainly could not talk. All for a football match - a game. No wonder the word 'fan' comes from 'fanatic'.

But enough about me. Back to Adrian - an utter fanatic. For this book, we met at his home, which is near BBC Television Centre in west London. Above the front door of the Chiles house is a stained-glass picture of a bird. It's a throstle - the West Brom bird.

Adrian's first job for the BBC was as a business reporter, and when Radio Five Live started in 1994 he had an early-morning spot called Wake Up to Money. But instead, listeners found themselves waking up to the Albion. 'Because I love the Albion, somehow I would end up talking about them all the time instead of business stuff,' Adrian said. 'In the end Five Live asked me to do a couple of football phone-ins when someone was on holiday. So I stopped doing the early-morning business stuff. Then the BBC gave me a Saturday morning show which was called Weekend Breakfast at first. It was not meant to be a football show at all. It was meant to be about life and cooking. But we did more and more sport and more and more football. In the end, without us really saying anything, it became a sports show.'

Because he was (and is) a mad fan, Adrian wanted to know everything about football. The show talked to people like the kit woman at Leeds. How did she keep the shirts and shorts white? And when football clubs first started buying so many players from abroad, Adrian's show had a chat with the man Coventry hired to translate things into different languages. He said the hardest bit was working out what was said by the manager, Gordon Strachan. Years later, Adrian worked with Strachan on Match of the Day 2 on Sunday nights. Then the whole country had trouble working out what Strachan was saying.

It was Adrian's Saturday morning radio show which led to him getting that Match of the Day 2 job, and a phone-in on Radio Five Live on Wednesday evenings. But the work has never stopped him going to the Albion. 'With the phone-in, I said to them, "Look, the reason you want to do this is because I am the sort of bloke who goes to matches, so it would be daft to stop me going to matches." So if the Albion are playing midweek, we do the phone-in from the ground after the game.'

'On Saturdays, before we had kids, Jane came with me to games. So when I was doing the Saturday radio show, I'd leave the house at seven in the morning and Jane would be waiting outside with the car after the show. We went to games together. When we had kids she stopped coming, but I still go to games and don't get back until seven at night. It has caused a few rows.'

Adrian still makes non-sport programmes for TV, including BBC2's business programme Working Lunch, but West Brom are never far from his mind. 'On Saturdays, if I can't get to an away game for any reason, I go into the Working Lunch office and watch the BBC's pictures of the match on a TV on my desk. I go with a mate. This big, open-plan office is empty except for us two idiots staring at this screen and cheering the Albion.'

'Most TV, radio and newspaper reporters are not fans with a passion for one club. To get to the top they have to stop going to see their team at quite an early age. That didn't happen with me, and I think other fans sort of understand that I am one of them. I wear my heart on my sleeve, but they sort of respect that. They understand my passion. And they know that I understand their passion. I care so much about the Albion that it is hard doing the job sometimes. If the Albion have lost - and it does happen - I can't bring myself to watch football on Saturday night at all. I should do. I'm not really doing my job by missing it, but I can't watch.'