

CLOSE • UP  
ON

# Bobby Robson

Stephen Wagg

The media frenzy of the World Cup football competition will soon be upon us once again. Hordes of newspaper reporters and tv anchorpersons will descend on Mexico City and begin the patriotic work of shoving microphones under the chins of their respective national team managers, asking how did training go today, or what explanation can they offer for yesterday's 1-1 draw against lowly Third World opposition. The attention of the Fleet Street/Wapping contingent will focus on the not wholly remarkable figure of the England team manager, Bobby Robson.

Robson's life could have been scripted by the prickly *nouveaux riches* of today's Conservative party central office. He was born in 1933 in the small mining village of Sacriston, County Durham, the fourth of five boys born to Lillian Robson and her collier husband Philip. His childhood was like thousands of working class childhoods of the era: hard, happy, disciplined - father reaching for his belt when necessary and circumscribed by a stern Methodist faith.

Robson is awed by his parents' stoicism. His mother, the solitary female in a household of seven, longed for a daughter, but hid her disappointment. His father, ever mindful that if you didn't turn up for work you didn't get paid, missed only a single shift in 51 years down the local pit. He is also proud that all his brothers, clearly imbued with a remarkable sense of striving, have 'got on': aside from the England football manager, the family now boasts a chief engineer at the NCB, a prosperous newsagent, a supermarket owner and senior draughtsman with an oil company.

Robson's own route out was of course, professional football. At 17, in 1950, he rejected an offer from his local club, Newcastle United, on the grounds that their big spending policy limited opportunities for young

apprentices. He signed instead for Fulham, making his debut the following year. He played wing half—now called 'midfield'—and was one of several class players at Fulham at the time, notably Johnny Haynes, a future England captain.

In 1956 he moved into the First Division when he signed for West Bromwich Albion, and within 12 months he had gained the first of his 20 England caps, scoring twice in the 4-0 defeat of France. Playing for England brought him into contact with Walter Winterbottom, manager of the England team and director of coaching for the football Association. Winterbottom was an inspiration to hundreds of young professional footballers in the 1950s. Scorned on Fleet Street as a boffin peddling irrelevant 'theories', Winterbottom gave many League players a sense of their own expertise and a conviction that football teams could be coached and managed to greater effect.

As his disciples began to get jobs as coaches and managers at league clubs, this conviction fed a new managerialism. Robson, like all his generation, scoffs at the men who managed football clubs up to the 1950s. The general view is you never saw managers then: they just poked their heads round the dressing room door before a match and told you not to hang about in the bath afterwards. Robson resolved, like most of his contemporaries, to forge a closer tactical and personal relationship with any players he might manage and to demand autonomy in team matters.

Robson finished his playing days at Fulham and got a job managing Vancouver football club in Canada. This appointment was aborted within months by the club's bankruptcy and Robson returned to England to manage Fulham. The comedian Tommy Trinder had lately been replaced as chairperson by property tycoon Sir Eric Miller. Miller, a Jew of humble origins and wheeler-dealer in the modern mould, was close to the prime minister Harold Wilson, having



photos: Camera Press

found the Conservatives anti-semitic. He was wealthy and interventionist in the manner of many men who have taken over football clubs in the last 20 years.

He and Robson clashed bitterly over playing matters and Robson was dismissed after nine months. The day he was fired he stood in the middle of the Fulham pitch and wept. 'I thought only layabouts and social misfits claimed dole money', he remembers. 'There was no disgrace, I soon learned, in being unemployed'. When told years later of Miller's suicide, Robson reflected bitterly: 'Shows how he stood up to pressure, doesn't it?'

Robson soon landed another job, this time at Ipswich. His account of his stewardship there is an extraordinary ideological mixture. He found, he says, a decrepit club dominated by backsliders, two of whom he took on in a John Wayne-style fist fight. He then nurtured a young team, culled largely from the club's apprenticeship scheme, which performed well in the First Division and won the FA Cup in 1978. Augmented by the talented Dutchmen Muhren and Thijssen it won the UEFA Cup in 1981. Although he stands as strongly for professionalism as any other modern manager, Robson always valued the fact that the Ipswich board was dominated by John and Patrick Cobbold, Old Etonians for whom winning was not the only thing in football. The England post is one of the few that would have tempted Robson from Ipswich.

When he became England manager in 1982, Robson called, perhaps

unsurprisingly, for 'the spirit of the Falklands' to be expressed by Wembley crowds watching England. His teams have been neither very good nor very bad at eliciting such a response. They merely reflect the state of the national game here and elsewhere: functional, forgettable and perpetually in search of new marketing strategies.

With the press, he is readier to talk than his predecessors Ramsey, Revie or Greenwood were, but he acknowledges that he's not a 'front-of-house-man' and would rather not compete for column inches with the more garrulous managers. He is also wounded, just as other England managers have been, by press treatment of the 'pathetic England' or 'X must go' variety: he once threatened, for instance, to 'put one on' Brian Glanville of the *Sunday Times*.

But in the world of the football manager, with its absurdly individualistic ethos, it is not easy to convince oneself that *anyone* in the job would get the same ritual abuse (although they undoubtedly would). Football managers *have* to believe in themselves *and* to find some way of coping with ludicrous public expectations. Robson, an earnest and vulnerable man, consoles himself with thoughts of his luxury East Anglian home, the public school education he procured for each of his three sons and, above all, like so many football people, with the realisation that he is 'absolutely besotted by football' and couldn't imagine earning a living any other way.