

Jelleyman's Thrown a Wobbly

Saturday Afternoons in Front of the Telly

Jeff Stelling

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Extract

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Introduction

This is not a rant ...

... But on the sixth day, God created Saturday.

Well, maybe, but during my more reflective moments, I'd like to think He designed it as a reward – something to look forward to during the working weekdays and those soulless evenings on the sofa in front of *Corrie*, *Big Brother* and *Location, Location, Lo-bloody-cation*. He stuffed it full of football, goals, drama, dodgy refereeing decisions and penalty appeals to cheer our souls and set our pulses racing. He gave us beer and pies as a refreshing accompaniment. And as an afterthought, He then gave us Sunday to deal with the hangovers and indigestion, while watching even more football and stuffing our faces with more food. Oh, and going to church, of course.

Minor blasphemy aside, though, I figured it would be a fitting way to begin this book by telling you exactly why Saturday is my favourite day of the week, mainly because I'm guessing it's yours, too, otherwise you wouldn't be reading these very pages. Unless you're a judge for the Pulitzer Prize, in which case you're permitted to hate Saturdays as much as you like as long as you look very



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favourably on these pages. But for most of us here, Saturdays represent a moment of weekly nirvana: twenty-four hours dedicated to superstition, strange rituals, long walks to the train station with siblings, friends and parents. It's about the little details: the rustling sports pages in the newspapers, the TV magazine shows (like my very own), listening to debate programmes on the radio, stumbling into drunken, post-match arguments in the pub, and engaging in long conversations during the late hours, all focused on one subject: football. Sweet, sweet football.

And god, it's great, isn't it? I remember that even as a kid, Saturday always held that extra special holiday quality from the minute I woke up in the morning to the moment my head hit the pillow in the evening. For years it was the bus to Hartlepool's Victoria Park ground, the short walk to the stadium, the smell of police-horse dung in the street, the whiff of frying onions, the first pint of the day in the local pub (after my 18th birthday of course), the first glimpse of the pitch, the ref's whistle, the shouting and the screaming and the ranting and the raving. Then there was the half-time pie and the half-time queue for the toilet. This was topped off with some more ranting and raving and screaming and shouting, before the shrill of the final whistle and the inevitable, crushing, demoralizing sting of defeat and the slow trudge home.

I wouldn't change it for anything else. Even now, the thrill of sitting in the hot seat in the *Soccer Saturday* studio is special. From the moment the first dab of make-up and 'guy-liner' has been stroked onto my face, through to the final results and post-match interviews, I'm usually on the edge of my seat, reacting to every goal, gaffe, sending-off, penalty decision and moment of high drama. Of course, it's not quite the same as sitting at Victoria Park in the wind and the rain from the North Sea, but it's up there.



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And, of course, I get to spend my Saturday afternoons with some pretty impressive figures in football (and Paul Merson), among them Matt Le Tissier, Charlie Nicholas, Phil Thompson, Clive Allen, George Best, Rodney Marsh, Paul Walsh, Alan Mullery, Frank McLintock and Tony Cottee. And let's not forget our roving reporter, cult (yes, cult) hero and giggling moustachioed friend, Chris 'Kammy' Kamara. Who wouldn't want to shoulder this cast of football superheroes on a Saturday?

Over the years, the show has picked up quite a following. Hopefully, you're one of the lovely, lovely many who tune in every week. If you're not, the next 200-plus pages are going to be bloody confusing, though you should glean some joy from the nice illustrations. But if you're familiar with the show, hopefully the book will give you a little insight into the madness that goes into making your Saturday afternoons every bit as exciting as mine ...





Part I

'You're not even watching football on the telly. You're watching a programme on the telly, where four blokes are watching football ... on the telly!'

Stop for a moment and see yourself meeting someone who has never seen *Soccer Saturday* before. This is difficult I know, but perhaps suspend your disbelief by picturing them as Martians or new Chelsea fans. Then, with this alien concept in mind, imagine explaining the basic idea of the show to these unfortunate souls. Believe me: it's not as easy as it sounds.

You will, of course, start by explaining that this football programme doesn't show any real, actual football. There are no goals, shots or near misses on the telly, so it's a bit like watching Derby

***Apologies to Bill Bryson**

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County. You'll explain that the closest things to action are the replays of last week's goals in three hours of football analysis, discussion and general messing about that precedes the 90 minutes of match drama on a Saturday afternoon. And that the real drama takes place as the latest scores and events stream onto the TV screen on a computerized videoprinter, while four men of varying 'expertise' - all of them former professional footballers - sit in front of TV screens displaying their designated matches, pull on headphones, and relay the afternoon's action with a series of gasps, groans, girly yelps and 'Oh, oh, no, oh, oooooohs!'

You'll probably confuse your enthralled audience further by adding that the roll-call of experts includes a former football play-boy ('Champagne' Charlie Nicholas), a one-eyed Liverpool fan and former England captain (Phil 'Thommo' Thompson), a former Southampton legend who dated an Australian soap legend (Matt 'Le Tiss' Le Tissier), and a controversial midfielder who once shared a house with Gazza and could be considered as a football equivalent to Amy Winehouse (Paul 'Merse' Merson).

But hang on a second! Curtail their confusion by explaining that this car crash of information, goals, bookings, red cards, referee blunders and substitutions is held together by 'Jeff's masterful handling of the latest football results' (GQ magazine, apparently - many thanks), as somehow, drawing all this together with a relatively calm head and a prayer to the TV gods, I perch on a precarious chair at the end of a desk as 'anchorman', with some notes and a dossier of information by way of reference while making some semblance of order from the chaos going on around the country.

Sounds strange when explained this way, doesn't it? But bizarrely, in this format, *Soccer Saturday* has drawn a cult following of fans, which is probably unsurprising given that, between the

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hours of three o'clock and four forty-five on a Saturday afternoon, it is the only place to receive a continual stream of match-related stats, facts and trivia, without suffering whatever it is Peter Schmeichel is waffling on about on BBC One. And if you haven't got a satellite dish, or even a cheap digital package from the local supermarket (shame on you), then you may have seen my mug gurning from a TV in your local Dixons as you've traipsed around the shops and peered at the half-time scores. This, if you are uninitiated to the programme (and if that's the case, I can only assume that you've been bought this book as a badly-planned present from a none-too-popular auntie), is *Soccer Saturday*. Hopefully you'll enjoy the show, and thanks for watching.

Part II

Calling The Oracle

How the *Soccer Saturday* concept came about now requires a back story of desperate measures, ill-conceived ideas, boozy escapades and Mark Lawrenson's unusual taste in waistcoats. Though by way of a full explanation, it's probably best if I take you back to a time before Sky Sports, when, in the olden days, there was only Ceefax or, if you were really unlucky, Oracle, to deliver live football scores on the telly. For anyone reading this under the age of 25, you may want to imagine Ceefax as a low-tech internet. Visualize a text-based service on your telly, only in colours more garish than a Norwich City away kit and with none of the speed or convenience of broadband, no pictures, no movies and certainly none of the mucky films. Instead, think graphics so big your granny could read them without her NHS specs, delivering the bare bones of a news story all served at a snail's pace. Forget high-speed connections:



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if you wanted live football results on a Saturday afternoon, you were probably sitting in front of the telly waiting for the system to scroll through 23 screens of information (the old First Division down to the Scottish lower leagues) with each page turning over every 45 seconds. It was a painful business.

Of course, you could have listened to the radio for results, but this presented another minor headache. In the good old days, the major stations would only focus on the biggest matches of the afternoon, with the odd result from the old Second Division thrown in. So there you were, driving home, listening out for the Crystal Palace versus Grimsby score in Division Two, and instead you're having to listen to a live commentary of Sheffield Wednesday versus Nottingham Forest (like I say, it was a long time ago) in the old Division One. Smart alics might claim that local radio delivered the more specialized commentary services, but it was unlikely that Hull City's local station would pay much lip service to anyone interested in the scores away from their former stadium, Boothferry Park, so if you had a passing interest in anything happening further up the table, you were in trouble.

Something, clearly, had to give. And that something was dignity ...

Part III

The Big Bang, Crash, Wallop Theory

To anyone with a bit of media savvy, there was clearly a huge audience requiring a wide range of football info in one place, delivered by a dashing anchorman at fast speeds. Somehow, we arrived at the show we all know and love today, though it hasn't always been called *Soccer Saturday*, a football show without any live football



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to watch. Its predecessor was *Sports Saturday*, a sports show without any sport to watch. This was originally presented by Paul Dempsey, a rather charming man who has now gone to the dark side of Setanta, I believe. Not that I ever watch it, mind. Anyway, my job was to appear on the show once every three weeks as a reserve anchorman, which was a blessing because *Sports Saturday* was a hideous show and would really only pay lip service to football.

When we did mention 'the beautiful game', former Liverpool defender Mark Lawrenson was invited onto the programme as our football expert. For whatever reason, 'Lawro' would usually wear the worst waistcoats you had ever seen. At times it was hard not to imagine that he'd dressed in the dark. In his garish fashions, he would talk in the studio for 20 minutes and discuss the day's big games. Then at four thirty - because there seemed to be an unwritten rule on TV at that time that the football scores should start to appear at four thirty - the results would trickle in.

It was a pretty shoddy service, because nobody had kept in touch with the scores throughout the afternoon. If you were a viewer, you had no idea what was going on in any of the games. If you were a presenter, it was highly possible that you were just as confused. It really was a mind-boggling format. Meanwhile, Sky in those days had very little in the way of live sport, apart from the football on a Sunday, which was their big selling point. As a result we would fill *Sports Saturday* with absolute twaddle or unique features. In fact, some of the so-called 'features' I would have to present are burned in my memory.

For example, one afternoon somebody had the bright idea of inviting a synchronized swimming team into the studio. The brief was for the team of a dozen girls to work through their competitive routines, complete with swimming caps, nose pegs, the works.



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Thankfully we were without water, which for safety reasons would have proved disastrous, but the movements and routines were just as disorientating. For anyone in the studio it was like watching the back four of any team managed by Kevin Keegan as they paraded around the floor inelegantly, waving their arms around and pretending to swim. Anyone actually viewing from the safety of their sofas must have thought, 'What the bloody hell is this?' I must admit, I remember shifting uncomfortably in my seat and thinking, 'What the bloody hell is this?' myself.

Later, we ran a feature on the Junior Darts Challenge, which killed a bit of time. We covered the UK Strongman Challenge and the quest for Britain's Best Lady Driver, which was obviously a very short item. During the World Cup we had nothing in the way of live coverage because the TV rights had been cornered by ITV and the Beeb. Instead we laid out a cloth Subbuteo pitch on the studio table and for an hour and half – a full 90 minutes! – fellow easy-on-the-eye presenter Suzanne Dando and I flicked a little plastic ball around, recreating the live match on the other channel.

How anyone could have taken this concept seriously was beyond me. In fact, I remember during the early salvos of our 'match', I actually knelt down and crushed one of Suzanne Dando's players beyond repair. Somewhat embarrassingly, the producer went absolutely crazy off-camera. I later crushed another with my hand. It was a completely innocent accident, but I received a bollocking for not taking our little game seriously. But how could you? It was a bit like Fred Truman's 1970s show, *Indoor League*, a programme that focused on pub sports in a studio built to look like a pub. Sadly – or maybe brilliantly, however you wanted to look at it – *Sports Saturday* was much, much worse. I think if the programme existed now, it would probably have built a cult following.

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I remember one Christmas – and I don't know how we got away with this, what with the rules and regulations that govern TV these days – we took a delivery from the Harrods warehouse, which was conveniently located next to the Sky studios. Very kindly, the store had couriered over a box of toys, all of which would be available from Harrods during the festive season at a very reasonable price, or so we were told. Given our desperate need to fill airtime, we decided to spend a couple of hours on *Sports Saturday* trying out every toy. We even invited former England cricketer Alan Lamb and current panellist Phil Thompson into the studio. Their kids were brought along to try out all the shiny gadgets and, presumably, add some much-needed maturity to the event.

'Harrodsgate' was blatant product placement and probably the lowest point of my broadcasting career, particularly when a Velcro hat appeared from one of the boxes. By all accounts it was one of the must-have toys of the year. It worked on the frankly absurd principle of hurling fuzzy balls onto targets marked on the hat. If a ball stuck, the triumphant thrower would score points. It seemed a stupid concept, but in a moment of TV gold, I donned the hat as former cricket legend and upstanding member of his local community Alan Lamb and various members of the studio crew threw balls at my head. It wasn't a particularly glorious image.

Elsewhere, everything was done on the cheap. Different guests would come in to lend their expertise to different sporting events. We used to drag jockeys into the studio for interviews, even though Sky had no horse racing coverage to speak of. Ex-football managers like Brian Horton would show up for two 20-minute windows (before the kick-off and after the final whistle) and stay for the duration of the show. I don't know what sort of fees were on offer, but it couldn't have been enough.



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Outside broadcasts would take a particularly surreal turn. Alan Lamb and I were once invited to St Moritz in Switzerland where a yearly horse-racing-on-ice event is held by the locals (believe me, I wish I were making this up). Naturally, we weren't going to pass up a free trip to the Swiss Alps, especially when we discovered there was a local cricket team who were planning on playing cricket-on-ice, too. It was hardly the Winter Olympics, but it promised to be a bit of a giggle.

It wasn't until we got to the train that our usually organized party became embroiled in some minor chaos. It was the bloody slow train from Zurich up into the mountains. Everybody got bored and started to drink. Then we did what any right-thinking, slightly tipsy sports nut would do: we started a cricket match in the corridor of the train carriage. Typically, as with all things *Sports Saturday*, we didn't have a bat, stumps or ball, so we made do with bags, a broly and tomatoes. After four overs, the train was splattered in red and resembled a scene from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Only a Velcro hat could have lowered the tone.

It came as no surprise when the Swiss train officials took a dim view of our behaviour. We were informed by a particularly disgruntled guard that the police would be waiting for us on our arrival in St Moritz. I remember thinking, 'This will not look good.' By the time we'd arrived everyone had been on their knees cleaning the train. It was spotless and the police were not required, so we'd got off scot-free, which was a relief. Better still, this marked the beginnings of *Soccer Saturday* as we now know it.

Part IV

1997-98 BC (Before Chris Kamara)

I suppose, after the silly clothes, absurd reports and drunken misdeemeanours, it was unsurprising that the show would change. And when some bright spark – I can't remember who exactly, it's been lost in the annals of time – had the idea of plonking four slightly overweight, ex-professional footballers in front of four tellies to report on matches the paying public couldn't see, we seemed to strike gold. It happened in one season, in 1998, and with the show's name changed to *Soccer Saturday*, we were suddenly working on a more football-based programme, which was a blessing because it would mean no more Velcro hats – or tomato-splattered train carriages. Even better, it seemed to capture the public's imagination, though nobody – not even me – really believed the concept had staying power. Who would want to watch four blokes watching football on the telly in a studio? Nevertheless, I began my role as anchorman on the nation's surrealist football magazine show.

Almost immediately it appeared to be good fun. In those days, *Soccer Saturday* started at two o'clock in the afternoon. We'd have an hour-long discussion with a panel, including Clive Allen and Mark Lawrenson, George Best, Rodney Marsh and Frank McLintock. It was principally the same idea as the show's current format, but at three o'clock we might move from football for a brief while to look at the horse racing or rugby. As more and more people began to discover that this was the only place to receive a comprehensive round-up of the day's football events, as and when they happened, the viewing figures began to increase.



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Soccer Saturday began to develop into a word-of-mouth success – Sky never really promoted the show and some of our popularity came from the comedy of the afternoon. One idea at this point was for the panel to magically disappear from the studio desk at three o'clock. Each panellist would then sit in a little voice booth in another corner of the building to present telephone reports from their respective games. Why they couldn't stay on the panel and deliver their reports from there was beyond me. And why any right-thinking individual would believe that Frank McLintock had travelled from Middlesex to St James' Park to report on his game in the space of 10 minutes would require a massive leap of imagination.

This surreal situation was given an even stranger twist when our pundits piped their reports into the studio. As I introduced a new match, a picture of Rodney Marsh's face, say, would appear on the telly with his name underneath as he recalled the action at Highbury. Despite their close proximity, the phone lines would sometimes go down and we would lose contact, meaning the studio would be thrown into chaos. It was even less technologically-advanced than 'Andy Townsend's Tactics Truck' on ITV, and slightly more embarrassing. But only slightly.

Somehow, the show survived in this guise for a little while until a producer called Andrew 'Buzz' Hornet suddenly struck upon the idea of *Soccer Saturday* in its modern format. It was blindingly obvious really: rather than moving the panel into phone booths, why not place them in front of TVs on a visible panel so they could relay the match action more visually? With a studio facelift, we were away, and the current format of *Soccer Saturday* was in place. TV viewers were now watching a programme where four men watched live football on the telly. Almost immediately we realized it was a great idea.

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I remember thinking the show had made its mark when I stumbled across a magazine interview with actress Patsy Kensit. In it, she began detailing the ins and outs of her marriage to Oasis frontman Liam Gallagher and described his surreal behaviour on a Saturday afternoon. This didn't involve hell-raising lager binges in his local pub, or hotel-trashing drug orgies. Instead, Liam's strangest act was when his wife found him watching Sky Sports on the telly, as four experts in ill-fitting suits watched football ... on the telly. Apparently, she couldn't get her head around it, which was weird because I imagine she'd probably seen some very strange things in the Gallagher household at that time.

'That's where Liam sits on Saturday afternoon,' she explained to the journalist. 'He is mesmerized by that mad programme on Sky where everyone is watching football on tellies you can't see. Honestly, that is the weirdest show I've ever seen and both my husband and my eldest son are riveted to it.'

She wasn't alone. I think a lot of other people felt the same way about *Soccer Saturday* at the time. Thinking about it, they probably still do.