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GOLDEN DAZE

NICK CORBLE



IT'S STARTED AGAIN. The clicking of the turnstile, the grunt from the gateman, the first sight of the immaculate green sward below with its alternating light and dark green stripes. The coppers patrolling the old dogtrack, the wind catching the corner flag, the nods to recognised faces nearby, the lone cameraman in his gantry. The referee finally blowing his whistle. It's started again.

Across the country middle aged men dressed all in black were re-starting my world. 'The big kick-off' the papers always call it, and for once they weren't lying. You waited all summer for it to come along, the Saturday of the August Bank Holiday weekend, summer may still be in full flow, but in reality this was where the year began. Wearing scarves proudly in the summer sunshine we met as usual at the One Bell in the heart of town. We were a breed apart, separate from the shoppers who normally occupied the High Street, we were a community with a shared aim. Optimism was the glue that bound us together, that and a love for our club and our team.

The pub was our watering hole, but we weren't there to get tanked up. We may have been young with strong bladders, but we didn't want to miss any of the action standing in the pisser inside the ground. We had just enough to feel good, then out

into bright mid-afternoon daylight and a stroll up through the graveyard and a mad laughing dash over the ring-road. We joined the gathering crowd, walking with determination, and even though there was still half an hour to kick off, adrenaline was pumping through our veins.

Closer to the ground the programme sellers were barking out their wares and I fished out a fifty pence piece to keep my collection going and to catch up on the season's opening words of wisdom from our manager. The sausage and burger vans added their smell and sizzle to the general air of anticipation. A crowd of drinkers had spilled over from the Red Lion on the corner and a line of hoardings let us know which journalists from which rags would be covering the game the next day in the Sundays.

The national journalists never were our favourite people, always ready to put us down, but it was good to see that they were having to take us seriously. To us they were merely the butlers to the football aristocracy, there to do the establishment's dirty work for them, making it clear who was and who was not welcome at the top table and ever ready to point out when we might make a social faux pas or fail to conform to their social rules. They'd learn, we told ourselves, in time they'd learn to accept us as one of them and that times had changed, forever. Groovy. Paully and Trev were with me as we picked up where we'd left off, nicking Paully's hat and trying to toss it up onto the top of road signs. It was like we were in our first long trousers except the beer was kicking in by then, making us more adventurous, more daring.

The opposition that first day was Coventry and there was a smattering of sky blue shirts heading the same way as us, although we chose to ignore them. This was our patch, our turf, our Vicarage Road. After the previous season we feared no one here. Then we arrived, the tall floodlights gazing down onto the pitch hidden behind a high wall, unlit and redundant in the bright summer sunshine - their time would come. A

background chatter of noise on the outside and a deep resonant rumble from within. Mums and Dads with their kids, lads like us in their gangs, policemen with their dogs and one or two perched on top of horses. We headed for the far corner and stood dutifully in line and after what seemed like an age we finally got to the front of the queue and handed over our money. The man behind the grille in the gate pushed his foot down and the cold metal of the turnstile squeaked and turned, admitting us to the open space inside.

At last, for reasons lost in the mists of time, the familiar opening bars of the Z-Cars theme tune started up, and the teams came out to a crescendo of cheers and a rain of torn up Yellow Pages, one inch squares that fluttered down like sycamore seeds and carpeted the concrete terraces. Our boys, our golden boys. The players ran into their respective halves and immediately started kicking balls to vent off some of the pent up energy they too must have been feeling, a summer's worth of frustration, whilst the managers slinked towards their dug outs and hid.

There was no great ceremony, no pom poms or brass bands, this wasn't American football, there was no need for a great fuss, it was a simple game after all, the only cameras there were from Match of the Day and even they were there only to record the highlights. It was all terribly restrained, and although individual players might choose to raise their hands above their heads if the cheer when their name was announced was loud enough, this was their only acknowledgement. Otherwise, it was as if we didn't exist, watching through a one way mirror, observers at the feast.

Standing on the terraces created an almost natural phenomenon as all of us fans morphed together into a single mass, swaying from side to side like a field of wheat caught in the wind as we all strived to follow the action. If sheer willpower were enough on its own the ball would never have left the opposition's half as we pushed our boys forward and

pulled theirs back with shouts and hand gestures, both of encouragement and abuse. The players on the pitch were our playthings, a giant Subbuteo set, not human beings until they did something special with the ball, rising to heroes for a few vital seconds if they delivered the ultimate: a goal.

We were close enough to hear the players shout at each other, to see the sweat fly off their faces like salty rain as they raced around the pitch using every ounce of energy in their finely tuned athletes' bodies, to almost smell the fear they generated as they advanced on the opposition defenders and headed for goal. We could hear the tackles as studs met bone, not just watch them, and we knew they could hear us back; and as the slanted sunlight began to disappear behind the west stand it reflected off their shirts, at times making them seem as if they were truly made of gold.

When a goal was scored, the ordered swaying of the crowd became anarchy. Some leaped up and down, others merely clapped politely. The more experienced celebrated briefly and then watched where the surge of humanity behind them was headed as we were all pushed forward involuntarily towards the crush bars. Get one of those in your ribs with the weight of a few dozen yellow and red scarved fans behind you and you'd know about it until the following Saturday.

It was for this reason that we invariably stationed ourselves just after a bar, leaving ourselves room to become absorbed in the moment without fear. If the goal was against us a great collective sigh would follow, with a few of the crowd burying their faces in their hands, a few more appealing for offside and a few others berating the defenders. Then came a dissection of where it had all gone wrong, who we needed to blame. That was the routine.

For nearly ten years Groovy and I had stood in the same place and those that joined later had adopted the location as their own. Almost instinctively we homed in on a spot two thirds the way up to the right of the goal. Our end was

uncovered, unlike the die-hard fans at the Rookery end directly opposite us. These were the true hard nuts, the ones who started most of the chants and had the advantage of a corrugated iron sides to bang on to get the noise levels up. Having a roof also amplified them of course, and they had the further advantage of the visiting fans to their left to taunt and respond to, the two factions divided by a thin line of men in blue.

Behind us was the electronic scoreboard, another Taylor innovation. State of the art stuff this was, with the capacity to run short pin man type cartoons or flash up words of encouragement. Our favourite used to be when it brought up the two words 'Black Magic' whenever Luther Blissett scored, which was often. Sadly we suspected this has been retired with the loss of our talisman to Italy, despite the fact that our new main man, John Barnes, or Barnesy, was also black. It was all a long way from the fourth division.

We'd waited all summer for it to come along, the Saturday of the August Bank Holiday weekend, but by the time the final whistle blew we wished it hadn't bothered. We'd celebrated goals from Barnes and the substitute Jobson, but it wasn't enough. We'd lost 3-2. There would be no unbeaten record that season, no fortress Watford, just an agonising three day wait until the following Tuesday for another home match, this time against Ipswich, and an hollow feeling in the pit of our stomachs.

A sense of anti-climax descended like a fog, a confusion of 'ifs' and 'buts' rattling around our heads, and a frustration it was impossible to vent in any way that didn't involve either violence or screaming - we could have won, should have won; but we didn't and we hadn't and there was no reversing the fact. The scores would appear in green on the Teletext and in black and white in the Sunday papers and the journalists would have their way after all. We left the ground and headed back into town, radios pressed against our ears.

It's 5 o'clock and time for Sports Report, and then the familiar marching music, a brass band given its head and told to enjoy itself, a tune that sounded as if it should have been backing a fairground sequence on a silent film, a sequence of notes that triggered an almost Pavlovian response of silence across the streets so we can hear the honeyed tones of James Alexander Gordon as he read out the results starting, as always, with 'English League Division One'. What had happened elsewhere and please, please God, we pleaded, make Luton lose too.