

Putting the Boot In

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Warm-up

There are too many ways of breaking a footballer's leg. Too many, that is, from the footballer's point of view. Others may find the freedom of choice encouraging.

Duffy patrolled the edge of his penalty area and wondered what had happened to Danny Matson. That was where it had started. Danny Matson in the underground car park. The first sign of the whole business going public. And after it had gone public, and really threatened to become a bit serious, there had been more things to worry about than poor little washed-up Third Division Danny. Who remembers yesterday's footballers? Who remembers even the famous ones – the ones with the hacienda-style house, the Merc and the wife that's a genuine blonde, the ones who get to partner fat comedians on the TV golf? They slip the mind as soon as they stop playing. Pampered swaggerers, they strut the floodlit pitch for the last time, salute the fans, and disappear down the tunnel. Suddenly, they find it's colder there, and they don't feel so tall, and no one applauds; there's a faint smell of piss and Ajax, a forty-watt bulb overhead, and a concrete floor underneath. No grass any more: if you fall, this time it will really hurt. And that tunnel is the rest of your life. So if it feels like this to the players at the top, what chance was there for the Danny Matsons?

Time to stop worrying; or to start worrying about

something different. That speedy little ginge had got the ball again. Duffy retreated towards his goal. Close him down, for Christ's sake close him down. Bell was too slow, as usual, but Maggot got near enough to threaten a little GBH, so the ginge whipped the ball out to the left instead. Duffy checked his angles, got up on his toes, banged his gloves together and started inching out for when the winger beat the right back. He would beat the back, of course: he'd done him three times already, no trouble. Once going inside, once outside, once nut-megging him in a show of public contempt. Which would he go for this time?

He went for simple pace – the cruellest method there is. Show the full back every inch of the ball, give him a couple of yards, then just hare past him as if to say, Give it up, this game, don't bother, you're too fat, you're too slow, you're not smart enough. And that left it up to Duffy. Come out fast, narrow the angle, cut down the winger's options, make him pick one way or the other, don't go down too soon, but when you do go down, really spread yourself. Duffy was muttering the coaching manual to himself for company; there wasn't much other help around. The winger was closing fast. *Now*, thought Duffy, and started to spread himself. Just as he did so, the winger gave a little jink to the right, and took off at speed to the left. He beat Duffy, who couldn't lay a finger on him, legal or illegal; but in doing so ran himself out of space. Too close to the line, and with a red-faced defender thundering back, the winger tried a finely angled cross-shot which missed even the side-netting. He spat angrily and interrogated the turf, as if the ball had bobbled unexpectedly at the last minute. Duffy got up calmly, trying to look as if he had masterminded the

whole thing. Honour seemed even, except that Duffy knew there would be a next time, quite soon, and that this fellow had more tricks than the Magic Circle.

Duffy was a worrier. They say goalkeepers tend to be worriers. Some start off like that, and choose to play in goal because it fits their temperament. Others start off calm, capable fellows and then get frazzled up by their own leaky back four, or by a sudden loss of form when their handling goes and they sweat at the thought of a high cross, or by some psychotic striker with Aberdeen Angus thighs who doesn't seem to know whether it's the keeper or the ball that he's meant to be putting into the net. Further up the park and you can hide; you can even blame others. But a goalkeeper is exposed. Everything he does wrong is vital. Ten men can win you the game and one berk can lose you it; that's what they say. You can get your own back a bit by shouting at the other ten: keepers are allowed to shout, and can sometimes shift the blame after a goal by picking out the least forceful member of the defence and giving him a rollocking. But mostly you're on your own, shuttling between boredom and fear.

Duffy had been a worrier long before he started playing for the Western Sunday Reliables. He'd been a worrier since – oh, he couldn't remember. He worried about that too: was his memory going? When other keepers went about their business, they worried about playing badly, and losing, and letting the side down, and getting kicked, and facing penalties, and getting called a wally. Duffy worried about all this too, and then some; he even worried about why he'd become a goalkeeper in the first place. Perhaps he wasn't really a worrier; perhaps he was a fully-fledged neurotic.

One of the reasons he liked goalkeeping – and one of

the reasons he worried – was that he liked things neat. He liked the neat box of the penalty area; he liked the way it marked out his territory, his manor. Everything that happens inside this box is your responsibility, Duffy; he felt like some young copper being given his first beat. He also liked the way everything in his manor had corners: the penalty area, the goal area, the woodwork; even the netting was made in squares. He liked these right-angles: they reassured him. The only thing on his patch that didn't have corners was the penalty spot. A great big round chalky mess, as if some bloody enormous pigeon up above had decided to unload right into the middle of Duffy's manor: *splat*. Somebody ought to clear that mess up, Duffy thought. It bothers me. He didn't like the penalty spot. For a start, it was much too near the goal.

He found himself looking down at his legs, at the white bits, the bits that were getting cold. A late March wind was blowing across the recreation ground. He wasn't looking for goose-pimples, though; he was looking for little brown blotches. Still doing so, after all these months. He was probably safe now; probably. But at the time, when that whole business was going on, it had been just another thing to worry about. Actually, to get shit-scared about. There were a lot of very frightened people down at the bars and clubs then, and Duffy had been no exception. There were days when someone had only to put a hand on his arm for Duffy to send his jacket to the cleaners. And the funny part of it – yes, it was funny, he decided, looking back – was the thing about Carol. The thing with Carol. Very odd. Duffy smiled.

Christ, that ginge again. Anyone would have thought the chief scouts of Juventus, Benfica and Manchester United lay concealed among the mute crowd of eight

spectators that the game had attracted. Close him down, close him down, Duffy found himself yelling, even though the ginge was still in his own half. Bell had a go, with the usual lack of success, Maggot was caught too wide, everyone else backed off or stuck tight to the man they were meant to be marking, and suddenly the ginge was free and heading straight towards Duffy's manor. He came out fast. Where was his defence? Where was his fucking defence? Duffy had only one idea – get out there, outside the area, and bring the ginge down.

Perhaps the Benfica scout really was present. Duffy came roaring out, and had almost reached the edge of his box when he noticed something odd. The ginge had stopped running towards him. In fact he'd stopped running altogether. He'd put his foot on the ball. Before Duffy could cover another yard the freckly little fellow had flipped the ball up a couple of feet and volleyed it dippingly over the oncoming keeper; he was already turning away, index finger raised in modest triumph, by the time the ball hit the back of the net. One–nil.

Christ, thought Duffy. And they're only meant to be a pub team. Where had *he* sprung from? Had they brought in some cowboy specially? That didn't seem likely: everyone knew you didn't need cowboys against the Western Sunday Reliables. Perhaps he was some minor-leaguer coming back after injury and getting in a bit of extra match practice. Or perhaps he was just a chap who drank at the pub and happened to be a class above everyone else on the pitch. Somebody would certainly have to give *him* a whack pretty soon, or he'd be getting above himself.

The Reliables didn't even go through the motions of blaming one another. One or two nodded at the ginge as if to say 'Good goal'. Duffy wondered if he would have

had any chance of touching the shot if he'd been taller; or if he'd jumped. The only trouble was, it wasn't so simple to jump when running full tilt; and if you did so, you'd probably signal it so obviously that the bastard would just toe-poke the ball along the ground underneath you instead, and then you'd really look a wally. This was one of the problems with goalkeeping. You needed to be several different sizes all at the same time. If you were tall, you could pick out high crosses all afternoon but got beaten by low volleys. If you were small, your ground work might be terrific but you often made the net seem invitingly large to opposing forwards. If you were chunky, there was a lot of you to spread in front of someone with the ball, but you might not be so nimble about the box. And if you were slim, you might move fast, but you might also find yourself on the end of a lot of agg when they brought up the big men for the corners. Duffy was medium-sized – just tall enough for the copper he'd once been years ago – and stocky. This seemed to him to be the worst of all worlds. It worried him.

One-nil. There goes my clean sheet, thought Duffy. He liked that phrase: 'keeping a clean sheet'. It made you understand the way goalkeeping was all about neatness, tidiness. He sometimes imagined conversations which went like this: 'How did you get on yesterday, Duffy?' 'Oh, clean sheet again.' He had to imagine these conversations because they very rarely took place. Not many people asked him about his football; and when they did he wasn't very often in a position to give the response he dreamed of. Clean sheet. It was a funny expression. He gave a small smile. The only time he'd kept a succession of clean sheets had been when he was searching his legs for brown blotches and taking his temperature every

other day; the time when the Alligator and all the other clubs were running scared.

The Reliables weren't the greatest outfit Duffy had ever played for. Some of them were a bit fat, a bit bald, a bit heavy in the leg; one or two of them were distinctly old. But they were keen; they turned up. It's all very well having a teamful of ball-playing wizards, but if only nine of them show up, and one of those nine happens to run into a skilfully placed elbow early on, then you're in trouble. Duffy had kept goal for a few Sunday teams like this. The trouble with Sunday is that it follows Saturday, and as likely as not the creative midfield dynamo has been creatively on the piss until all hours the previous night, while the hunky ballwinner is gazing round some strange bedroom for the first time and realising that he has six and a half minutes to get across London *and* he hasn't got his kit with him. Duffy had had enough of such teams; for a start, they tended to leave their keeper a little short of protection. Whereas with the Reliables, you could always count on there being four players in the back four. When the team had been founded, all of three years ago, they'd called themselves the Western Sunday Casuals. It sounded pretty smart, and even hinted that they were some rather posh outfit who'd been going since the days when everyone wore pyjama tops and shorts down to their calves; but it didn't really suit, and after a few months the Casuals had quietly become the Reliables.

One-nil with ten minutes to half-time. A couple more scares for Duffy, but otherwise not too bad. They'd really have to sit on the ginge, though; maybe kick that winger about a bit too. And perhaps last night's beer might catch up on the pub side in the second half. Just keep the concentration going and don't try anything clever in the

last couple of minutes. Go two down and they'd be sunk.
Lost. Lost without trace. Like ... like Danny Matson.
Where was Danny Matson now?