

PART TWO

# MANAGER

# 9

## MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

As I run for the ball, I know it's all over for me. Despite months of rehabilitation, my knee buckles.

I'm helped off the pitch and carried into the dressing room. The physiotherapist has been called back to the dugout. I can hear the crowd noise outside but I'm not part of the game any more. Five short years ago I was young, strong, extremely fit and clutching a European Cup medal while parading around the Bernabéu Stadium. Now, in 1985, I'm lying on a treatment table with no one in attendance, at a testimonial match in Cambridge – one in which I shouldn't have played.

Nobody asks whether I'm all right. People have other things to do, more important things that concern them. I have ceased to matter. For the first time, it hits me: I'm done with playing this game of football.

The players come into the dressing room at half-time but I am ready to go home. I decline the offer of crutches because I don't know when I'll be able to return them. Cambridge and Nottingham are not exactly neighbouring cities. By the time the second half is ten minutes old, I'm driving painfully and uncomfortably back to Nottingham. I'm thirty-three years old; I have a wife, two small children and no money.

Several months later my old friend Sammy Nelson, a Northern Ireland colleague who is now in the world of finance, throws me a lifeline by organizing an interview with the manager of the

Nottingham branch of the pensions company he works for. I somehow get the job and I join the workforce. I need to earn.

One day, I'm coming out of a shop in Nottingham city centre and who should be walking by but Peter Taylor. Initially I try to avoid him – I don't want to be quizzed about where I am in my life and where my future might lie – but he's having none of it. He wants to talk. We have not spoken since I left Nottingham Forest more than five years ago.

'Hey, you,' he says in the friendliest manner possible. 'What are you doing with yourself?' I don't get a chance to reply; Peter often doesn't wait for an answer to his own questions. 'I thought you'd go into management,' he continues. 'I always felt you would be cut out for it. You disappoint me. Thought you would want to do it. And you've had the two best influences you could ever hope to have in me and Brian.'

Peter is now retired from the game. His infamous falling out with Brian Clough a few years ago is still unresolved. He has an avuncular approach with me today and it's hard to argue with his conclusion; I only wish he had been as friendly in my playing days. In fact, I would also love to tell him that he and Brian should bury the hatchet and speak to each other. But I don't have the nerve, and anyway, there a lot of people I'm not speaking to myself these days.

I will never see Peter again and he will pass away four years later, but his legacy with Brian Clough will live on. And in a lesser way, his words to me will live on too. By the time I'm back home I've given his suggestion a lot of thought and it combines in my head with Billy Bingham's earlier musings on the same matter. I make up my mind that I will apply for jobs. Because of my knee injury I cannot play any more, so a player-manager's role – in vogue for lower-league clubs in recent years – is a non-starter. But surely my top-flight career will at least afford me an interview somewhere, and I'll take it from there.

Every managerial casualty in the new season allows me to write my letters to club chairmen. No one is biting my hand off.

Then, in January 1987, Second Division Bradford City sack their manager and I apply for the role, with not too much confidence of a reply. But a letter arrives at the house – I have been granted an interview. I get very excited, mainly because I've got a response at last. On a snowy January morning I set off for Bradford.

I wait about an hour in the foyer before being called. I'm escorted to the interview room on the first or second floor, where I knock and wait for the call to enter. There are six people sitting around a table. I'm welcomed by the chairman, Stafford Heginbotham, who does the probing. There is a man sitting to his right-hand side, the vice-chairman Jack Tordoff, who also asks a few questions. After a shaky start, I do OK – well, better than OK, but I'm not the judge. They thank me for my time and say they'll be in touch one way or the other.

A day goes by without news. A second day passes in the same manner. Then, on the third day, I get the call. It's Mr Tordoff. They want me back for a second round. He tells me that of all those interviewed, I'm the only one asked back. That's a positive start.

Mr Tordoff likes me. But he reveals that all those interviewed a few days ago had excellent references from very good managers, which I lacked. Could I, he asks, get a glowing reference from Brian Clough? If so, it would help me immensely in the second stage. I say yes, although I'm reluctant to do so, not having spoken to Clough in a long time. But needs must. I phone down to Nottingham Forest. The manager is over at Derby County's training ground, watching a game. I'll get him there.

I head over to meet him. He sees me coming from a good distance and looks a little surprised. He asks me what he can do for me and I tell him the story of Bradford City. He says he'll do a reference with pleasure and that if I don't get the job after his recommendation, he'll eat his hat. I thank him and head back home. Soon I'm back at Bradford, in the same hotel and the same room.

Terry Dolan, the caretaker manager, is doing well and is probably now in pole position for the job. Nevertheless, I

impress at the interview and I believe I have a good chance. Mr Heginbotham asks me if I could work with Terry, with me being the manager. I don't know Terry well and I tell the panel that it might be difficult for both of us. In the end, I don't get the job. Terry Dolan becomes permanent manager of Bradford City and their position improves. I never do ask Brian Clough if his flat cap was eaten.

Early the same summer, there's a knock on my door at home. A man introduces himself: he is Kevin Greene, a director of Grantham Town. Would I have any interest in managing the club? Although Grantham is only twenty miles from where I live in Nottingham, I don't even know what league they are in.

'Beazer Homes Midland Division,' Kevin says.

'How many leagues below the Football League?'

'Three,' he answers. 'We train two nights a week and then a Saturday game.'

Two things are going through my mind. First, Kevin is very persuasive. He and the board have big plans for the club. Second, Peter Taylor's words are still ringing in my ears. Kevin wants me to meet the chairman, Mr Balfe, and the rest of the board. They too are very persuasive.

And so I'm now a football manager.

I have a three-week coaching clinic in America that I was invited to some time ago and as a consequence, I miss much of Grantham's preseason. Early results are not great and I don't yet know the strengths and weaknesses of the team. But I soon spot a young lad playing in an Inter County game at Grantham. We sign him from Lincoln United. And Gary Crosby wins the next seven games for us with scintillating performances.

I tell the coaching staff at Nottingham Forest about him. They are put off – why should they believe a nineteen-year-old lad, recently playing for Lincoln United, deserves a place for First Division Nottingham Forest?

'Because I say so,' I tell them, a bit too arrogantly.

Clough grants him a trial, Gary impresses, he signs for Forest

and has a terrific career with them. The transfer fee doesn't do us any harm, either.

I really enjoy all aspects of managing the club: organizing the training sessions, picking the teams, motivating the players, and of course the matches themselves. We go close to promotion, failing by the thinnest of margins, and we are almost as close the following year too. Shortly after that, I leave to manage Shepshed United. Geographically closer to Nottingham, it means I can have more preparation time for training sessions after finishing work. They are of similar standing to Grantham, only in a different regional league; but I only spend a few months there, as my relationship with the owner quickly sours. I decide that I do not want to work with him and so we part company. I'll continue with some radio punditry work, sporadic as it may be, and see what life brings in the future. I do hear from Shepshed's owner again some years later. It's a congratulatory letter to me on Leicester City winning the League Cup in 1997.

It's early 1990 and I am covering an FA Cup tie between Norwich City and Liverpool at Carrow Road for BBC Radio. It's half-time and after a few comments about events so far, I nip off to the toilet. I bump into Alan Parry, the TV commentator, who is also having a comfort break. It's a chance meeting because he is only at the game to watch Liverpool, his favourite team; he is not working himself today.

I have met Alan a few times at sporting functions over the last few years. He is mightily good company, a brilliant raconteur and a terrific commentator. As befits a Scouser he is extremely opinionated on all subjects and, with a pint in his hand, as stubborn as the proverbial mule. Despite not being a churchgoer he is very fond of talking about religion, its merits and drawbacks – the merits usually mean Reverend Ian Paisley and the drawbacks may well centre on Roman soil. However, he argues so coherently and so passionately that one could be forgiven for changing religion after half an hour in his company.

'I thought you might have applied for the Wycombe job,' he says, referring to Wycombe Wanderers, the Vauxhall Conference club in Buckinghamshire, of which he is a director.

The reason he thinks this is that I applied for the post a couple of years ago. I had travelled down from Nottingham one sunny Sunday morning for the board interview, held at Loakes Park on the edge of High Wycombe town centre. Brian Lee was then the chairman of the club – he had also been a very successful manager there, but now he was running things from a chairman's viewpoint. There were a number of directors there that morning but Brian did most of the talking. Wycombe Wanderers were a very famous amateur club and tradition was their very essence. Blazered men on match days, good hospitality shown to visiting directors and a kindred spirit within its gates. I loved all of this, and said so at the interview. However, I felt they wanted someone with more local experience and some knowledge of the Vauxhall Conference itself. I was manager of Grantham Town at the time, a few leagues below the conference, so I knew what non-league football was all about, but I still didn't get the job.

'I didn't know it was even available,' I answer truthfully to Alan.

'Yes. We were beaten by the Metropolitan Police in the FA Trophy a few weeks ago and the manager left,' says Alan. 'The board are actually interviewing some people today. I can put a call into the chairman, if you have any interest? But bear in mind they may even have decided by now. I'll call immediately after the game.'

'No harm done, I suppose,' I agree, somewhat reluctantly. 'They can only say no.' They turned me down only two years ago, I'm thinking; so even if I do get an interview this time, why would they go for me? I'm not at any club right now and I dread being turned down twice for the same job, some two years apart.

After the game, I make the three-hour journey back to Nottingham without seeing Alan again. There is a call later. It is

from the current Wycombe Wanderers chairman, Ivor Beeks. His predecessor, Brian Lee, has been asked to supervise the building of a new stadium for the club, with the move taking place this summer. Ivor is sorry to tell me that just this very afternoon – probably while Alan Parry was telling me about the job – they offered the manager's role to Kenny Swain, ex-Aston Villa full-back and current assistant manager to Dario Gradi at Crewe Alexandra. Kenny will confirm this as a formality this very night.

I thank him for taking the time to call me personally and put the phone down. Alan calls a few moments later with words of consolation.

'Nothing to worry about,' I reply. 'If I hadn't met you at Carrow Road I wouldn't even have known the job was available.'

But then, later on, the phone rings again – and once more it is Ivor Beeks on the line. Kenny Swain has changed his mind and wants to stay with Crewe Alexandra. Ivor asks whether I can come in for an interview tomorrow evening at his hotel close to Loakes Park. I agree.

I get to junction four of the M40 and descend Marlow Hill in darkness, save for the street lamps intermittently placed either side of the road. I recognize the steep descent, naturally, but cannot immediately place Loakes Park behind the general hospital. At the bottom of the hill are a couple of small, confusing roundabouts, which I negotiate at the second attempt before steering my car towards Ivor's small but well-maintained hotel. Ivor is already waiting for me. I introduce myself, although I'm hoping I'm the only one he's interviewing tonight. He tells me we've already met. He was one of the directors round the table when Brian Lee interviewed me the first time, but he stayed in the background and didn't ask any questions.

During the course of the next hour there seems to be a good chemistry between us. Ivor is a self-made man, extremely successful in the building trade. He has a strong work ethic and doesn't suffer fools but there is a warmth to his character that draws you