

## THE CLOWN PRINCE OF SOCCER

**I use the S-Word less these days because the American usage of it seems to be part of a plot to persuade us all to believe that a game played with the hands should be called football. And what a silly game: ten seconds of action followed by a meeting and then a plenary to plan the next ten seconds of action while yet more hot dogs are sold to the spectators. Theresa May must be a fan for she has based her entire Brexit strategy on this approach.**

My title refers to the one and only Len Shackleton. It is the title of his autobiography and refers to his nickname which, in turn, refers both to the fun he brought to the field and to his career-damaging anti authoritarian approach to professional life. Borrowing from Lawrence Stern's Tristram Shandy Len has a chapter entitled

### ***The Average Director's Knowledge Of Football.***

Turn over and you find a blank page.

I can imagine a lot of chapters like that. *The Average Tory Cabinet Member's Knowledge of Life Outside the Bubble of Privilege* or *The Average Labour Friend of Israel's Knowledge of Genocide, of Falsified History, of Apartheid, of the Imprisonment of Poets, Lawyers and Children and of the real meaning of the word Semitic* (I am trying to keep this list short).

I grew up having people such as Len Shackleton as heroes. My greatest hero was Billy Liddell, on the left wing of course. People argue about Liverpool's greatest players knowing only recent ones but standing on the Kop when the ball was passed to Billy you could hear the collective inhalation of twenty eight thousand people holding their breath to see what he would do with the ball. Somewhere in my loft must be the signed receipt I had from Billy when as Assistant Bursar of the Students Union of the University of Liverpool he fined me five quid for, with others, throwing a tutor in a pond. Watching pundits today analysing a game reminds me that Liverpool's most complex strategy in those days amounted to 'Pass the ball to Billy'. Now I feel I need a PhD in football punditry to understand what they are saying.

Another hero was Eggo, Tommy Eglington, on the left wing for Everton and Tranmere. At eighteen with him training my school football team I was so pleased to find out that I was as fast as him. Fast as him? What use was that when his acceleration was so good that all I did was run at the same pace four yards behind? Stanley Mathews was like that. Even if someone was faster than him by the time they caught him the ball was somewhere else. Eggo used to shuffle in front of the full back, foot one side of the ball, then the other, wait until his opponent had all his weight on one leg and then go past on the other side. If the full back tried to trip him with the other leg Tommy would stop what he was doing and thump him.

Will there ever be another Clown Prince of Soccer, loved by the fans but passed over by international selectors because he does not take kindly to ignorant bosses?

**And does the world of government and politics have anything to learn from old heroes of footy?**

**Cliff Jones 28<sup>th</sup>. September 2018**