My England Years: The Autobiography

Sir Bobby Charlton

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

THE RAREST, AND the greatest, feeling I have ever known as a footballer is that on at least one day I had everything I needed to produce the very best of myself. Almost every run, every pass, every decoy move was fuelled by certainty.

I felt I could run forever in any company, including the one in which I seemed to be sharing every stride and every heartbeat, that of the great young Franz Beckenbauer, who had been thrown against me, as I had been set upon him.

This did not result in one of those spectacular goals that helped build my reputation down the years, but it gave me a deeper sense than ever before that I had done everything expected of me for the good of the team.

That summed up the ethos of this group of players – the team. There were no stars, no egos, no possibility of anyone failing to understand what precisely he had to do, or believing that he had a role somehow separate from all those around him. The tacklers tackled and the runners ran, and it was clear that they would keep doing it until the job was done. Then if it was undone, as it was so late in the game, well, it had to be done again. There could only be this time, this game. There was nothing beyond it. Nothing, at least, worth thinking about until the matter was settled.

That day locked into my heart and my consciousness so strongly that I knew, as it was happening, that it would never

dim. Whenever there is the need, I can reach for it as easily as I turn the page of my morning newspaper. It is the diamond of my days – 30 July 1966.

Of all my time in football it was the day that brought the deepest satisfaction, the cleanest, least complicated sense of achievement. I knew immediately it would always be shared with the nation, and yet I could also keep it as the most treasured football possession. I know my fellow professionals, with whom I lived it most intimately, felt the same.

On that day, when I helped England win the World Cup, I also learned that a perfect team performance was possible. I found out that if you gave enough of yourself, in the company of teammates who were of the same mind and spirit and who trusted the leadership they had been given as deeply as you did, you could master anything that was put before you. You could come off the field without a single regret. You could get to the very heart of the game that had for so long dominated your existence.

This is the reason, above all others, that makes that summer's day in old Wembley unique in my memory, and so uplifting whenever I recall it, as I do of my own accord or by request almost every day of my life.

First, though, I should explain why the joy that came with England's victory and my own contribution was so heightened beyond anything else I had, or would, experience on a football field. Much was coloured by the still vivid memory of my first days with the England team, eight years earlier. Those moments in turn, long imagined and fondly dreamt of, were coloured by the tragedy of Munich in which I had been caught only months earlier.

No, being called by England was certainly not as I thought it would be when, as a boy, I went with my brother Jack to the cinema in Ashington to watch the grainy Pathé News film of our great relative, Jackie Milburn, making his debut against Northern Ireland. Then, no ambition could have been less

clouded by doubt, not with 'Wor Jackie' already at the peak of football and the picture house billing the snippet of newsreel alongside the main feature.

The idea of wearing my nation's shirt was both possible, because of my early progress in football, and thrilling. I had set myself a series of targets – and they had all been met. I played for my school, my district, my county and then my country at schoolboy level. Professional football followed quite naturally but when the invitation from England came, it was not so simple. I had to respond to it in the time of pain that followed in the wake of Munich and seemed to change everything in my life.

This was made all the harder when, still mourning beloved team-mates and friends, I saw headlines announcing me as a new star who could both rally my stricken club, Manchester United, and make a major impact in the national team.

For a little while it was too much. Roger Byrne, Duncan Edwards and Tommy Taylor were key components of an England team heading for the 1958 World Cup as serious contenders, but when they fell in Munich, I became United's sole representative in the national side. It seemed as though everything was moving too fast, too chaotically. I looked at the newspapers and saw those flattering headlines, but when I looked in the mirror I saw just a boy, and one who feared he might be stretched beyond his limits.

So much was expected of me so suddenly. For a long time I had been in a deep learning process. Jimmy Murphy, Sir Matt Busby's tough assistant manager, was my mentor and he would seize on every mistake, hold up a hundred examples of where I was going wrong. On our first meeting, he had built up Duncan almost as a mythic figure, a young god of the game.

Now it seemed I was expected to take on at least something of that mantle – and those expectations. The newspapers painted a picture of a boy who had become a man overnight, and one

whose future for both United and England was completely assured. Headlines such as 'Bobby Dazzler' filled me with more apprehension than pleasure.

There were so many matches to play, and numerous emotional ordeals to be borne, often provoked by people who wanted to talk about Munich, to offer sympathy, when so much of my world had been lost, maybe beyond recovery, on the snowy airfield in Germany. All of a sudden, playing alongside idols such as Tom Finney and Billy Wright was no longer the ultimate bonus, but another burden.

Yet, step by step, and with much good luck that accumulated down the years, I had been brought to that day at Wembley, one to which I can return so completely it might be yesterday, and never with the fear that I will find any of the shadows or the doubts that sooner or later are part of everyone's experience.

Now, perhaps more than ever, I can put the proper value on a perfect day and on the England years that took me to every corner of the world and made rivals and friends of such great men as Pelé and Franz Beckenbauer, Lev Yashin and Alfredo di Stefano.

The day England won the World Cup is where I have to start – and probably end – my account, because the lessons of it have grown stronger, more vital, each time I think of what was achieved, and how it happened. I feel this so powerfully, so unchangeably, it means that when I am asked about the future of our national game and the chances of it ever again scoring such a triumph, I invariably go back to the time when it seemed the nation had never been so united outside of days of war.

I go back to ninety minutes, and then half an hour of extra time, when everything was as it should have been; when no one neglected to run or cover for each other, or forgot for a second that the job had still to be done. I return there not as some ageing conqueror spinning out the years, but as a pilgrim who was once shown the light – a light that seemed so accessible to

anyone who had their eyes even half open but, unfortunately, shone only briefly before being obscured for so many years.

It was the greatest of my days, not just because of the glory that I knew I would have with my team-mates forever, and the emotion released in the tears that streamed down my cheeks for all the world to see when I embraced Jack, and agreed that no siblings who played football could ever have shared such a moment. There was all that certainly, but something more was built into that special day.

Perhaps the most powerful sense was that we had taken ourselves beyond even our highest ambitions and found something that was somehow bigger than anything we could have imagined when we first set off. Suddenly, it wasn't about a trophy, however prestigious, or a place in the record books, and still less about a bonus of £1,000 from the Football Association. It was about how we could look at ourselves when each of us had played our last games.

We had seen what could be done when you gave everything because you knew it was right. Everything we had been asked to do, however hard it appeared to be at times, however many sacrifices of personal life it involved, and however many weeks we had to go without seeing our wives or young children, had a point and a reward that became more obvious with every success.

There was a beautiful simplicity to what happened on 30 July 1966, more so than at any point earlier or later in my career. Certainly, if we are talking about the weight of emotional baggage, there is no doubt I carried far more of it, and of much greater complexity, into the same Wembley stadium two years later.

When Manchester United beat Benfica to win the European Cup a decade after the Munich tragedy and my deepest embraces were with Sir Matt Busby and Bill Foulkes, fellow survivors of the pain that for so long we feared was beyond any kind of redemption, I was both overwhelmed by the past and

liberated from it – or at least I thought so. That was something of an illusion, a comforting one no doubt as Nobby Stiles and I left our celebrating team-mates to join up with an England tour, but an illusion nonetheless. I learned quickly enough that not all the guilt of surviving Munich, when so many team-mates had died, could be banished by one night of great triumph. There were simply too many feelings, too many regrets, to parcel up neatly, even on an extraordinary night when our nerves and our skills held against one of the best teams in Europe.

When England won the World Cup, there were no such warring emotions. We had our wounded, of body and spirit, on the way to the final. The great Jimmy Greaves, one of the best players of his or any other generation of English football, would always be haunted by the day he was required to be just another spectator. But none of this took us beyond the boundaries of the game we played. They were the hurts and the disappointments that are commonplace in football. You have to understand they can happen any time, even when you are the youngest, most wide-eyed trainee professional.

My tears were untouched by any doubts or questions – and, I have to say, were entirely in keeping with my belief that it is only in victory that a competitor is entitled to cry without any fear of regret. The tears were my most natural expression of a satisfaction that filled me completely.

The keenest edge of my pleasure came from the fact that this was an effort of the purest football kind. There had been no diversions, no confusions of roles or purpose. Each man had been told what he had to do and was happy to do it because he could see the sense of it. Perhaps our play did not match that of Brazil four years earlier in Chile, or four years later in Mexico, maybe it did not light up the sky with flights of fantasy and unfathomable skill, but it was good, intelligent, honest football, built on the very best values of our English game. Above all, it rested on faith in a manager who built us up, brick by

brick, man by man, into an unbreakable unit and gave us a wonderful sense of ourselves and our potential to beat the world.

Yes, there were tactical adjustments to make against an excellent German team and their young superstar Beckenbauer. Nobby had to make his tackles, Jack had to take anything high, and Bobby Moore had to read every point of defensive weakness with his unerring eye and uncanny responses, but essentially we would play to strengths developed down the years.

Most crucially, we never lost our focus, and if we had the advantage of playing all our games at Wembley, it was one that we refused to squander. This, I believe, was an ill-considered achievement in itself because along with the familiarity of the ground on which we fought, there was also the expectation and pressure that is peculiar to playing in front of your own people. This is especially so when they have been told, in the most emphatic way, that they could confidently look forward to the moment of victory and are quick to display their displeasure at the first hints of serious doubt.

Many of the following pages will inevitably centre on the work of, and the inspiration provided by, Sir Alf Ramsey. His approach was filled with so many fundamental lessons about how to make a football team, and it is very sad they have laid fallow for so long. But for the moment it is maybe enough to say that his gift to his players, and the football nation he was so desperate to make proud, was the ability to make everybody believe that if we did the right things, made enough sacrifices, the World Cup could indeed be ours.

Many of the images that are rooted in my memory are, I am sure, as familiar to all those who saw them in the stadium or on black-and-white television as they are to me. I think now to the abandoned pleasure of my friend and team-mate Nobby, whose jig of triumph is perhaps the most enduring symbol of that happiest of afternoons. I see the shudder that ran through George Cohen, our fierce and always correct full back, when

Nobby planted a kiss, wet and toothless, on his mouth. Like so many other proud Englishmen and women, I smile with pride at our captain Bobby Moore, who always looked the part, and always was the part, wiping the moisture from his hands before receiving the trophy from the Queen.

I hear the piping tones of the baby, and perhaps in some ways the hero of our team that day, Alan Ball – if we can put aside for just a moment the decisive value of Geoff Hurst's hat-trick – saying that he never wanted this day to end. I see the look of satisfaction in the eyes of some of the quieter ones, Martin Peters, Roger Hunt, Ray Wilson and Gordon Banks, and I will never forget it as long as I live.

I had never known such a unity of hope on the terraces and action on the field. We all felt the vigorous, even ecstatic, pleasure that radiated from the field of play across the whole nation, perhaps even to a degree that could almost bear comparison to Victory in Europe Day, twenty-one years earlier.

I will never put aside the rush of feeling I had for a lad whom I knew for just a short while before the tournament began and never saw again because, to me, he will always stand out as England's Everyman in that long-ago summer – the representative of the nation we had striven so hard to please.

Naturally, at such a moment of triumph you think of those closest to you and, of course, the great privilege, among so many others, was to stand shoulder to shoulder with my brother. Brothers can have their arguments and their fights, and heaven knows Jack and I have had a few that have become public property and required us to work through with some pain and embarrassment. If they are very lucky, though, they can have moments that will unite them forever in a way that goes beyond the coincidence of sharing the same womb. Jack and I had such a time, on a gilded day that would be with us for a lifetime, and we would be strange men indeed if we ever lost sight of the value of that.

Among my first thoughts were my wife Norma, who had so

transformed my life, my little daughters Suzanne and Andrea, my mother Cissie, who had been so intent on Jack and me becoming successful footballers, and my father Robert, who in his quiet and dogged way had made me both sad and proud when he said he couldn't attend the semi-final game with Portugal because he was due on shift at the colliery. That was his duty, just as mine and Jack's was to play as well as we could for England.

Yet among all those closest to me whom I had been most anxious to make proud when I woke that morning, there was another, that lad. I'd met him just a few weeks before the tournament began, and I remember his face well because it was filled with the most intense hope. In the lead-up to the World Cup he seemed to have become, forever, part of my life and, for those vital days, even my professional conscience.

His name was Trevor Atkinson and day after day on a secluded little beach in Majorca his close-cropped head popped up from behind a deckchair, a pedalo stand or a beach-side bar. I had taken Norma and the girls there for what was supposed to be a relaxing break between the stresses of a long season and the challenge that lay ahead that summer. There could be no break from football, though, when Trevor Atkinson appeared, as he did unfailingly each day. I developed a sixth sense. It told me that in the next second he would be at my side, questioning, exhorting, almost, it seemed, speaking for the nation before whom my team-mates and I would so soon have to perform.

He was not a pest because I could no more get football out of my head, immerse myself in the buckets and spades, than I could go without breath, and it was as though Trevor gave some of my tensions their point. With him at my side, I didn't have to imagine the importance of what lay ahead. He confirmed it in each of our conversations. I too was consumed by the question of whether England could win the World Cup and if this lad was passionate in his interest, and had his beliefs about how

the triumph could be achieved, he also knew something of the game. He knew its quirks, its injustices, and what it required if you were to deal with all of these and still win.

He had started with Spennymoor United in my own North East country and now he was playing with Darlington. He accepted that he had gone as far as he ever would in professional football, but then he said it would always be his life.

He died some years ago and it is one of my regrets that I never had the chance, or maybe made the chance, to tell him how deeply he had entered my thinking by the time I went into the tournament, and how, in the good days and the bad ones, he was always present.

It seemed to me that if I wanted to isolate the best feelings in the country about football, and the deepest hopes, and have some idea of quite how many dreams I carried along with my team-mates when I went out on the field wearing my nation's shirt, I could do no better than choose Trevor Atkinson as my silent companion through the coming weeks.

When we struggled against Uruguay in the first match, and there was a sudden fear of anticlimax among the fans if not the team, and the boos rolled down from the terraces, I hoped that Trevor would understand that there was so much more football to be played. Even though we hadn't won, hadn't even scored, we had averted a disaster and were still well set to qualify for the quarter-finals.

I thought of Trevor when I scored the goal against Mexico in the next match, a goal that was spectacular enough to re-ignite some of the belief that had been challenged by the frustrating resistance of Uruguay. I fancied I saw him punching the air, as I did, when the shot that was so vital to our momentum swirled beyond the Mexican goalkeeper. Trevor was the point of contact, beyond my family and my fellow players, with a nation who realised their team would probably never have a better chance of winning the greatest prize in the game.

Even today, he comes into my thoughts when someone says, 'Bobby, when are we going to win the World Cup again?'

I think of the intensity and longing on his face when we sat on the sand of the little beach of Campo del Mar and discussed the threat of the Argentines, a most dangerous team, the Germans and the defending champions Brazil. Norma was never irritated by the fact that I could be so easily distracted by this stranger who came into our lives each day. I suspect that deep down she too understood that until the issue was settled, I was, like him, a prisoner of a challenge that had been embraced by so many people.

When the emotion of the field drained away, when the banqueting was done, I finally asked myself, how did we win it?

We won it because we never lost our concentration on a single aim. We won it because we had been given leadership and because we were never in any doubt about how much the people cared.

That's the reason I will never forget Trevor Atkinson, someone who did not play beyond the Third Division but who, even if he never knew it, had a role in the greatest day of English football. In a strange but compelling way, he became for me a presence as tangible as my brother Jack or Nobby in moments of success or crisis. Just like Sir Alf Ramsey, he made the call to duty.

The time is now due for another group of Englishmen to do the same. I refuse to believe that it will not happen, that the emotions that burst into life all those years ago are dead forever.

When the latest England coach, Fabio Capello, spoke to me on one of his first scouting missions in England, I was indeed heartened. Like Ramsey, he spoke in short, blunt sentences. Like Ramsey, he was immaculately dressed. He seemed to be a man who cared for detail and performance rather than reputation, and he was quite specific about his ambition. 'Charlton,' he

said, 'I wish to take England to the World Cup final in South Africa.'

I was lifted by a promise of the future that might, who knew, just one day take me back to the best of England's – and my own – past. It was, I thought, time enough.

1

THE WRIGHT EXAMPLE

MUNICH HAD BEEN so cold and so cruel in February 1958. The warmth and kindness, and the thrill, I found in Glasgow just two months later might have belonged not just to a different city but to another world.

It was because of this contrast I kept up my guard for some time after the first landmark of my England career – that and a little of the feelings that had permeated through to me from a few of those who worked at the pithead when I was a boy, people who had been so wounded by life that they would always be reluctant to trust happiness.

So I scored my first goal for England. It was, if I am entirely honest, what I had always believed I was born to do. Such confidence grew from the confirmation that indeed I was among the most talented youngsters in the land. This came with my selection for England Schoolboys at the age of fifteen and my two goals against Wales in a packed and yelling Wembley. That was a day that set almost all the First Division club scouts running to my house, telling me that I was destined to play at the highest level. These soothsayers were proved correct when I read in the *Manchester Evening News* seven years later that I would be playing for England against Scotland. But what did it mean any longer? How easily could I throw up my arms in celebration at my goal without feeling that somehow it was wrong to do so?

I believe now this questioning – at a time when those who

didn't know me so well might have seen nothing more than triumph written in the blaze of headlines greeting my arrival in the England team – was my defence against the worst that life can bring. Certainly, and despite all the good things that have happened to me since, I have to admit it is an attitude, a caution maybe, I have never been able to put aside easily, at least not completely.

Whenever I try to make sense of my feelings back then, one fact remains quite clear. As hard as I tried, I couldn't stop doubting the optimism that had always been so much a part of me. It is difficult, after all, to be jubilant when so often, any time of day or night, and especially night, your strongest urge is to cry, for what has been taken away and, you fear, might never be replaced.

The problem was that deep down I didn't think it was right to feel so good again, so quickly after the air crash. I had been granted survival – was it not too much to expect success as well? And, even more questionably in my own mind, should I hope to enjoy it? Could I feel as free and as whole as I always had on a football field, whether in the mud or the frost of the North East or some great stadium in Europe?

As I look back, maybe all I really know for sure is that if anybody had told me that so quickly after the ruin and grief of Munich I would be playing for England, I would have withdrawn, in still more disbelief, a little further into my hospital bed. After all those funerals I couldn't face, the idea that men with great names in the game would be able to persuade me that there would again be life and football without shadows and fear and uncertainty was inconceivable. All that belonged in another lifetime, with another set of hopes that had left me now and could not be recovered, at least not in the way I had always imagined, and if by some miracle of healing, those things became possible, it could not happen so soon.

Before Munich, everything had seemed so simple. I would

play for Manchester United and then England, by way of an extra treat, and that would be my life. My mother might warn me against the perils of my chosen trade, she might talk about the need for education and ask me where I would be if I suffered some serious injury, but even when I saw team-mates cut down and agonising about what would become of them, none of it touched me because I knew what was going to happen. I was untouchable. I was going to play forever.

Then suddenly that made no sense. The new reality dawned in the hospital in Germany – the only certainty was that no one, and least of all a kid who had up to that moment experienced so little of life, could ever again tell what was going to happen tomorrow, let alone in a future that no longer had any borders to protect the old confidence. The new reality was the lost lives of friends and team-mates and the abandoned hopes that had been so strong in the days before.

So when I arrived in the Marine Hotel in Troon, where the England captain Billy Wright welcomed me and announced that we would be sharing a room, I felt I had to try to explain quite how jumbled and confused my feelings were, and how this day that I had fantasised about for so long could not now, whatever happened, be anything like I had once anticipated.

I was anxious not to appear disrespectful and I hoped the captain of England understood what I was trying to say, but then I also thought I knew well enough what playing for my country could mean. I had done it at Wembley in the Schoolboy game against Wales in front of a vast, young, yelling crowd of 93,000. That experience had taken me to a place far from the rough fields on which I first kicked a ball, where you always felt cold and the wind was always in your face.

When the scouts filled our house in Ashington after the Welsh game, I thought to myself, 'This is wonderful. I can do this. I can play for England.' These were the best lads in the country and I could measure myself against them and feel

that I was equal to the tests that lay ahead. We beat Wales comfortably in the return match in Cardiff and scored eight against the Republic of Ireland and this gave me so much confidence when I reported to Old Trafford to start my professional career.

So, of course, it should have been the most natural progression, settling into the Marine Hotel, hobnobbing with the great international footballers, as my late friend and hero Duncan Edwards had done, as though it was not a privilege but a right. I should have been looking forward to Hampden Park as a rite of passage rather than any kind of trial.

I did say to Billy that if Munich hadn't happened, these now would be the proudest and most exciting days of my life. All the messages of congratulation would have been read and savoured and re-read a hundred times until the paper they were written on wore away in my hands. I would have been thinking of nothing else, and planning every moment of my performance, listening and looking, desperate to make the right impression as I went to the big stadium in the company of such men as Billy, Tom Finney and Johnny Haynes.

I would also have travelled back more than eighteen months to the night in my digs in Manchester when I couldn't sleep because it was the eve of my first game for Manchester United, against Charlton Athletic. Before the first streaks of dawn flecked the sky, I wanted to get out of bed, run into the street and shout that I was playing for United, and make the dead, waiting hours of that seemingly endless night fly by.

As I tried to explain all this to the England captain, he was patient, perhaps at first thinking I was merely nervous, and went out of his way to reassure me. I was a talented young player, he said, and should relax, and feel that I was in the right place with the right people who would do all they could to make the challenge facing me easier. He told me I would not lack opportunities to make a good impression. However gloomy or

emotional I became, he refused to let go of the possibility that, at some point in the next few days, all the pain and pressure, and even the doubts that I could carry on, would be placed in a new and much more encouraging light.

This, he said, was a time that I should not fear but take hold of and enjoy, because it would never come again in so fresh and exciting a way. If I responded in the right way, it could bring a whole new dimension to my career and my life. I could look back, not on another ordeal, but on an uplifting experience that had filled me with new ambition and – something I maybe needed more than anything else – a belief that my life could be renewed.

Billy was right, of course, but that would be proved only by action and time. Conversation, however encouraging and kind, in a hotel room with a man I admired so much for what he did on the field and the modest way he conducted himself off it, was not enough.

In the end, in a passage of football that still seems magical, the captain's argument was taken up, and won, out on the field of Hampden Park by the brilliance of Tom Finney. If the great player had taken me by the hand – and never let it go – he could have done no more to make me understand Billy's point of view, that this was something to be enjoyed for its own sake. Tomorrow I could continue to agonise as much as I liked, but today I must play, I must do the thing that I had always believed would be the core of my life.

When I was a boy, I watched Finney and saw that he was a fine, creative player. I saw his speed and his touch and his tremendous appetite. I saw his dribbling skills and the absolute control he exerted over his talent. There was nothing showy, or irrelevant, about Tom Finney. However, it was also true that, back then, no footballer stood higher in my admiration than Stanley Matthews. No one made my blood run so quickly.

There was a beautiful mystery to his game that haunts me

still. Standing on the terraces of St James' Park, I told Jack that Matthews was unique and we would never see anyone to compare with him as long as we lived. That spindly, stooping figure became my great hero almost from the first moment I saw him. No one could so beguile a crowd or bewilder an opponent as Matthews.

But when I said that to Jack, I had not yet played with Finney, or been given, at the dawn of my international career, quite such a perfectly honed example of the game at its most brilliant – and most simple. I had never known at first hand – not even in the company of my late United colleague, the emerging but not yet fully mature Duncan Edwards – quite what it was to have a team-mate who saw everything, could do everything, and never once exploited either his vision or his talent on behalf of himself rather than his team-mates.

This, in my eyes, will always be the mark of the greatest footballers – it was the supreme quality of Pelé – as opposed to the most gifted ones. I still go to the football museum in Preston to watch with awe the carefully edited, and freshly coloured, film of 'The Matthews Final' of 1953, but nothing I see surpasses something Finney did at Hampden Park on a spring day five years later, which was so directly to my benefit.

Anyone who was in the huge, packed stadium all those years ago, and whose memory holds, will understand easily enough the depth of my gratitude.

Finney made my first goal for England in my first match. He made anything seem possible. He made the game look ridiculously easy, not only for himself but for all those lucky enough to be on his side.

By the time I played for England at the age of twenty, some harsh realities had indeed intruded into, and overshadowed, some of my boyish dreams. But when Finney set off on the run I would never forget, and I realised that I had to make sure not a stride of it was wasted, I was a little in love with the game again, and all the possibilities that it offered me.

My mood, and my view of the world, had not been transformed, so instantly, into a permanent condition; I knew that well enough, despite all my excitement and exhilaration. A door had not been slammed shut on grief that was still bone-deep – how could it be? – but it had been half-closed, as Billy Wright said it would be. Stirrings of those feelings I'd had when I first thought of playing for England rose to the surface, and what it might mean, sooner or later, to walk in the steps of my great relative, Jackie Milburn. I was taken back, at least some of the way, to a time when nothing in our lives would ever be as uncomplicated or as pleasurable as playing or watching football.

Tom Finney gave me something to carry into the future, a burst of hope that one day football would again be as completely satisfying and as beautiful as before. No troubled lad could ever have been told more eloquently about the wonders of life that can come so unexpectedly in even the most unpromising circumstances – or that the most magical of these wonders could be the kindness of a tough and proud opponent.

This was Tommy Younger, goalkeeper for Liverpool and Scotland, and what he said to me when he ran to the centre circle to have a word before the restart after I'd scored is as warming today as it was fifty years ago. The big man was at my shoulder, shaking my hand and saying, 'Congratulations on your first game – and your first goal. There will be many more, laddie.'

Perhaps there was something on my face, which I know can be mournful from time to time, that drew such concern and, when I think about it, compassion. Like Billy Wright, Younger went out of his way to be encouraging. Old pros are supposed to be resentful of new blood, envying their youth and all the days that lay ahead of them, but in Glasgow I found quite the opposite.

It was amazing to me that Billy Wright would be sharing a room with me. Of all my opponents in my brief career in club

football up until then, with the exception of Alfredo di Stefano and his Real Madrid, it was Wright and the Wolves team who had loomed largest.

Once, when we beat them, and I saw desperation on the face of their captain, I took it as the supreme evidence that there was no limit to the potential of my own team, because to beat Wolves, their big, strong defenders and quick and skilful forwards dressed in gold, you had to do so much more than merely play well. You had to function completely as a team.

Billy was saying nothing but the truth when he told me that I should have no fear going into my first international because I was surrounded by good professionals. Even though they were stripped of my fallen team-mates, Duncan Edwards, Roger Byrne and Tommy Taylor, England were still formidably strong. Derek Kevan, West Bromwich Albion's big forward, was not so quick or polished as Taylor, and although they were fine players, Bill Slater of Wolves and Jim Langley of Fulham could not hope to match the power and authority of Edwards and Byrne, but England were far from bereft of the highest talent.

We had, above all others, Finney, so quiet and calm but also so confident in himself before he burst into life on the field. We had the great Johnny Haynes, who passed the ball so exquisitely and with such bite, who was already the model for so many aspiring midfield playmakers. We had the wonderfully clever little Blackburn Rovers winger Bryan Douglas, who later developed his craft superbly when he moved inside. They all welcomed me and tried to take away the tension.

So I listened to what Wright had to say and that was when I tried to explain to him that my fear was not so much of being overwhelmed by the Scots and their passionate support at Hampden Park, but was instead rooted in another layer of the pressure that had been building on me since I first regained consciousness in Munich.

For evidence, I showed him a bundle of mail that required

replies. From the odd tax notice, my post had swollen to more than forty letters a day. Wright said that a hard but vital lesson for every professional was that if you made something of a name for yourself, whatever the circumstances, your duties did not stop when you walked off the field. The public believed that you were their property, and to a certain extent you were. They filled the grounds, paid your wages and, if you were lucky, appointed you among their heroes. They also gave you responsibilities, which could be shirked only at the risk of their anger.

Wright also had to deal with some personal mail but as he did so, he outlined, very gently, some of what I could expect at Hampden. Even though he had known me for just a short time, he must have realised that a lot of what weighed on my mind went beyond the touchlines of a football field, but that was no reason, he felt, not to say that I was still about to enjoy one of the most momentous experiences of my career.

'Bobby,' he said, 'however you feel now, I tell you that once you're involved in the game you're going to love every minute of it. If you get a chance, just take a look at the great terrace behind the right-hand goal. There must be nearly fifty thousand fans squeezed in so tightly they can hardly move. From the pitch, they look just like little birds waiting to be fed.'

Billy's description was perfect. The Scots didn't score but after one close call I looked up at the great fluttering crowd and they might have been a throng of starlings on a telephone wire. He was right, too, about the enjoyment that would take hold a little more each time I had the ball at my feet and the vast crowd responded to the play.

As well as so many other discoveries, I had my love of Scotland confirmed that day. Tommy Younger's gesture no doubt helped, but it was an old attachment that was strengthened. While growing up in the North East, the odds were that when you talked about going to a cup final you meant the one at Hampden not Wembley, unless Newcastle might be involved. It was too

expensive to go to London as a neutral, even if you could get a ticket, and in Glasgow you were guaranteed the most extraordinary theatre. As my first international game wore on, and all the little birds chirped their way to a frenzy of frustration as we took control, the more I said to myself, 'This is good, I want more of this' – and the bigger and louder Hampden became.

I had sat enthralled at the Bernabeu in Madrid when di Stefano unveiled some of his most devastating work, but I had never known a crowd quite like this. They had been brought to a pitch of excitement by the Powderhall sprinters, who raced on the track before we went out on to the field, and reminded me of those bewitching days when I accompanied my beloved grandfather Tanner and his stable of runners to miners' galas around the North East. Maybe it was the sight of those runners that took me back so quickly to so many of the certainties of my boyhood. Tanner was with me again, coaxing the best out of me, telling me that if I did my work, and kept my concentration, nothing was beyond me. I might even play for my country, and just imagine the pride in that. Tanner was dying, and could no longer watch me play. I would sit at his bedside and read him the football reports in the Saturday evening sports pink edition, but right to the end he kept telling me that everything was in my hands. I had been given all the talent any lad who wanted to play football would ever need.

The day in Glasgow lingers so strongly in my mind that I felt a strong surge of anger when the Football Association decided the most fitting opponents for England when the new Wembley was unveiled in 2007 would be Germany. Given my experiences in a World Cup final and quarter-final, I doubt that too many people understand more deeply the football rivalry with Germany that was created in 1966, but I thought the case for Scotland was overwhelming when it came to mark a new phase in the history of the traditional home of the England game.

I thought it was a time to rekindle some old priorities, to go back to our strongest and oldest roots as a football nation. England versus Scotland is surely a game that runs in our blood – mine, certainly. I lived in a place where the border was insignificant. Working people on both sides of it had so much in common, and if we had fought wars against each other down the centuries, more recently we had stood together, with terrible loss of life.

As my first game for England unfolded, Billy Wright's assurances, as against my own fears, were proving accurate. The blast of the crowd, the excitement of the journey along the Clyde and all the people coming into the streets, had set my blood flowing. Tommy Docherty conceded a free kick, which I took quickly to find Douglas, who, with typically neat skill, put it past Younger. Kevan made it 2–0 from Douglas, and twenty minutes into the second half I scored the first of my 49 international goals. Kevan scored another goal late in the second half, but by then it felt to me as though I was no longer involved in a contest. Against all my worries and reservations, and the treadmill so much of my football had become, I had been given the chance to shine – and I had taken it.

It helped greatly that I had been so fiercely tutored in one of the basic duties of an attacking midfielder by my mentor at Old Trafford, United assistant manager Jimmy Murphy. Whenever a winger launched himself towards the dead-ball line, the obligation was quite basic, Murphy always insisted. You ran hard for the expected cross, however speculative the winger's foray. But then Finney didn't speculate. He executed whatever chore he settled upon, and almost as often as a cross it might be a direct attack on goal. On this occasion Finney's intentions were as transparent as the distress of the man who was trying to close him down, right back Alex Parker.

Parker, with more courage than hope, attempted to jockey Finney and win a little time for his fellow defenders. It was

futile. Finney dropped his shoulder, Parker went the wrong way, and I thought, 'Right foot or left, I know what Tom's going to do now . . . he's thinking, how easy can I make it for the man tearing down the middle?' He looked up, for half a stride, to measure my run and then floated the ball perfectly into my path.

The ball came to my right side and, since we enjoyed a comfortable lead, I gave no thought to safety. I volleyed the ball home from around sixteen yards, yelling with a pleasure that no longer had to be questioned. In the morning, the newspapers announced that I was the author of a wonder goal and that I was heading for stardom in the coming World Cup in Sweden.

I knew that I had struck a powerful shot, as I had so many times before, sometimes with success, sometimes not. The wonder had come in Finney's absolute mastery of the winger's art.

For me, that was a decisive moment in deciding between Finney and Matthews. Today, controversy surrounds the relative merits of Cristiano Ronaldo and George Best, but the question of Finney or Matthews was always going to be easier to resolve because they played at the same time against the same defenders and the same tactics.

Initially, I leaned towards Matthews because I saw more of him at St James' Park and a boy is always going to be more susceptible to star quality than is a fellow professional. But in the end, the sheer range and depth of Finney's talent became overwhelmingly apparent. Finney, apart from sharing Matthews' deadly pace over ten yards, did two things that were never part of the latter's make-up – he headed the ball and he tackled, sometimes quite ferociously.

It is not a case of deserting Stanley's cause. He had a talent that would have glowed in any circumstances, but if you ask who would have made more impression on today's game of

heightened speed and strength, I would have to say Finney, but even as I say this I am haunted all over again by the ability of Matthews to move and thrill, unforgettably, all those people who made a pilgrimage to wherever he was playing, or where it was hoped he would be playing.

Stoke City and then Blackpool, when he moved to Bloomfield Road, were the names that leapt out of each new season's fixture list. At St James' Park, Jack and I were often surrounded by people who had travelled across the country to see Matthews, convinced that if they never saw him in the flesh, they would regret it for the rest of their lives. He was every young footballer's dream. He was helped, of course, by the naivety of the tactics that allowed him to persecute a full back throughout the game. Today he would be double marked, there would always be somebody backing up the first defender, but then a full back was on his own, and against Matthews on his best days he was the loneliest man in the world.

It was as though the ball was tied to Matthews' feet and, when he was on his toes, you knew the full back was beaten the moment he rested on his wrong foot. Matthews was gone, either right side or left, and then his options were to play to the feet of a team-mate who had worked himself free, or put the ball on Stanley Mortensen's head. Soon after playing with Finney for the first time, and seeing him strike the most brilliant form in Moscow a month later, I was reminded most strongly of Matthews' particular talent by Brazil's Garrincha in the World Cup finals in Sweden. He had the same, burning ten-yard pace, the same ability to make a goal a formality.

Many years later, I told Stan Mortensen of my fascination with Matthews, and about all the times I had compared him with Finney. I recalled how I sat with Jack in the shale near the corner flag at Newcastle and saw Matthews for the first time, and how I was a little surprised that I found myself thinking, 'Well, he's just a man who wears an overcoat like everybody

else, he doesn't have wings or a halo.' I also told Stan that I had often wondered about his own feelings on the subject, because once, when Matthews sent in a perfect corner for a headed goal at Newcastle, he had immediately run over to shout, 'Great cross.' But then when I was taken to Hampden Park to watch England against Scotland, and Finney supplied a similar service, I noted that Stan did not make a similar acknowledgement. He just ran back to the centre circle. I asked why it was so. 'Well,' said Mortensen, 'you know Stanley always made sure the lace on the ball was pointing away from me. I always thought that was very considerate because the lace hurt.'

I competed against Finney at club level several times, and saw him play at Deepdale for Preston, once brilliantly when my Uncle Stan's team, Leicester City, were the visitors. Compelling evidence was also provided by his club team-mates. They swore that no one could be more committed or resilient. While Matthews was the despair of huge crowds all over the country when he was announced as a non-starter because of a relatively minor injury, Finney was relentless. Talking to some Preston players after a match at Deepdale, telling them how well their team-mate had played, I was told, 'No, lad, that was normal. You should watch Tom play match after match, in any conditions against any opponents, against full backs who, by the end of the games, want to kill him, and then you see that he really is unbelievable.'

At Hampden Park I saw why it was that Tom Finney's team-mates were so unanimous and so deep in their praise. I saw the range and the depth and the willingness to do everything that was required of him to help the team. I also saw the generosity that is common to great players, who are so sure of their ability they do not need to parade it at every opportunity. When people talk of the extraordinary talent of Pelé, they sometimes forget that so much of his genius was expressed in the simplest but also deadliest of passes to a better placed team-mate. Some describe this as peripheral vision but that is a gift that grows

with experience and awareness of the rhythm of a game. What Finney showed me against Scotland was something more. It was the brain and the accomplishment of a great player but the heart of a humble one.

It was something to take from Scotland and, like my first cap, always care for as a rare gift. Another memorable present was two fine haggis from the head waiter at the Marine Hotel. He was thanking me for my compliment to the chef who had produced this dish. Some visitors push haggis aside on the grounds that it must be an acquired taste, but I said how much I enjoyed it, and whenever I returned with England, the head waiter gave me the same present – two cannonballs of lamb's liver, oatmeal and spices wrapped in a sheep's stomach – and I always accepted with unbroken enthusiasm.

I loved haggis from my first bite. It was a taste I did not have to work to acquire, no more than my first love for football, and today it remains as appealing as when I first tried it at the table of heroes who did so much to make me feel whole again.

Billy Wright became a friend as well as a hero, and an example of how a famous sportsman should behave. Long after his death, his widow, Joy, of the famous Beverley Sisters singing trio, occasionally wrote to me, telling me how much she still missed the gentle man who had brought so much into her life that she never found elsewhere, even in all the glamour of her show-business career.

I told her I remembered so vividly how he helped me through the most difficult time of my life, how he told me what I would see and feel at Hampden Park would persuade me that, far from being over, my football life had scarcely begun. I also told her that with the help of Tom Finney, he was proved right beyond my most optimistic dreams.