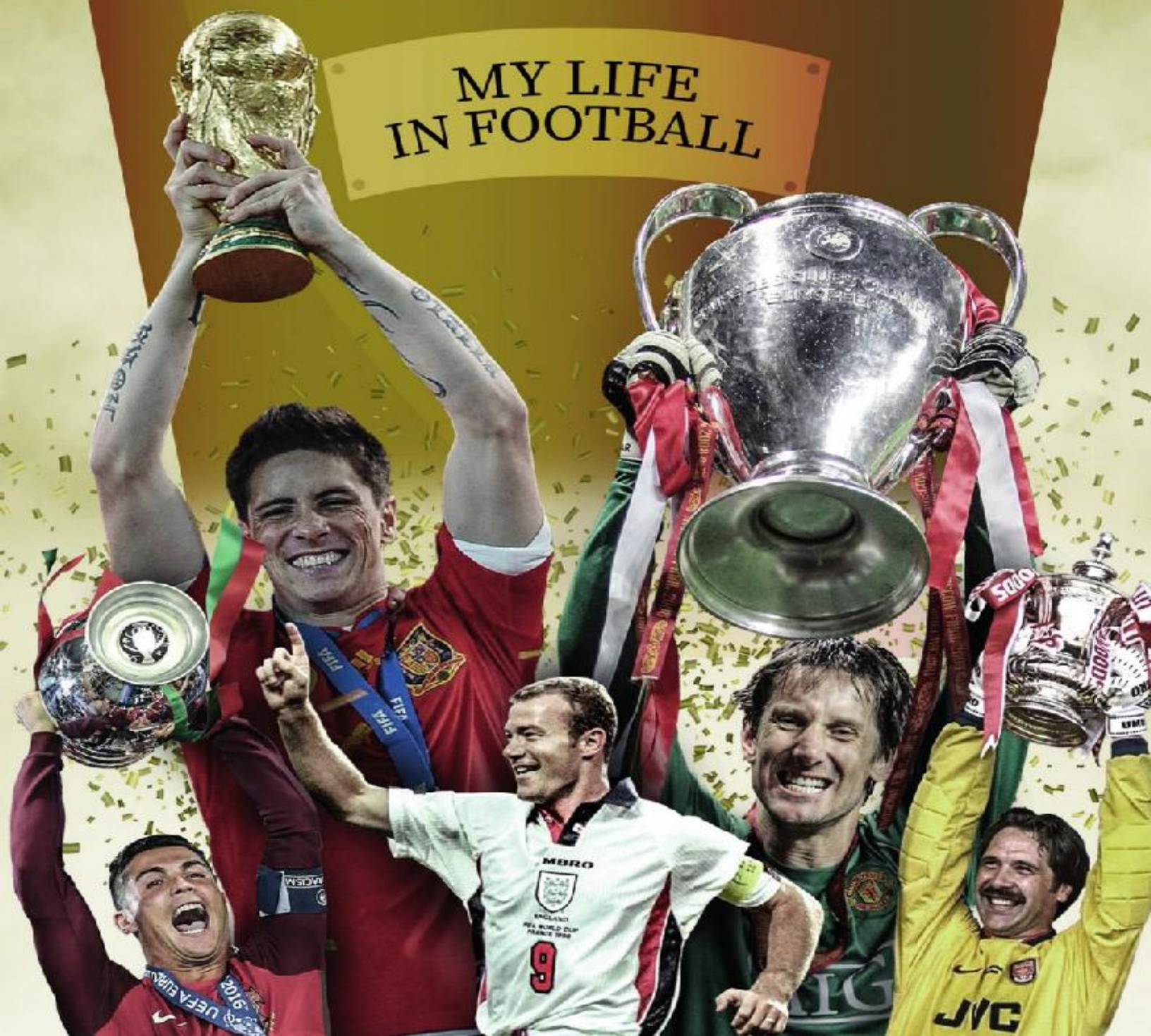


NICK COLLINS

FIFTY

CUP FINALS

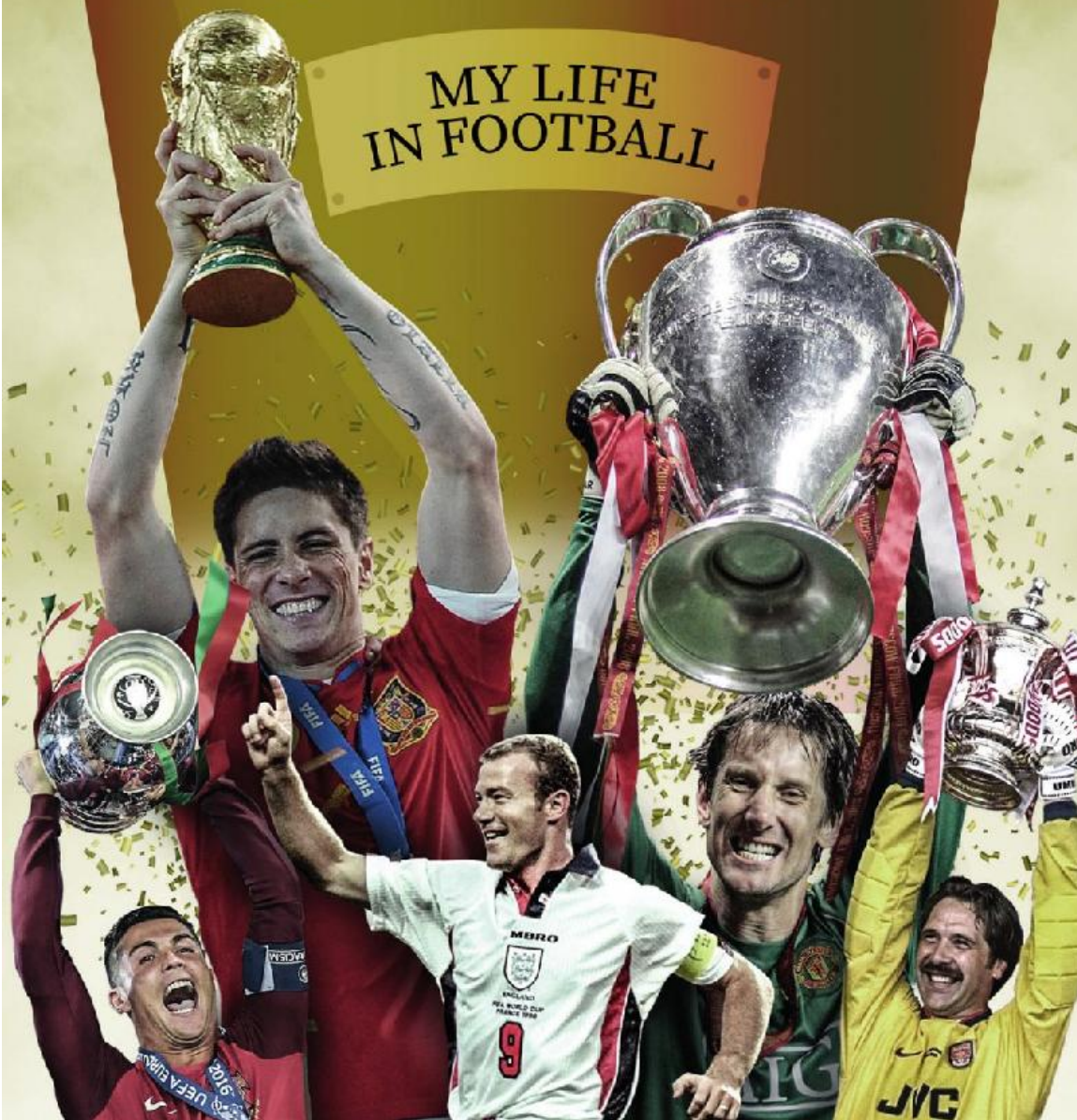
MY LIFE
IN FOOTBALL



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DEDICATION

To my three children, Ollie, Poppy and Louis, for putting up with me being away so often.

And to my dad Ken (1929-2017), who did not quite live long enough to see my book published.

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Foreword

by Steven Gerrard

DURING my career with Liverpool I was lucky enough to win eight cup finals, many of which are featured in this book – so it is a pleasure to be asked to write a short foreword. I did lose a couple of finals to Chelsea (the least said about them the better!) and one to AC Milan in 2007, but for me personally a cup final tended to be a happy experience, none more so than in 2005 when we lifted the Champions League trophy thanks to the Miracle of Istanbul.

The last FA Cup Final in Cardiff in 2006 was another unforgettable experience – another three-all draw after extra time, another amazing win on penalties – scoring twice in that game is a very special memory for me.

Nick Collins became an increasingly familiar figure during my time with England. He was the man with the microphone (and moustache!) in the front row of the press conferences on the day before the game. He interviewed me many times, especially when I was captain, and I found his questions were usually pretty fair. I got the impression he was an England fan and was willing to give the players the benefit of the doubt. Like us, he would look for the positives.

Three times with England I lost in the quarter-finals of a major tournament after a penalty shoot-out. Being interviewed afterwards is never easy, but I did feel Nick managed to keep a sense of perspective. In the mixed zones around the world he was often the first person we would see as we left the dressing rooms to face the massed ranks of the media.

I was very happy to win 114 England caps, so I can imagine Nick is proud of his achievement of reporting on nearly 300 England games.

Talking of honours, Nick says he's named me third on his list of all-time favourite England players. Thank you - though I am gutted to lose out to Becks and Lamps!

So I wish him luck with *Fifty Cup Finals* - the last 25 years have been a hugely exciting time for our game and I hope we will be able to say the same about the next 25 as well.

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Live on Air When the Axe Fell

WELL, almost! I was live on air at the Sky Sports News studios as a guest on the *Premier League Daily* morning show. Tom White was hosting with 'Galey' – my good friend Tony Gale – and George Boateng, when I felt the vibration of the mobile in my back pocket. We were discussing Gareth Southgate's imminent appointment as the permanent England manager and his potential backroom staff.

It was a good discussion and George provided some valuable insight about Southgate's early management career at Middlesbrough. Galey, as usual, brought a naturally witty sense of perspective about recent events. At the time I remember thinking, 'I'm really enjoying this, the concept is working well.'

It seems a little daft now, but I also thought this could be my future at SSN – going on set to reflect on recent events and to put into context exactly what it all meant. My area of expertise was mainly England and the Premier League, but I could cover European stories as well.

When I finished my piece and left the set I checked my phone. There were two missed calls from my line manager Brendan Henry, at 10.23am and four minutes later. Then the phone buzzed again. It was 10.39am and it was Brendan Henry once more.

‘I need to speak to you, Nick. I’ve been calling you – where are you?’

‘I’ve just come off air,’ I said. ‘Couldn’t you see that from your desk?’ He did, after all, sit just a few feet away from where our studio chat had taken place.

‘No, I’m over in Sky Central,’ he replied. ‘We need to have a chat. Come across and up to the second floor. I’m in Area 3.’ He hung up.

Sky Central? Area 3? Now I was puzzled, and I was also more than a little concerned. Sky Sports had seemed to be awash with redundancies in recent months, and we knew the cuts would be coming to Sky Sports News soon.

The changes were called ‘Transformations’ and mapped out Sky Sports’ path forward in this digital age. The reality was that the company was struggling to cope with the absolutely vast sum it had paid out for the latest Premier League rights (for 2016 to 2019) – 11 million pounds a game! The perceived wisdom (certainly among many of the Sky Sports staff) was that Sky could have paid a billion pounds less than it bid and still won the rights. That could have safeguarded an awful lot of jobs.

But back to Sky Central. It was a vast building and I had never been inside it before – it was almost like a new world. Looking back, I suppose it is a reflection of the fact that Sky Sports and Sky Sports News are no longer the ‘Be All And End All Of Sky’.

The company these days seems to be much more about operating on a lot of different fronts, so that it is no longer as dependent on sports rights (and the Premier League football broadcast rights in particular).

On the way up in the lift I was thinking that, if Brendan was with Sports News boss Andy Cairns, then I was definitely on my way out. Sure enough, when I reached Area 3, there was Brendan and Andy.

I said something like, 'This looks ominous!' Andy replied, 'Yes it is, Nick, it's all bad news I'm afraid.'

For the next two minutes Andy read from a prepared printed sheet and that was it. After a quarter of a century I was being discarded. Redundant at the age of 59. Not a good feeling. I was being put on gardening leave – effective immediately – and my final day was just a month away; 31 December 2016.

Andy and Brendan suggested I go straight home, but I wanted to see out the week. And like all good reporters I needed to go back into the office to do my expenses!

It had not come as a complete shock. I remember having a chat with some of the reporters in the August after I had got back from covering EURO 2016 and we all felt that our numbers would be reduced. We simply were not filming as many edited reports (or 'packages') as we used to, and knew that somewhere down the line there would be cutbacks.

Many of us believed that would happen at the end of the 2016/17 season. We imagined that the 18 London-based reporters would all be interviewed for about 12 available jobs, so we were expecting half a dozen or so redundancies. We just did not expect it to be as ruthless as it turned out.

The walk back over towards the newsroom felt totally strange. My head was full of a thousand thoughts, but priority number one was to appoint a good employment lawyer. I stopped off at the car park and climbed inside my

company BMW (while I still had it!), so that I could study the redundancy package in detail – and in private.

On the surface it appeared reasonably generous. My one concern was that it did not take into account the fact that I had been employed by Sky since 1991, but had only been on the staff since 2002.

Back in the newsroom the first person I told was David Miles. ‘Milo’ was also under threat of redundancy and had been appointed the spokesperson for those facing the process. He was a senior producer and a top bloke, with nearly 20 years of service at Sky. His reaction was one of utter astonishment, but then he stunned me by explaining that Tim Abraham (our England cricket reporter), Phil Edwards (our England rugby reporter) and Pete Colley (Sky’s ‘Mr Midlands’) had also all just been made redundant. We learned later that the experienced Peter Staunton and Fraser Robertson had gone as well.

‘This is a crazy day,’ he said, sadly, ‘and I just don’t know what to say.’

‘Nothing to say,’ I shrugged. ‘I reckon the bullet-to-the-back-of-the-head technique they used today is better than the slow drip-drip Chinese water torture treatment you guys are facing.’

Milo and some of his colleagues – including my England producer Gemma Davies – had been under threat of redundancy since early September. Nine jobs were going, with only three replacing them – so that meant another six facing the scrapheap, and it would be several months before their fate was finally decided.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Milo and Gemma chose redundancy once their tortuous process had finally played

out. I think by then they had just had enough – and I don't blame them.

Sat at a desktop doing my expenses helped to take my mind off what had happened, but word was spreading fast. Many colleagues came over to express their sympathy, surprise and anger. Around 6pm I called it a day, telling the news editor Nick Seymour that I was perfectly willing to come in the following day and talk live with the presenters about Gareth Southgate. His appointment was due to be ratified that next afternoon.

'I'll get back to you on that one,' he said, uncertainly. 'If it was up to me I would say definitely yes, come in.'

'But I'll have to run it past the powers that be, so leave it with me.'

The journey home round the M25 back to Kent was a long and difficult one – in keeping with the day. An accident near junction ten led to huge delays so I had plenty of time to work out how to tell my family that, after 37 years in journalism, I was about to be out of work.

Next morning I found myself pacing up and down, waiting to see if Sky would let me back in to go on set when the Southgate story was due to break.

Complicating the issue slightly was the fact that the papers had got wind of our redundancies. Charles Sale ran a story in his Sports Agenda column in the *Daily Mail*, entitled 'COST-CUTTING AXE FALLS ON SKY FOUR'.

Reproduced below is part of the article – for legal reasons it's perhaps best I make no comment, other than to thank Charlie for what he wrote about me:

'SKY SPORTS' brutal cost-cutting following their £11million-a-match spend on Premier League rights has claimed four more casualties including chief football reporter Nick Collins.

'The moustachioed Collins was best known as Sky Sports News's indefatigable England reporter. Such was his standing, he was given the opportunity to ask the England manager five or six questions before anyone else was allowed a turn at TV broadcast interviews. Gareth Southgate's first TV media conference as the newly appointed England boss tomorrow will be a strange affair without the ever-present Collins behind the mic.'

It seemed that no one really wanted to make the decision about my presence one way or the other, but full credit to Nick Seymour. My news editor forced the issue and just after midday he rang to say it was okay for me to come in to the Sky Sports studios.

I arrived at two o'clock and was told I would be able to go live on air that afternoon, once I had spoken with Brendan Henry. I was also informed that I would lead the Southgate news conference at Wembley the next morning. I think Brendan just wanted to make sure I was in the right frame of mind, and in a funny kind of way I almost felt sorry for him.

He was not comfortable with the turn of events, though he had given me a foretaste of what might be to come when I had reported back to Sky after those European Championships. He had informed me that I would not be getting a pay rise for the following year as there was a slight issue with the 'consistency' of my performance. After busting a gut at EURO 2016 I felt office politics might be at play here, so I bit my tongue and said nothing at the time.

Despite all this I felt elated that common sense was allowed to prevail. No way after 25 years at Sky was I going to 'go rogue' live on air and say something inappropriate. There is absolutely no point in feeling bitter, I told myself, because I had been lucky enough to have an amazing career at Sky that spanned three decades – many didn't even last five years!

Once the Southgate appointment was ratified I joined David Garrido and Hayley McQueen on the SSN set to discuss the issues and implications. It turned into a 15-minute interview as (unknown to me) there were a couple of technical issues behind the scenes which forced the running order to be scrapped. We discussed England past, present, and future until the ad break at the top of the hour came to our rescue.

It was quite an emotional afternoon, because many more colleagues came over to commiserate with me over losing my job – after a while I just did not know what to say to them, other than to offer the hope that there would be no more redundancies – unlikely.

I also went over to Sky Central to do a piece for our counterparts at Sky News about Gareth Southgate. It involved appearing in 'The Cube', a futuristic suspended glass studio where Kay Burley was presenting the early-evening news bulletins. It was a slightly strange experience but I must admit I did enjoy it – and I also got a sense of why Kay has remained at the top for so long. As an interviewer she is very sharp and slightly mischievous, but also sympathetic.

My final day of live broadcasting for Sky began early. We were live from outside the Bobby Moore statue at Wembley from 9am, to tee up the day and explain what would happen. It seemed very appropriate that Wembley would be

my last on-location job for Sky as I had been there so many times over the previous three decades.

There is always a real sense of anticipation when a new England manager is unveiled. True, Gareth had been caretaker boss for four matches, but now he had a four-year contract with the mandate to take England to the 2018 World Cup and EURO 2020.

We screened the news conference live and I opened proceedings by asking Gareth about his hopes for England, Wayne Rooney's future and a host of other topics.

To my surprise, when the conference was about to end, Gareth took the mic and said some very kind words about my years covering England. It was a proud and humbling moment, but we had no time to rest on our laurels because there was still a lot of work to do. More filming, several live stand-ups and an edited piece to reflect the day.

My last piece to camera for Sky was filmed beside one of the goals as I explained how Wembley had provided Gareth with the worst moment of his playing career (when he missed a penalty in the semi-final shoot-out with Germany at EURO '96), but that if everything went according to plan Wembley could also provide him with his best moment as a manager – because this was where the final of EURO 2020 would take place.

I admit it's a long shot, but when you cover England you have to try and look on the bright side.

After that it was off to the Wembley Hilton for a quick glass of Prosecco and a final goodbye to some of my favourite colleagues. I won't deny this is when it really started to hit home what had happened over the last 24 hours or so.

When you cover England you form great bonds with your colleagues – it is the peak of your profession in my opinion, because it gives you the biggest highs, the biggest lows and the biggest challenges. Those people I have shared tournaments with are, inevitably, the ones I like and respect the most among my Sky Sports workmates.

I kept my emotions hidden but it did feel really sad knowing this might have been the last time I worked with a lot of them. Gemma Davies was a particular case in point. We started working together on England in 2012 and Gem was undoubtedly one of the rising stars of Sky Sports News.

She was an incredibly bright and bubbly girl who just implicitly understood the pressures and rewards of doing the England job. We formed a great bond (some would say an unlikely one), but I think what we both appreciated was that each one could help the other to become better at our respective jobs.

The fact that she also chose to take redundancy in March 2017 was also a bit of an indictment about what had happened. She was precisely the kind of person Sky should have been trying to keep.

The next day the *Daily Mail* again showed an interest in my story. This time a piece appeared with the headline 'BOSS HAILS SKY'S AXED REPORTER'.

'New England manager Gareth Southgate ended his first broadcast media conference at Wembley yesterday with a tribute to Sky Sports News' lead football reporter Nick Collins. Collins has been a familiar figure reporting on England but as Sportsmail was first to reveal on Wednesday, he is being made redundant as part of Sky's cost-cutting. To the applause of the media corps, Southgate said, "On behalf

of the FA, I just wanted to acknowledge Nick Collins and the way you've covered the England team. We're grateful for how you've dealt with us – it's been a pleasure personally working with you and we all wish you well.”

As a footnote on a different page in the paper, Charlie Sale also wrote, ‘Nick Collins, the Sky Sports News lead football reporter made redundant this week, was given rather more respect by his TV colleagues at Gareth Southgate’s first broadcast conference as England manager. Collins, who came off gardening leave, asked the opening 14 questions. No one was going to interrupt his England swansong!’

Actually it wasn't quite my England swansong. A few days later I was back at Sky to record a one-to-one interview with former manager Roy Hodgson – it was the first one he had given to TV since he'd stepped down after EURO 2016. Roy is one of my favourite people in football so it was a great way for me to bow out. He may not have been the most successful of bosses, especially when it came to tournaments, but I can't think of another who helped me more during his time in the hot seat.

We discussed what went wrong at EURO 2016 and the game against Iceland in Nice. I genuinely hope his England career is not defined by that match, but I fear it might be. We should not forget that he is also responsible for England's ‘Perfect Ten’, when they won all ten qualifiers (a feat they had never achieved before) on the way to qualifying for the tournament in the first place.

Roy is one of football's gentlemen. He never forgot how Sky Sports helped him out when he lost his job at Blackburn Rovers and as a result was always very co-operative. There are plenty of others who have been down the same route and aren't, so I will always have massive respect for him.

On 19 December I attended the Football Association's Christmas drinks reception at the St Pancras Renaissance Hotel in London and was blown away to receive a framed England shirt, signed by all the players. The inscription at the bottom read:

272 England matches
11 England managers
1 Nick Collins
Thank you

It was the perfect early Christmas present and it hangs in pride of place on my study wall.

Two days before the new year I dropped off my security pass, company mobile and laptop, as I bade farewell to Sky for the last time. I really did not want to make a big deal of it but it was nice to say goodbye to a couple of the backroom staff – like my boss Andy Cairns's secretary Dawn Ellis, who had always been very helpful over the years.

Driving away I realised I had plenty to reflect upon: some amazing memories, a whole host of extraordinary events and countless matches from my 25 years at Sky Sports.

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2

Bristol Days

PEOPLE often ask me how I got to work for Sky and it's not always an easy question to answer. Luck, obviously, can play a part in these things – being in the right place at the right time might sound like a bit of a cliché – yet there is an element of truth to it.

I had wanted to be a journalist since about the age of 14. In those days there were two routes into the business: leave school at 16 or 18 and land a job on the local paper, learning from the bottom up; or go to university and read a relevant subject like English, history or politics. I chose the latter and went to Bristol University, where I studied history from 1975 to 1978, with an emphasis on socialising.

Also I probably spent too much time following the fortunes of the city's two professional football clubs. I saw Rovers first at their rather ramshackle old Eastville ground just by the M32, and was rewarded with a thrilling 4-2 win over Brian Clough's (pre-European Cup) Nottingham Forest.

I caught the last few months of one of football's most celebrated partnerships in the lower leagues in the shape of 'Smash and Grab', aka Bannister and Warboys, who were both from Yorkshire. 'Smash' was Alan Warboys, a tall and physical forward. 'Grab' was Bruce Bannister, shorter, quicker and with an eye for goal. The theory was Warboys would smash his way through a defence and set up Bannister to grab the goal.

They both actually were very talented strikers and both were prolific – with Bannister just shading it over the course of their careers. ‘Grab’ grabbed 167 league goals from just over 500 career appearances while ‘Smash’ smashed in 137 from just under 500. In five seasons they netted more than 130 goals between them for Rovers. A great double act in every sense of the word.

On that October day Bannister did manage to get on the scoresheet against a Forest side containing Frank Clark, John McGovern, Ian Bowyer (who scored) and John Robertson (who also netted). I went with my new American room-mate Dave, who was from Cleveland, Ohio. I think it is fair to say I was more enamoured with what I saw than him. This was his first taste of English football and sadly he never came back.

Two other Bristol Rovers games stand out – both in the FA Cup in 1978. Second Division Rovers entertained Southampton in round four. The Saints were flying high in the league and would go on to win promotion to the top flight a few months later. They brought around 5,000 fans and had memorably lifted the cup by beating Manchester United 1-0 in the final just a couple of years earlier.

In the Rovers team that January day was another hugely popular Eastville striker, Paul Randall. Born in Liverpool, ‘Punky’ (because of his love for punk rock music) was in his first season with the club and what a prodigious season it was: 22 goals in 35 games, including two in this particular tie. The first just before half-time was a glorious, instinctive chip. The second shortly before full time was an assured finish from an in-form forward. It triggered a pitch invasion from hundreds of Southampton supporters, who seemed to be hell-bent on getting the game abandoned. It was a not completely uncommon tactic of the time. Mercifully order was eventually restored, but when the final whistle blew

they came back on to the pitch in their droves and headed for the home end!

Now Eastville, as I have suggested, was an old ground and – although it was fantastically atmospheric – it did leave a bit to be desired on the health and safety front. To exit the home terrace there was a narrow entrance at the back, which one person at a time could use. A huge crush was building up and I was starting to feel claustrophobic. There was a rising sense of alarm at the progress the Southampton followers were making as they came towards us.

To the rescue came one loud voice who bellowed, ‘Come on lads, we’re not having these bastards take our end! Let’s go and get them!’

At this point the more adventurous of the Rovers fans turned and ran on to the playing surface to confront the visiting hordes, while we were all able to make good our escape. In the pub that night my fellow students all thought it sounded like a good laugh, but just for a while it was getting distinctly hairy – and those two words sum up football in that decade as well as the 1970s themselves.

Three weeks later I was back at Eastville for round five. This time I managed to persuade a couple of friends to come along – tempted, no doubt, by the prospect of seeing Bobby Robson’s attractive Ipswich Town in action.

What followed was bizarre and dramatic. It had snowed heavily in Bristol and the club had performed a minor miracle in getting the game on at all. A good two inches of snow lay across the entire pitch, with the lines only just about visible. We had arrived early, so as to get a good spot

on the Rovers terrace: behind and just above the goal, with a metal bar to lean against.

On that afternoon Rovers showed no fear in facing supposed First Division superiority and tore into the visitors with gusto. The orange ball was inevitable; the orange colour of the Ipswich shirts, though, was a bit more of a puzzle – it was an exact match and must have made the task of the officials even harder.

The weather conditions and the style of football at the time meant defenders dare not dally on the ball – not even for a moment. It cost Rovers, as young Robin Turner scored his first goal for the club after seizing on an opening.

In those days the playing surfaces were incomparable to the ones now. Trying to control the ball in the ice, snow and slush was virtually impossible, let alone dealing with a bumpy pitch as well. When your team was defending you held your breath and feared the worst, but when they were on the attack it was hugely exciting, because you just did not know what might happen next.

In the event Rovers staged a great fightback as two Bobby Gould corners led to two David Williams headers and the underdogs, having trailed, led 2-1 and they had their tails up. Gould intercepted a bad back-pass and stuck the ball in the net with a really cool finish from a tight angle. Eastville was in raptures at the prospect of a 3-1 lead, but the celebrations died as soon as they had started. The linesman on the far side had his flag up for offside (wrongly as it happens), and on such decisions games – and even entire competitions – can turn.

Into the closing stages, England international Paul Mariner drove at the very heart of the Rovers defence, who backed

off, allowing Turner to score his and Ipswich's second. Moments later the final whistle blew. A 2-2 draw was a decent effort against a team from the division above, but the sense of disappointment among the players and fans alike was palpable.

The replay at Portman Road proved a little one-sided with Ipswich winning 3-0 and going through to the quarter-finals. West Country FA Cup dreams were over for another year, but for Ipswich they were only just beginning. A 6-1 thumping of Millwall was followed by a 3-1 success over West Bromwich Albion in the semi-final at Highbury. A stunning victory against Arsenal in the final catapulted Ipswich into the big time just a year after winning promotion. By a quirk of fate both Ipswich and Bristol Rovers finished 18th in their respective divisions, although they would reflect on their seasons very differently.

* * * * *

Bristol City was a different experience altogether. For my second year at university I had moved from the halls of residence at Stoke Bishop to affluent Clifton. Six of us rented a house near the famous suspension bridge. Ashton Gate was within walking distance – albeit two miles and 40 minutes away – and there was the lure of First Division football.

Up until then I had preferred catching the bus from the far north-west of the city down to Eastville in the east – a journey of well over an hour. To my 18-year-old mind Rovers was edgier, more working-class, and a bit more of an adventure.

As it happened, Bristol City's first season back in the top flight in 65 years was the adventure to end all adventures.

It began well, with a victory at Arsenal on the opening day, and after a handful of games City were lying second. Then a slump set in and by the time I had returned to Bristol for the academic year they were already in free-fall. I went to the Leicester City game: total domination, but no one was able to stick the ball in the net. Leicester won 1-0, scoring from one of their very few attacks.

And that's how the season looked to be going. The odd good result, but in the main the side was too inconsistent and there was a worrying lack of goals. The return of old favourite Chris Garland lifted the spirits briefly, but the goals were still proving hard to come by.

With ten games to go City were rock bottom and the tension at Ashton Gate among the fans was almost unbearable. A vital win to complete the double over struggling Spurs was a bonus. Peter Cormack scored the only goal, and the walk back up to Clifton afterwards was much less of a slog than usual. Cormack had won the league title with Liverpool and was hugely experienced. He was to play a key role in the closing weeks of the season.

But City were still bottom, with nine games left, and the next four were all away. There was a priceless win at Queens Park Rangers but a draw and two defeats in the others meant the Robins were still propping up the table.

With five matches to go they were three points from safety (and remember in those days it was only two points for a win).

Thinking back, the run-in was pretty extraordinary. It certainly dominated most of my waking thoughts. Five games took place in 13 days, starting at home to Manchester United. A big crowd packed into Ashton Gate

and we saw Garland put City ahead. I remember Stewart Houston being stretchered off with a broken leg, while Gerry Gow and Sammy McIlroy were both sent off for fighting.

In the second half Jimmy Greenhoff (one of my favourite players) scored an equaliser. It was a tough, feisty game, laden with anxiety at times and every bit as exciting as anything I had experienced at Eastville. It ended 1-1, a pretty good point all things considered, and now it was a case of bring on Leeds.

Tuesday, 10 May 1977 and just three days after holding Manchester United, City were taking on another of the really big clubs in English football, Leeds United. League champions, FA Cup winners and European Cup runners-up in recent years, Leeds were certainly successful but not universally popular. They had beaten City at Elland Road just a couple of weeks earlier and the home fans were desperate for revenge.

It was another enthralling game with Bristol City again holding their own. Eventually the breakthrough came and again it was Garland. Could City hang on this time? In the defence that night and up against his former team was Norman 'Bites Yer Legs' Hunter. Now 33, Hunter may have been past his prime, but his organisation, determination and sheer desire to beat his old Leeds mates was a big factor.

The final whistle was greeted with a huge roar. Three points from two games and finally City were off the bottom with three games to go. More significantly it had fired the team and the fans with the belief that maybe they could, after all, survive.

By now I had a big emotional stake in Bristol City, even though I had been following their fortunes for less than two

years, and on the Saturday afternoon I listened on the radio as they battled to a goalless draw up at Middlesbrough.

Then on Monday it was back down to Ashton Gate for another one of those magical nights that live long in the memory. Liverpool were the newly crowned champions of England (again) and were going for a league, FA Cup and European Cup treble. They oozed class, knocked the ball about with assurance and it was no surprise when David Johnson put them ahead after half an hour.

A season's best crowd of over 38,000 had squeezed into the stadium. We were surrounded by Liverpool fans and they just wanted to party, to celebrate their title. The result was almost irrelevant to them.

City gradually got a toe-hold and that man Garland grabbed the equaliser just before half-time. The atmosphere cranked up a level or two and the second half saw Liverpool having to defend for long periods. Perhaps the exertions of the last few weeks began to get to them because their intensity faded. That was quite understandable in a way as they had an FA Cup Final against Manchester United coming up five days later.

With 15 minutes to go Garland guaranteed his permanent place among the hearts of the City faithful with a second goal. It was his fifth in six games and would turn out to be the winner.

As we streamed out of the ground we heard that Stoke City had lost and been relegated. Tottenham had already gone down, so now there was only one other place to be decided. Moreover, City had now climbed out of the bottom three on goal difference from Coventry City.

And guess who the final opponents of that season would be? Yes, Coventry, away on Thursday, just three days after the Liverpool match.

You really could not have scripted it any better. Sunderland were also level on 34 points with the Robins and Coventry. A superior goal difference for them was offset by the fact their last match of the season would be the same night away to Everton.

Thousands of City fans made their way to the Midlands for that game. Sadly I was not one of them. Student finances and an important tutorial the next morning meant I would be unable to travel to Highfield Road.

Listening to the radio in the minutes leading up to the start, it became clear there was a good deal of congestion outside the ground so perhaps it was no surprise that the kick-off was delayed. Now, this is where the conspiracy theorists come in: some (especially Sunderland fans) were convinced it was a deliberate ruse by Coventry chairman Jimmy Hill to ensure that his team would be playing several minutes behind Sunderland's match at Goodison Park, so they would in effect be in control; others believed it was the local police who ordered the delayed kick-off on the grounds of safety (and also to give Coventry a better chance, which would make their life easier!).

Either way the drama started to unfold pretty quickly. Sunderland went a goal down at Everton (hooray), then Bristol City went a goal down at Coventry (boo).

The second half at Goodison got under way a good six or seven minutes before the game resumed at Coventry, and more goals started going in. City fell two behind and looked

in deep trouble. Sunderland were still losing, but would survive on goal difference if things stayed the same.

Enter Gerry Gow, a curly-haired, pugnacious Scottish midfielder. He made his debut for the club in 1970 as a teenager and was idolised on the Ashton Gate terraces. Just moments after Tommy Hutchison had made it 2-0, Gow volleyed City right back into the match with his first and only goal of the season on his 30th appearance.

Now it was all City, and before long Chris Garland nodded the ball down to right-back Don Gillies, who powered the ball into the net for 2-2. There was jubilation and pandemonium among the visiting throng, who by now were learning that Everton had scored a second goal against Sunderland.

News of the final whistle at Goodison was relayed round Highfield Road and as I listened on the radio it was obvious both sides had pretty much stopped trying. The final minutes seemed to be played out on the understanding that 2-2 would keep both teams up, and this is where that delayed kick-off undoubtedly played into Coventry and Bristol's hands. By all accounts, according to the commentary, it all descended into a bit of a farce, with both sets of forwards barely venturing into their opponents' halves!

It is something which would not happen today if it could possibly be avoided, and I did feel sympathy for Sunderland and their fans, who had also travelled in their thousands to Merseyside.

It was certainly a controversial ending to the gripping First Division relegation fight, all decided on a Thursday night so

that no other games would need to be played on Saturday when Liverpool met Manchester United in the FA Cup Final.

Just listening on the radio I felt drained – exhausted even – but ultimately absolutely ecstatic. I never did get to meet or interview the manager Alan Dicks, although he had my eternal gratitude for providing an inspiring backdrop to my three-year Bristol University career.

Needless to say, I still went to Ashton Gate on a pretty regular basis in the 1977/78 season, but – not surprisingly – it lacked a bit of the passion and exhilaration of the previous campaign. City survived relegation by three points this time and doing the double over West Ham was probably the key. Oddly, they finished with an identical playing record from the previous season: played 42, won 11, drew 13, lost 18, points 35. I'm not sure what it all proved – except that they were somehow consistent in their inconsistency.

The season opener in August was against newly promoted Wolves, and having stayed down in Bristol to work at a bottling factory in the summer, we all piled along to Ashton Gate to witness what we thought would be more of the same from the previous campaign.

There was certainly drama but most of it occurred before kick-off. As we neared the ground we could see that Greville Smyth Park just behind the stadium was starting to resemble a bit of a battleground. Mounted police were trying to keep the scuffling fans apart, it seemed there was a gigantic rolling maul taking place, and we had to be fairly light-footed to escape the mayhem. Not exactly the ideal introduction to First Division football for my girlfriend at the time, Alison. Needless to say – like my American mate Dave – she never came back either.

To compound it all, it was quite spicy leaving afterwards as Wolves celebrated a 3-2 victory. A sobering experience all round.

I left Bristol in the summer of 1978, and though I still retain a real affection for both City and Rovers, my footballing allegiance, as will be revealed, lies elsewhere.

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3

The Aldershot News

ALMOST 12 months elapsed between me leaving Bristol University and finally landing my first job in journalism. I spent that time working as a warehouseman, an insurance clerk and a hospital porter. I was also appointed first XI captain at my local cricket club, Merrow, in the Three Counties League (Surrey, Hampshire and Berkshire, in case you were wondering).

The big break, as it were, came via a tiny classified advertisement in the *Daily Telegraph*, 'Sports Reporter required for busy bi-weekly paper in North-East Hampshire. Apply to Deputy Editor John Elliott at The Aldershot News.'

I wasted no time getting my application in and enclosed a copy of an interview I had done in the last month or so with David Howell, Guildford MP and a Cabinet minister.

He had kindly granted me some time to question him about his role during his weekly Friday night surgery in the constituency. He had been a journalist himself once and was happy to try and help another aspiring press man. It wasn't relevant to sport, but I suppose it showed if I had an aptitude for writing.

John soon got back to me, but what he had to say took the wind out of my sails somewhat.

'Thanks for your application, Nick,' he said, 'but I am afraid we have already appointed our new sports reporter.'

However, John did go on to say that he had been quite impressed with the piece I had submitted about David Howell and wanted to offer me a week's work experience (no guarantees) in the newsroom.

This was music to my ears, a chance to experience the working environment of a busy newspaper in the heart of its community. In my eagerness I set off that first Monday at around 6.30am. I wanted to be in Aldershot by eight, so I could have a good look around the town, before reporting for duty at nine sharp.

The Aldershot and District Bus Company had other ideas. They cancelled three consecutive services so it was nearly 9.45am before I arrived, breathless, at the newspaper's offices in The Grove.

News editor Ian Barron was not impressed and dispatched me immediately to Aldershot Magistrates' Court to meet up with the chief news reporter Steve Peacock.

Steve didn't normally have too much time for juniors, but for some reason he took me under his wing, patiently explaining how the court worked and how to fashion copy from the various cases. In exchange for buying him a couple of pints at lunchtime he also promised to run the rule over what I would write in the afternoon.

And that's how it started, on an early June day back in 1979: my first real taste of journalism.

By the end of the week I had even managed to win Ian over (again a couple of lunchtime pints probably helped) and on the Friday afternoon I was called into editor Phillip Green's office, where John offered me a job as the most junior reporter in the newsroom on the princely salary of £49.50 a week.

It was a fantastic feeling, and after shaking me by the hand he gently suggested that in future if I was to travel from Guildford to Aldershot each day, then I should go by train as it took just 17 minutes and the station was opposite the newspaper offices.

‘Better still,’ he added, ‘pass your sodding driving test!’

For two and a half years I worked as a general news reporter, getting to know the patch, the people, the local personalities. Aldershot was an interesting town, a little rough round the edges – especially when the Paras (the Parachute Regiment) returned home from a tour of duty to Northern Ireland.

Going on an operational night out with Aldershot CID certainly proved an eye-opener. Sometimes, keeping the peace between the locals and the ‘squaddies’ was a difficult and delicate exercise, which called for some unique skills and insight. It was a useful lesson to absorb, and helped me in the news coverage of my ‘patch’.

I did also learn to drive and took proud ownership of an old gold Hillman Imp, just after passing my test. Sadly it did not last long. A few months later I got cleaned out by an off-duty detective sergeant (not from Aldershot), who pulled out of a side road in his Ford Capri and sent me and my Hillman spinning and somersaulting through a fence across a garden until it came to rest on its side against a house.

The passenger door above me was pretty badly smashed in and would not open, so I was trapped. Worse still, the petrol tank was in the front of Hillman Imps, and I was watching the fuel spilling out through the hole where the petrol cap should have been. I was thinking that the car would

spectacularly ignite and then blow up, just like in the movies.

Those negative thoughts did not really have too much time to take hold because moments later a fireman peered down into the car, asked if I was okay and broke into a big smile when I told him I was in one piece, albeit with an injured knee and ripped clothing. I think he was fearing the worst.

I was levered out of the car in no time. The Hillman was badly damaged – in fact to no one's surprise it was declared a complete write-off.

The fire engine, it turned out, had been travelling back from a shout and was just four vehicles behind the accident. They saw everything and were prepared to act as independent witnesses.

The other driver – the police officer – was very relieved I was okay, but he looked distinctly worried, and with good reason. He was prosecuted at Winchester Crown Court for careless driving and suspended from driving for the police for some time. Originally, he chose to plead not guilty – hence the Crown Court scheduling – but changed his mind the morning of the trial when he realised a local reporter who used to cover courts on a regular basis would not be intimidated when giving evidence.

My solicitor Ian Pearson did a fine job in ensuring I was adequately compensated for the loss of my car and the delays in paying up, so when I finally got back on the road I was able to afford a smart little Ford Escort. Ian went on to stand for the Labour party at the Aldershot constituency in the 1982 General Election. He got my vote, for the help and advice he gave me, but Maggie Thatcher was starting to reach the peak of her powers and the Conservatives – as

they did through most of the south – swept away the Labour vote in this part of north-east Hampshire.

Going back to the accident itself: because the car had overturned the firemen insisted I went to hospital for a check-up and half an hour or so later, I was in the A & E at the Royal Surrey County hospital. I assured them I hadn't bumped my head, but they told me to take it easy for the next couple of days in case delayed shock set in.

However, just 24 hours later, I was due to make my broadcasting debut so I was never going to let delayed shock get in the way. It was a fairly humble beginning – half a dozen live reports by telephone into BBC Radio Sheffield to update their listeners on the progress of the all-conquering Blades. Sheffield United had been relegated into the bottom tier for the first time in their history at the end of the previous season. But they stormed back in style, dominating the Fourth Division and earning 96 points along the way.

That mid-April afternoon in 1982 they had brought a sizeable support down from South Yorkshire, which made for a great atmosphere. It was a really competitive game with Aldershot giving as good as they got in a 1-1 draw.

In the crowd that day, having travelled down from Sheffield, was a young Keith James. It was only 20 years later that we discovered we had actually both been at that game. Keith joined Sky in the late 1990s and was a top-class news editor as well as being a good friend over the years. He acted as my producer/fixer at EURO 2004 and the 2006 World Cup. We have often had a laugh about it ever since.

Keith maintained that Sheffield United battered Aldershot and were desperately unlucky not to win! The story I told

Radio Sheffield was a slightly different one:

‘One-all the final score here at the Recreation Ground, as Sheffield United move ever closer to promotion. A point won, rather than two points lost for the visitors, who had to withstand some heavy pressure in the second half.’

Those early days on the *Aldershot News* were a lot of fun. It was a massive learning curve for me but there were some good people willing to help you along the way.

Sat opposite me in the newsroom when I started was Ian Barron, the news editor. I’ve mentioned that I made a bad start with him but he soon forgave me and taught me a lot about how to write good, crisp copy, and the importance of an accurate, eye-catching intro. On the surface he was a tough-talking abrasive Scotsman with an uncanny ability to produce acerbic one-liners, which kept you in your place. However, he was a really decent guy, who enjoyed watching young reporters improve under his keen eye – even if he didn’t always tell them. He was also a creature of habit: two lunchtimes a week without fail he played squash against sports editor Peter Hutchinson; the other three days he would be holding court at the Sportsman, a members’ club and popular bar just opposite the Recreation Ground.

Ian certainly had the talent to go further in the business than a bi-weekly local newspaper but in those days there were not the opportunities that are around now, and I guess in the end he settled for what he knew best.

At the desk to Ian’s right was chief reporter Steve Peacock – again, a good writer who could churn out terrific copy at speed under pressure. His slightly bedraggled look belied a sharp intelligence and at times he was the scourge of the local councils. The more they tried to bury or deny a story,

the more tenacious he became. As I recall, he led a slightly entangled personal life and eventually moved down to work in Devon.

Next to me was the second newest reporter in the room – Martin Creasey. His outward extrovert personality (he was always cracking jokes – usually bad ones!) masked a slightly nervous character underneath. But he was good company, a very gifted singer, and a fanatical Brighton & Hove Albion fan. He genuinely loved his football. I remember he tried to get to Brighton's first away game in the top flight – a midweek match at Aston Villa – but he left work a bit late, became stuck on the M1 and had to admit defeat. Instead of seeing his own team make a piece of history, he pulled over and settled instead for a Fourth Division match between Northampton Town and Bradford City.

Completing the newsroom line-up were the two girls. They sat across the far side of the room to me by the big bay window. Laretta Murphy was a flame-haired Irish girl who, like me, had a university degree. We were considered the brains of the outfit, but I have to admit she was far brighter.

Last, but by no means least, was Debbie Comfort. Debbie was a chatty, bubbly bundle of energy, who had absolutely brilliant people skills. As a result she landed many human interest stories for the paper – both in Aldershot, where her family lived, and Farnborough, when she moved on to become the deputy chief news reporter in that office.

She also became my first wife.

We had been friends and colleagues for nearly two years before our first date – in the Horse and Groom pub just outside Guildford. Eleven weeks later we were married.

The service took place at the parish church of St Michael's in Aldershot and was conducted by the splendidly named Stanley Zeal. I think a fair few among the congregation that day thought this might be a shotgun wedding, given how quickly events had moved that summer of 1981 – but it wasn't.

We had eight largely happy years. Debbie was tremendously ambitious for me and constantly urged me on to bigger and better things like applying for jobs and forcing me out of my comfort zone (no pun intended).

Eventually that ambition helped drive us apart. We were both working journalists, committed to our jobs and putting in long, unsociable hours.

The last straw, I suppose, was our move from north-east Hampshire to Kent (where I was working for Television South). It took Debbie away from her family and made her commute into London a really arduous one. The marriage was buckling under the pressure and we parted in June 1989. Our last weekend together was spent near Belfast at her brother's wedding.

Alan Comfort was a professional footballer and had the double satisfaction of winning promotion on the day he got married. To make it even more spectacular the two events took place in two different countries and involved a sports car, a helicopter, two aeroplanes, and a motorbike taxi!

A flying winger with a great turn of pace, Alan was one of the stars of Leyton Orient's 1988/89 promotion push. He and on-loan teenager Kevin Campbell (later of Arsenal, Everton and England B among others) formed a great partnership towards the end of that season, scoring 25 goals between them.

Orient finished the regular campaign with six wins and two draws from their last nine games, forcing themselves into sixth place and the play-offs. The semi-final was against Neil Warnock's Scarborough and a 2-0 first leg win at home put them in charge.

I was working in south London (interviewing Brough Scott at the *Racing Post* offices) on the day of the second leg, but made a late decision to charge north for the game. Alan had put a ticket on the players' entrance for me, but a hold-up near Leeds meant I would miss kick-off. I listened to the first-half commentary on the radio as I sped (not too fast) across the North Yorkshire moors towards the seaside town of Scarborough.

It was 0-0 at half-time when I arrived, but it wasn't too long into the second half before Scarborough scored. It was all hands to the pump after that for the O's as they clung on to their aggregate lead, despite a 1-0 defeat on the night.

There was no Wembley final in those early play-off days so Orient faced Wrexham over two legs with the first encounter in North Wales. Another long car journey, another sterling defensive performance and a 0-0 draw set up the second leg to perfection.

There was just one problem: Saturday, June 3 was also Alan's wedding day. Kick-off at Brisbane Road in east London was 3pm – exactly the time Alan was due to marry Jill in Bangor, County Down.

Now, you might wonder why Alan arranged to get married on this day of all days? To be fair he actually contacted the Football League months and months in advance and was assured that the domestic season would be over before the first weekend in June.

And so it would have been, but for the Hillsborough tragedy in April 1989, which led to the season being extended by a week. The team itself had looked anything but play-off contenders for much of the campaign anyway then that storming finish changed everything.

To the rescue came manager Frank Clark and the *Sunday Express*. Clark successfully managed to persuade the police and relevant authorities that this high-profile match needed an early kick-off. Then, in exchange for the exclusive story, the national newspaper supplied the transport, while over in Northern Ireland the wedding was put back to 5.30pm.

It was a strange experience as we gathered round the radio for updates and snatches of commentary from the game. Alan teed up Lee Harvey to put Orient in front, which was a great start. Wrexham fought back to equalise and the final was heading into extra time (which would have provided another logistical difficulty) when ex-Gillingham player Mark Cooper came up with a spectacular winner. Cue wild celebrations in a Northern Ireland hotel and among the vast majority of the 13,355 crowd at Brisbane Road.

Alan, by his own admission, raced straight from the ground (with his wedding suit and a bottle of champagne) in a chauffeur-driven fast car to a nearby helipad, which took him to Heathrow Airport. After landing in Belfast he transferred straight on to a flight to Newtonards, near Bangor – and then by motorbike taxi to the wedding service.

It was the ultimate happy ending that day for Alan, but sadly the same could not be said of his future football career.

A dream move to Second Division Middlesbrough was completed that same summer, which was followed by an

electrifying start to life on Teesside in the second tier. But 17 games and three goals later it was all over. In the north-east derby against Newcastle he took a heavy tackle and sustained a really bad cruciate knee ligament injury. It ended his professional career a month short of his 25th birthday.

The Alan Comfort story did not end there. He went on to become a vicar, he wrote a book with fellow Christian Gavin Peacock (titled *You'll Never Walk Alone*) and was for many years the club chaplain at Leyton Orient.

As for Debbie, she always kept tabs on my career and though our paths did not really cross again (professionally or personally), I always knew she was pleased I had done pretty well.

Tragically Debbie died from breast cancer in October 2016, leaving husband Paul and two daughters, Francesca and Daisy.

However, I am getting ahead of myself, so back to the 1980s and the *Aldershot News*. Two court cases stand out for me during my time on the paper – and both are slightly disturbing.

One Tuesday I was in Aldershot County Court. It didn't always provide good copy as the cases often revolved around debt and repossession. On this particular morning a young couple were being evicted from their rental property but the evidence we heard suggested their landlord had behaved very badly towards them, harassed them, and threatened violence – basically he wanted them out at all costs. There was also a racial undertone to his behaviour.

It was no surprise when the court found in favour of the young couple – they were given generous repayment terms

and the landlord received a public admonishment.

In the car park afterwards I was approached by the 'rogue' landlord. He wanted me to keep the details of the case out of the paper. Before I could explain that was not possible, he started stuffing £5 and £10 notes into my pockets, saying he was sure I would be able to take care of it all. I pulled the money back out and it just drifted around the floor of the car park as I shook my head before driving away. When I got back to the newsroom, I explained everything to Ian, the news editor. I still had two of the landlord's £5 notes, which were kept as evidence if required. Ian ensured that the story would DEFINITELY appear in the next edition and on the Friday it was our off-side lead.

At ten o'clock that morning the landlord rang the editor to complain. He claimed I had done a deal with him to keep the story out of the paper and then had kept the money for myself!

Because I had reported it immediately, the newspaper massively took my side. The landlord was given very short shrift and we never heard from him again. Cheeky sod.

Drink-drive cases were an all too familiar feature of proceedings at Aldershot Magistrates' Court. A guilty verdict meant an inevitable ban and fine – the only issue being the level of punishment.

Then one day this rich guy appeared in court. He was in his late 50s and wore a hugely expensive suit. He had even brought his own barrister (complete with silk wig) down from London.

The barrister told the court that his client was pleading not guilty to the charge of drink-driving, because the only reason he had been stopped in the first place was because

the police were jealous of the car he was driving – a Rolls-Royce.

Good luck with that defence, I thought to myself. I had certainly never heard that excuse before.

The prosecution solicitor outlined the case, telling the court that the defendant had been stopped because he was driving erratically. He was given a breath-test at the roadside, which he had failed, and was then arrested. Back at the police station he failed another breathalyser, not by a substantial amount but enough for a regulation prosecution.

Nevertheless, his barrister persisted with the notion that his client should never have been apprehended. He went on to explain how important having a licence was for his business, and how he had raised thousands of pounds for charity.

This particular magistrates' bench consisted of three JPs; a lady chairwoman, who sat in the middle, and two male colleagues on either side.

The barrister concluded his case by addressing the two men on the bench, looking them both squarely in the eye, and telling them his client was also 'The Worshipful Master' of a well-known Freemasons' lodge in the capital.

The magistrates then retired to consider their verdict.

Half an hour later they returned. The lady chairwoman looked flustered and annoyed. The drink-driving conviction was upheld, and a fine meted out, but she then went on to say that because of the exceptional circumstances of the case they were not going to ban the defendant from driving.

This caused some consternation in the court. The chairwoman said it had been a 'majority' decision and she

then got up and left without saying another word.

I caught up with her in the underground car park next to the courtroom.

‘Did your two colleagues say he shouldn’t be banned because he was such a senior mason?’ I asked.

She looked at me and said, ‘I can’t discuss the details of this case with the press.’

‘But was that the reason?’ I persisted.

‘Off the record, and I mean off the record?’ she replied.

‘Yes of course,’ I said.

She nodded her head, got into her car and drove away.

Obviously we could not publish the details of that conversation. The rules around court reporting were pretty strict, and I always felt that what appeared in the next edition of the newspaper was a pretty watered-down version of the real story. It’s not what you know, I reflected afterwards, it’s WHO you know.

I’m now going to tell you about a murder case which convinced me once and for all that my future lay in sport and not news.

Marion Crofts was a 14-year-old schoolgirl who loved playing the clarinet. On Saturday, 6 June 1981 she was cycling along the Fleet Canal on her way to morning band practice when she was raped and murdered.

I was on weekend duty and got the call to cover the press conference the next day. The police sketched out what they