

Copyrighted Material

PROLOGUE

It used to be so simple. You got up later than most people. You drove in your excessively large SUV to a training ground and enjoyed either a barista-brewed coffee or a massage on arrival. You changed into clothes someone else had washed for you, ran around for a while playing a game you had loved since childhood and shared a number of excellent if puerile jokes with your friends. When you finished you enjoyed a highly nutritious lunch and drove home to sleep or play golf. If there were onerous tasks, you did not notice, because you paid someone to do them all for you.

Life as a footballer is a dream. Until it is suddenly over, and you are cast adrift in a world you do not understand and do not really want to be part of.

You are a man-child forced into maturity overnight. You are a general in the bling army suddenly demobilised and without a clue what to do. After a lifetime of being cosseted, praised and arse-kissed, you are a freshman in the university of life. And no-one at the careers fair wants to talk to you.

When I wrote *How to Be a Footballer*, I tried to take you inside the old world. The strangest, funniest, most baffling world of all – a

Copyrighted Material

place where one team-mate comes to training in a bright red suit with matching top hat, cane and glasses without any glass in them, and another spends his evening hiring a Ferrari, parking it outside a nightclub and then lying on the bonnet directly in the eyeline of all the girls coming out. A world where a player gets a tattoo of a chimpanzee wearing glasses and Beats by Dre headphones and kissing the barrel of a gun; where there is a team-mate whose preparation for a big game is turning up with a Tesco bag containing the same four items of food every single time (a croissant, a hot chocolate, a full-fat Coke and a packet of crisps); where there is a striker who sends a tweet and then replies to it as if it's a text message from a stranger, starting a conversation with himself that the whole world can see.

In writing my second book, *I, Robot*, I attempted to take you deeper still into the wonderful weirdness: the player who shut himself away in his hotel room every night and had his dinner opposite his smartphone showing his wife on FaceTime having exactly the same dinner at exactly the same time; the one who sustained a tiny cut on his leg yet went to the club doctor every day to ask him to apply a Band-Aid on his behalf; the ones who were so scared by the idea of cooking for themselves that they got the canteen staff to clingfilm up the same lunch they'd just eaten so they could have it again for tea.

But now it's over. I am a footballer no more. So it is time for me to tell you what happens next – when the adoration ends, when the money falls away, when the rest of your life unfurls in front of you and you just want to tell it to furl off.

In my first spell as a civilian after two decades of active service, I have sought the counsel and stories of those who have gone before. The brave ones, the daft ones, the cataclysmic errors and the beautiful successes.

Copyrighted Material

PROLOGUE

Because there is no real help when you finish. When you walk out of your final club after your last game for them there's nothing you have to sign, no contract you rip up. You're just gone. No leaving-do, no cards from your old colleagues or a whip-round for a gift. I had a small party at my house when I was done, but that was just family and a few friends. No fanfare, just a few beers.

The Monday after that final season ends, you go away on holiday, just as you always have. This is the easy bit. Nothing has changed, even though you know deep down that everything has. It's only when the season starts again in August that it hits you: you have absolutely nothing to do. The monthly pay packet that's been coming in for the last 20 years? It's disappeared.

It's amazing how you can take it for granted. If you're lucky enough to have played in the Premier League, even for one of the smaller clubs, you might have earned an average of £40,000 a week. After tax you can be clearing £100k a month. Suddenly, there's nothing. A great empty hole in the good side of the transactions section on your mobile banking app, a calamitous number of minuses appearing elsewhere. If you're lucky again and you've got a few investments, if you've bothered with a pension, that keeps the panic at bay for a few weeks. But pretty soon it hits you again – there is nothing coming in.

We don't expect sympathy, us ex-players. We earned great money doing something we absolutely loved. We've retired at an age when most people are still busting a gut to get anywhere near the top. But it doesn't help you, that first lonely Monday morning in August. Football has always been your great excuse. I can't do that because I'm playing football. I can't go there.

Suddenly, there are no excuses. You have nothing to do. You might as well do this thing you probably shouldn't do. You may

Copyrighted Material

as well go to the pub at lunchtime. Footballers are not great at planning things. There are people employed to do the planning for you. Now? Now those people don't care. They've deleted you from their spreadsheets. You don't even know how spreadsheets work, let alone how to delete stuff. Somehow this makes it worse.

And the others at the club? The manager got rid of you because he found someone better. Imagine trying to process that. None of this 'it's not you, it's me'. Instead, it's very much you, get your stuff and leave. The supporters, the ones who sang your name, the ones whose mood you could transform with a single wave of your foot? They're not singing your name anymore. They're making up new songs about the bloke everyone agrees is a significant upgrade. No-one's at the club shop asking for your name to be printed across the back of their new replica shirt. For the first time in your adult life, you realise with a lurch, there are thousands of badly fitting pieces of sportswear that will not feature a single mention of you and your deeds.

There is no sentiment in football. If moving club is bad – here one day, gone the next – retirement is a hundred times worse, because you're not falling into the arms of another lover. You're washed up. You're finished. You're a memory, banished to repeats of *The Premier League Years* on Sky and 'On This Day' features on your old team's social media accounts.

At first, it's just weird, having done the same thing every day for 20 years and then not having it at all. Then you get scared – scared of spending your days watching *Loose Women*, scared of a morning where the highlight is sitting on the sofa in your pants, eating crisps and watching *Lorraine*. For years you've dreamed of a morning

Copyrighted Material

off, doing exactly what you're now doing. Now you're doing it, it terrifies you.

And so I began a journey. A voyage into the hinterland, a search for answers. To the mavericks, like the former striker who ended up selling vacuum cleaner parts; the big lump of a centre-half who now runs his own hedge fund. The old rival who became a politician, the former defender who is now a detective specialising in drug busts and homicides.

We're out there, and there are thousands of us. The ones who try to make it as managers, having spent their lives trying to make managers' lives as difficult as possible; the ones who think they can run restaurants with no prior experience, just because they've enjoyed eating in them. The pundits, watching old team-mates have nightmares and wondering how on earth they can maintain both professional reputation and friendships; the creatives, trying to make it as actors or artists. The ones who turn to God, the ones who turn to darker pleasures. Because it doesn't take long to realise the Zumba class at your local Bannatyne does not offer quite the same buzz as banging in an overhead kick in front of the Kop, and that Susan on reception does not enjoy the same jokes as a half-cut Craig Bellamy.

Ex-footballers used to become plumbers. They used to run pubs and sell double glazing. You could win the World Cup in your own national stadium and yet end up owning a funeral parlour. Now we are terrified by the prospect of taking public transport and incapable of wearing pants that have not been bought for us by a kitman named Dave.

This is *How to Be an Ex-Footballer*. Simple, it is not.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

MANAGERS

Are footballers pleasant people? In the main, yes. But there is one thing you need to understand about each and every one: in a footballing environment, we will be ruthless.

Nicking a goal that could have been scored by your strike partner. Taking the starting place of a team-mate who you like very much as a person, and not feeling even slightly guilty about it. Seeing a manager who backed you getting sacked, and immediately trying to work out how this affects you, not them.

And it's this that has to be in your mind if you consider following your career as a footballer by becoming someone who will be in charge of them. There is a great attraction in becoming a manager – the profile, the problem solving, the emotional rewards. But you know, because you are poacher turned gamekeeper, that your players will try to take advantage of you in every possible situation.

Here's how it works. You're a manager in your first job. You've come up with a really innovative training ground drill that you think will be both stimulating and of great use in match scenarios. You've got in early, set out the cones, made sure there are sufficient balls. The players are standing in front of you, and you're explaining

Copyrighted Material

how the drill works, and it's all going great, and then just for a moment you get one of the instructions wrong. You say, it's the striker coming in late at the back post, lads, and as soon as you've said it you think, no, hang on, it's the front post. So you correct yourself quickly, and you crack on, but you look around the group, and you can see it on their faces: this is a shambles. This bloke doesn't know what he's doing.

I've done a number of coaching badges. The Level Two, and my UEFA A and B licences. And of all the brilliant things I was taught, all the basics and sensible stuff and the clever bits on top, this is the one aspect I'll never forget, because I saw it as a player. I was part of it as a player.

Respect. That's what it comes down to. You have that from the lads under you, and all is possible. You lose it, even for a moment, and you're finished. Players have an ability to smell weakness. They capitalise on it. Word starts spreading round the cliques, and the dressing-room, and then the wider training ground: don't bother with the new fella, he's all over the shop.

Of course it's harsh. It's almost impossible. All of us make mistakes; very few of us are certain about everything. So in football, you have to pretend.

Pep Guardiola talked about it to a good friend of mine. When you're in front of your players, even if you don't know the answer to a question, act like you do. Even if you think it's impossible for anyone not to realise what you're saying is wrong, make certain you look like you're right. You might remove the mask in front of your coaches when it's just you guys on your own – f***, what do we do here, lads? – but with the players you're in charge of, you always have the answers.

Copyrighted Material

It's the footballing equivalent of an army officer standing in front of a group of young squaddies. If he says, 'Lads, I think we might go over this wall here and launch an attack, but I'm not sure, what do you think?' then he's done for. It has to be said with total conviction – right, we're going over this wall, it's the best option, it's the only option, and it's going to work. There's a reason why you've never seen a sergeant put a hand on his chin and murmur, hmm, what's the generable consensus here? Hands in air – who fancies it?

This isn't an easy thing for me. I like being upfront with people. I'd rather be honest than pretend to be someone I'm not. I don't like the idea of standing in front of a group of players, looking them in the eye and lying to them. But even one glance sideways at your assistant when a player has confronted you about a tactic or drill can finish you. Be right, or pretend convincingly you are.

I loved the coaching courses I went through in my final years as a player. The Level Two badge was done on a residential course in South Wales, and it was superb. The year before I was there, the intake had included Patrick Vieira, Thierry Henry, Sol Campbell and Mikel Arteta. The people in charge were incredibly knowledgeable about the game; the teaching was thorough, and it was all enjoyable.

It was also hard work. We were finishing at nine or ten o'clock at night. And there was the realisation, a few days in, of how difficult it is to make the leap from player to manager.

You turn up, as a player who's been at the top, who's had success in the Premier League and played at World Cups, and you think you have a pretty good understanding of how the game works. You've been involved in the sport for a quarter of a century. And then they start taking you through your responsibilities – not even

the big ones, like buying and selling players, or plotting an away win at the home of your main rivals – and you think: I've released a hit single, but now I'm running the record company. All those skills I've picked up, the hours I've spent honing them? They're irrelevant now. The game has changed.

I'm not instinctively an organised man. I forget dates. I realise too late I've committed to being in two places at the same time. As a player none of that mattered. I had someone to do the organising for me. Where to be, how to get there, what to do when we arrived. It arguably accentuated my natural characteristics, because I never had to bother. As a player, you're actively encouraged to worry about nothing but your own game.

Then we did our first hands-on coaching session, and it was all about organisation. How many players are involved? What will each of them be doing? Where are the cones, where do these poles have to go? Right, there's a couple of players with niggles, you're down to seven when you planned for ten. How's the drill going to work now? Who's filling in at centre-half when you no longer have a central defender to play with?

And it keeps going. Have you remembered your stopwatch? How long is this going to take? The players have to be over there for another drill in 20 minutes. They're already a bit fried from the first session. How are you going to keep them engaged? It's a defensive drill, and the strikers know it. They're just stooges in their mind. How are you making it interesting and worthwhile for them? What about a warm-up – have you built in the time for that? These two have arrived a couple of minutes late. You now don't have time to do all the things you wanted to do. Do you cut down on the explanation bit at the start, with the risk that no-one gets it and the

Copyrighted Material

session falls apart, or do the full opener and then not have time to put it all into practice? When you're trying to do all this, how are you sounding and looking? You'll need to create a sense of authority to get them to listen to you – so what's your body language like? What's your tone of voice, your response if someone's not paying attention and you need to pull them up about it?

Maybe you could predict some of that. You certainly go back to your club, if you're still playing, as many are, and start watching your own sessions in a very different way. But there's other aspects that are so far outside your experience that it's just plain intimidating. When you do your UEFA Pro licence, which is what you must have if you want to manage in the top division of any European league on a permanent basis, it's as much about the off-field stuff as it is the coaching. And so you will go through mock interviews with Premier League chairmen and chief executives. You'll have put together a long-term plan for how you're going to transform this club – the style you want to implement, the players you'll look to bring in, the players you'll improve. You'll need to talk about your vision for the youth set-up, what you want to do with the training ground, how you're going to engage that section of the home support who have fallen out of love with the club.

It's neither a cosy chat in the corner of a pub, as it once was, nor standing up in a boardroom, difficult though that is for many players. It's a PowerPoint presentation. It's detailed slides: graphs, tables, diagrams. It might be a physical dossier – a folder you've prepared for each of your interrogators to take away.

Word gets around the game fast. Who prepared brilliantly; who tried to get through based on what they'd achieved as a player. If you can't do PowerPoint, you must bring someone in who can, and

do so in a way that makes it all look like your work. You need to know every slide and be able to expand off the back of it. People still talk in awe about the presentation Brendan Rodgers delivered when he went for the Liverpool job: the thickness of his dossier, the vision set out within it, the way it looked as if he had been working up to this moment for most of his life. But the best managers are meticulous in preparation for everything they do. Was Rafa Benítez a great player? Jürgen Klopp, Arsène Wenger? It doesn't matter that Rafa never made it above the second tier of Spanish football as a prosaic midfielder, or that Wenger barely made it that far in the footballing backwaters of the east of France. It doesn't matter that Klopp has described himself as having fourth-division feet. He's also said he had a first-division head. That's why he's a genius as a manager, not because he averaged a goal every seven games for a Mainz team remembered only in Mainz.

*

You get to meet a lot of special people through football. You get to make the sort of friends you can only make at a certain time of your life, when you're young and often a bit foolish, and you've got a few responsibilities but not too many, and you can have late nights and lie-ins at weekends, and there's not loads of money about but enough to do most of the things you fancy doing at that exact moment.

That was me when I met Shaun Derry, or Dezza, for the first time. Me after my first big-money move, going from QPR to Portsmouth in the summer of 2001, moving out of my mum and dad's house for the first time. Down on the south coast with a bunch of lads who were good at what they did but also liked to enjoy themselves.

Copyrighted Material

Shaun was three years further into his career than me, the sort of midfielder you love when they're playing for your team but hate in every other scenario. Tough, aggressive, fond of a wind-up, all about breaking up play rather than making it beautiful for somebody else. I had an apartment by the Port Solent marina. He had one just across the water. Over the other way was another one of the young-and-fun gang, Courtney Pitt, a left-sided midfielder who'd come in from Chelsea. Each of us bought a pair of binoculars so we could sit on our balconies and see what the others were up to, before phoning them to ask if they fancied coming over so we could do the same thing together.

Courtney and I had no idea what we were doing. We couldn't cook. We could barely make the washing machines in our flats work. Most of my lounge was taken up by an inflatable goal. I'd train all morning with Portsmouth, come back in the afternoon and play lounge two-touch with anyone who fancied it. One time a load of my mates from Ealing came down, and we ended up playing naked except for ties around our necks. I can't recall why, which may be a good thing.

Dezza got involved with a number of high jinks and low deeds. But I remember even then thinking that he was going to be a manager at some stage. Not just because he managed Courtney and me, when we needed it, but because something in him changed when he walked into the training ground. Gone were the japes and the mess-about. Instead, he'd work his arse off. He would be questioning the coaches, asking why we were doing particular sessions, telling them what he thought we should be doing instead. If your attitude as a player was even slightly off, he'd be on you. He wasn't in charge, officially. Unofficially he ran the place.

Copyrighted Material

Now? Now he coaches the first team at Crystal Palace. He managed Notts County, saving them from what looked like certain relegation in 2014 with six wins in their last nine games. He had two-and-a-half years in charge of Cambridge. And he's done all that, like a lot of players, because injury gave him a big fat kick up the backside.

'I didn't even think about management seriously until I was nearly 30 years old,' he told me, one afternoon after taking training at Palace. 'I'd done a couple of my coaching badges in my mid-20s, but I'd put it to bed with being so busy playing.'

'Then I was at Leeds, and we were playing Stoke away, and I got absolutely done by Mamady Sidibé, their massive centre-forward. It was an innocuous tackle, but all the blood that went into my heel calcified into bone, and I ended up needing three operations in ten months. This is the time when there was loads of crap happening at Leeds – on the brink of administration, Ken Bates in charge, Dennis Wise his manager. There were loads of players at the club that they didn't want, and I was one of them. They even offered me a retirement package, because they thought that was the best way of getting me out.'

'Now the injury got better. I got a move back to Palace, and I played on for a fair while. But it got me thinking – I could be done at any point here, I need to work out what else I could do. I knew I didn't have the profile as a player to walk straight into punditry and do well, so coaching was the way I decided to go.'

He did keep going, too. Three years in the Championship with Palace, two more with QPR plus another back in the Premier League under Neil Warnock. He was on loan with Millwall in autumn 2013 when the big change came – in a way that often happens in football, a mix of luck, inside information and a certain amount of blagging.

‘It was a Sunday, and I was on a coaching course in west London. There were 18 of us in the room, getting taught how to go through an interview process. I was still playing, doing okay, thinking this might come in useful a few years down the line. Then we had a break for lunch at two o’clock, and I went outside for some fresh air, and I had a text from a mate back in Nottingham saying County had just sacked Chris Kiwomya. Now, I’m from the city. I’d been back at Meadow Lane a few weeks before, playing in a charity game, so I had the number of the club’s chief executive, Jim Rodwell. At ten past two I called his mobile, and said to him, “Jim, it’s Shaun Derry here, you’re talking to your wildcard ...”

‘He asked me what I wanted. I told him an interview. He told me to come to meet him on Tuesday.

‘I was due to be at training with Millwall. So I phoned in injured, got in the car and drove from London to a hotel in Lincoln. Five hours later, me and Jim were still talking. I came away at half-seven at night, and I thought, s***, I’ve got a genuine chance of the job here. I had no idea what I was doing. I was going into the totally unknown.

‘My family were all away on holiday in Portugal. I hadn’t even told my wife about the interview. So I rang her and said, this is what’s happened, I’m meeting the chairman and his wife on Thursday, what do you think?

‘Our home’s in London. It would mean me moving. A big enough decision to take on your own. But I was going for it, and I wanted to do it properly. I thought about the perception of me versus the reality. I couldn’t look like a 35-year-old footballer. I had to look like a potential manager.

‘I wore the suit I’d got for Danny Butterfield’s wedding when we were at Palace together. Then I thought about all the stuff I’d learned

from Neil Warnock. He'd been fantastic for me in the latter stages of my career, letting me sit in his office listening in while he talked to agents on the phone, orchestrating it all. I felt privileged to be sitting in on those conversations, because he could really manipulate them.

'I rang him the night before. "What do I do?" And he told me that people in power like to speak about themselves. You have to flip the interview. Ask loads of questions, understand who they are, find out their recent history. Figure out who their family members are, because everyone loves talking about their own family.

'So that's what I did on the Thursday. The first two hours I spent talking to Jim Rodwell about his family, about his previous experiences as a chief executive. I carried it on with the chairman, who I found out was a QPR fan, so I gave him chapter and verse on all the inside stuff happening there.

'Notts County weren't my team. It was their team – the chairman's, the chief executive's. I'd never played in League One, and I didn't have in-depth knowledge like they did of the opposition. So I talked about the positives of the team. I told them how I could change what had been a pretty negative start to the season.

'I was offered the manager's job that afternoon. I went from playing football in the Championship on Saturday to managing a team in the FA Cup against Hartlepool a week later. With no idea what I was doing.'

I always think of Dezza being Warnock's me. Or Warnock being his Harry Redknapp – a player and a manager who seem to work together at every club. You're seen as part of a package. Harry, me, Jermain Defoe and Niko Kranjčar. Possibly Sandro. Warnock, Shaun, Michael Brown, Michael Tonge, Clint Hill and Paddy Kenny.

Copyrighted Material

It also makes sense that he didn't try to be Warnock as a manager. Harry and Neil are unique. You might borrow a few of their traits when you think about coaching, but there's no point in trying to be the mark II model.

'I know my reputation as a player,' Shaun admits. 'I was combative. I was in your face, argumentative. But if you're like that as a manager, you'd be in the game for two minutes. Modern players aren't the same as I was, and they don't respond to it. I very quickly had to read the room and become a different character to the previous 34 years.

'You go on all these courses, and you meet some great people, and some whoppers. But the single best bit of advice I got was from Mick McCarthy. He said, every day as a manager, you have to put a different mask on. You might be a prince, a jester, a friend. You have to look around that training ground and recognise what's needed by those players.

'You've got to look like you're in control, even when all around you is breaking down. At the Premier League level, players can smell when something's not right. You can't kid them at this level. If a session's got flaws, they'll highlight them in milliseconds. It's slightly different the lower you go; you can manipulate things a little more there. Not here. Your sessions need to be organised, and they need to flow. If it breaks down, they are on you. Some of the comments made at this level can be pretty ruthless.

'I'm a coach now, and I have to remember that. I'm not the manager, I'm not the manager's assistant. A coach has to work with the players every day, so you have to make sure the relationship is sustainable for the entire season. You'd be foolish to react one day

Copyrighted Material

and completely throw your toys out the pram, because you'll be seeing the same players the next day.

'The manager can lay down the law. They'll either abide by it or fall by the wayside. You? You have to find a different balance. There are a lot of egos in the Premier League. How far are you prepared to massage them? Because if you massage them continually, it'll be taken as a sign of weakness. At some point you've got to say: this is my session, my moment, and I'm the one in control. You can count on one hand the number of times a season you'll see the part of me that isn't friendly, but the lads have got to know you've got it in you. They need a level of uncertainty about what's going to happen next. If they can read you every day, you're in trouble.'

I still find it slightly strange hearing Dezza talk like this. We used to break the rules together, not enforce them. If you lost whatever little drill or game we were doing in training at Portsmouth, your punishment was to drive all the way back into town in just your Sloggi pants and moulded boots. But I also saw how much the game meant to him. I saw how much of himself he put into it. I saw how much he cared – about every game, about every performance.

'Playing football is the best fun you'll ever have. Nothing else can replicate it. I just loved the game – if it was me against you in midfield on a Saturday, I loved feeling like we were going into battle, the pleasure of me and my abilities trying to come out on top against you. That's the part I really miss. I don't miss the dressing-room, because in the end the same jokes keep getting regurgitated.'

'But managing your own group, and achieving something as the leader – when Notts County stayed up that year, it was a really weird moment. I broke down in tears after the game, I was so emotionally charged. I thought, I've never had this before, not as

a player. When you're a player and you hear a manager talk about their achievements, you think, it's not about you, it's us players. And then you do something as a manager, and you realise it's about all of you – manager, players, support staff. It's a brilliant feeling.

'But there's the other side to it as well. The crushing losses are so hard. Towards the end at Cambridge, when my relationship with the club wasn't as secure as it had been, we were away at Luton. When you come out at Kenilworth Road, the away fans are on your left. I walked across the pitch, applauding our supporters, and they were clapping me. Then 20 minutes into the game we were 4-0 down, and I'm thinking, f***, I've got to walk back past them at half-time, and they're not going to be clapping me then ...

'We had four centre-forwards at the club. We went into that game with none. One got sent off in the 93rd minute of the preceding match against Crewe. The second had an issue in his personal life. The third had a serious mental health issue that we had to keep out of the media. The fourth went down injured in training on the Thursday.

'You think, what can I do here? Friday is usually light-hearted in training. It's match day minus one, so you do a little on shape and tactics, but make sure it's not too hard. I got all the fit players in their training gear, and then said to them, "Lads, we can't afford any more injuries, we're going for a coffee instead."

'I walked them to Costa in Cambridge city centre, a mile or so. We had coffee, we shared a few cakes. I thought about that again when we were 4-0 down and half-time finally came at Luton. I mainly thought, f***, I wish I'd made them train instead.

'Our 'keeper David Forde had got lobbed from 65 yards, the perfect storm. We've gone in at half-time and all the lads are looking at me. I'm thinking, what do I say here? How do I break the tension?

Copyrighted Material

So I looked at them and said, “Lads, I’m taking responsibility for all this. I should have taken you to Starbucks instead.”

It’s that reaction from the players that turns your stomach when you’ve been one yourself. Listening to Shaun, for all his gallows humour, it was clear that the feeling of emptiness he had as a manager after a big defeat – and Luton won 7–0 that day in 2017 – was so much worse than it had been as a player. I remember the times when you’d be on the coach home from a bad away trip, the manager sitting up front, fuming, going over it all in his head, not saying a word. Meanwhile two of the younger lads would be laughing and joking, the result long gone from their minds. The manager’s head would swivel round, and you could see it on his face: how can you idiots behave like that after what just happened?

I found that hard enough as an older player. Could I handle it as a manager? I’m not sure I could. Before we said our goodbyes, Shaun told me about the time when he was assistant to Karl Robinson at Oxford. Karl was not a man for the team bus. He felt he got higher than the players after a win and lower after a defeat, so had to stay away. Even that didn’t help after a 3–2 defeat to Accrington Stanley one afternoon. Karl and Shaun were in his car, filling up on petrol on the motorway home, when three minibuses of furious Oxford fans pulled in behind them. They absolutely rinsed him, and there was nothing he could do about it. One hand holding the fuel nozzle in his petrol tank, the other up in the air in silent apology. When he went inside to pay, he met more angry Oxford fans at the till. Shaun left me with a powerful and unforgettable image of what being a manager can do to you: Karl Robinson, a prisoner in his own top-end executive saloon, extra-large coffee in one hand, family pack of Dairy Milk Buttons in the

Copyrighted Material