

B POSITIVE!

CHAPTER 5 – EVERYTHING HAPPENS AT ONCE

For most people, life is pretty straightforward until the treacherous adolescent years. Most decisions are made for you. Relationships are confined to a narrow band: parents, siblings, classmates, and the opposite sex are objects of curiosity rather than anyone you have feelings about. All your clothes are chosen for you, you eat what you're given and you're generally happy to do as you are told. You don't expect a lot of yourself and the future represents the next day.

Then; Wham! What a difference! Now *you* want to choose what to do and when to do it. Almost imperceptibly, you get excited about a girl who shows you the tiniest amount of attention. You feel physically sick and nauseous at building up courage to speak to them, let alone wondering what you have to do and say about getting to the next stage!

You have to compete on how you dress; fashions suddenly gain fervent attention to detail. You're worried about how you're going to afford the new clothes, shoes and ties that are essential to avoid ridicule. And what about getting a real job once the schooldays are over?

Competition for your time, too, is a major consideration. How long should you spend on homework rather than playing sport, listening to music, going to the youth club to chat up the girls, getting part-time jobs to finance your new clothes and visits to the pub?

But never mind; *You* now know best. Your parents, the previous keepers of the key to all knowledge, lose it overnight and now know nothing – nothing important to you that is!

How does *anyone* cope with all this happening at once? I was not exempt. Every aspect of my life during this phase became affected: sport, football in particular, school and new relationships, especially with the opposite sex. There were monumental change taking place within my mind, body and spirit – some mundane, some stimulating and thrilling and one, when I was 17, life-changing.

My stance on playing football and incurring detentions rather than playing rugby for the school was an early example of my growing assertiveness. I was addicted to football.

Although I wasn't naturally gifted – the playground games with a tennis ball proved I wasn't in the same league as some of the other boys – but I was tenacious, determined and dogged.

One example exemplifies these attributes. On one of my visits with my father to watch Tottenham Hotspur, he berated one of the players for only using his right foot. Had he been two-footed he would almost certainly have scored a goal. This stuck in my mind like a limpet, so I spent hours after school, kicking a ball against a windowless school wall with my right foot, as I'm naturally left-footed. At first it was very difficult but after about six months, I became equally proficient with both feet.

As well as pounding my right instep into submission, I cajoled my parents into buying me a Stanley Matthews correspondence course on all aspects of the game. Sent in weekly instalments, I studied it religiously.

He was, arguably, one of the best players who ever played the game. I saw him twice and the most memorable feature was the crowd's anticipatory roar whenever he received a pass. Magical with the ball at his feet, he'd add ten thousand spectators to the gate. He was never booked or sent off and was the perfect role model for any aspiring young footballer.

So, aged 12 and armed with these self-taught skills, and bucketfuls of determination, I embarked on my junior football career. It didn't start well. I joined St Stevens FC, founded and managed by the local vicar, the Reverend Charles Seymour, who was as nuts about the game as I was. Actually, I think he was just nuts! He was renowned for wearing his football boots and socks under his cassock during Saturday marriage ceremonies and christenings and would speed them up to ensure he could make a three o'clock kick-off on the pitch behind the church!

I found it difficult to break into the team but always turned up with my kit to every match. There were no substitutes allowed then, so even if a player became injured, I still wouldn't get on the pitch. I attended twenty-odd games before a player didn't turn up and I was thrown a shirt, with the words, "Go on, Henley, just do your best" – as if I'd do anything less! I had to wait a further ten games before I made another appearance.

The following season, although just 13, I joined an under-16 side based largely on the players from the local Secondary Modern school, Townsend Rovers. They were a great bunch of lads, trained and managed by another football fanatic, 'Spud' Murphy.

He was a very good referee but felt his talents were better spent in developing young players rather than admonishing them. He was a great motivator. Now in his fifties, he never married and the whole of his waking life was spent in and around football clubs. After training, he often took the team to *Jack's* café for a fry-up and gave us some money to play the juke- box.

I spent three seasons with them and it was towards the end of this period that, one freezing, foggy night in February 1958, as we turned up for training, we heard the dreadful news about the Munich air crash involving the Manchester United team. We couldn't believe that so many young players – the 'Busby Babes,' named after their charismatic manager, Matt Busby – had perished and others were very badly injured, including Bobby Charlton. We all shed a tear that night and 'Spud', although not overtly religious, suggested we prayed.

The best Under-18 team in the area were Carlton FC, a feeder club to St Albans City FC who played in the Isthmian league, one of the top amateur competitions in the country. Carlton usually won everything and were regarded as providing a sound footing for any player who wished to progress to a higher standard. I joined Carlton when I was sixteen and became a permanent fixture for the next two seasons except for the very last game of my under-18 career.

We'd reached two cup finals, both to be played within two days of each other at the St Albans City FC ground. In the first match on a sunny, spring Monday night with the ground full to capacity, over a thousand spectators, I had one of the worst games of my life – a real stinker. I played left-half and the inside-forward I was supposed to mark played irritatingly brilliantly and scored two goals within the first 10 minutes, both my fault. We got back into the game though and finally emerged as 3-2 winners after extra time.

Although the others celebrated as if we'd won the FA cup, I couldn't share their joy. Before I left the clubhouse I tentatively asked about the team selection for the second cup final and our very last match as under 18 year-olds on the following Wednesday. The manager said, "Don't worry, son, it'll be the same team."

I was determined to put up a better show so I spent most of Tuesday evening practising my skills. When I got to the ground, I thought it odd that nobody spoke to me as I began to get changed. I was about to pull on the club shirt when the manager sheepishly broke the dreaded news.

"Sorry son, you've been dropped."

I couldn't help what happened next. I put on a brave face but simply couldn't bear to stay to watch the game. I got dressed and walked home. My dad returned from the match puzzled why he didn't see his son on the pitch. As I tried to explain to him what happened, I broke down and blubbed in his arms. Looking back on it now, it seemed a pathetic thing to do but I was obsessed with the game and desperate to do well. As ever, Dad sympathised but even his kind words couldn't console me.

A month later, Carlton held their end- of-season Dinner and Presentation evening to which I was invited. We all shook hands, had a few drinks and I was presented with a spare Cup-winner's medal which I cherished.

At least by now, we'd discovered other activities to distract us from our sporting or academic failures. As well as girls, we added music, parties and a drinking culture that began benignly but rapidly grew to pulsating hang-over proportions! The Pioneer Club was a good source of enjoyment for three of these hedonistic pursuits, but we had to go to the pubs and clubs to enjoy our libations.

St Albans once held the record for having the most pubs within a square half-mile in the UK. The standing joke amongst us dirty-minded schoolboys was that the High street was like a man's body; it had the *King's Head* and *Blacksmith's Arms* at one end, the *Cock* in the middle and the *Boot* at the other end!

One of the big attractions in pubs was the juke box. We enjoyed being holed-up on a cold winter's evening in the *Dive* bar in the *Bell* hotel or the *Harrow*, downing excellent pints of the local brew, *Benskin's Best Bitter*, and listening to the fabulous music of Paul Anka, Johnny Tillotson, Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis.

There was something on every night of the week. We limited ourselves to Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturday nights, mainly due to finances although before we left school we'd got some part-time jobs and we also had to find time for studying for our GCE's. It all happens at once!

Wednesdays was live jazz night at the Market Hall where we were lucky to see all the UK jazz greats: Humphrey Littleton, Chris Barber, Acker Bilk and Kenny Ball. The place was invariably heaving and you could run a small town's electricity supply from the energy generated by 200 gyrating dancers sweating the night away!

Thursdays was a more sophisticated night spent at the *Waterend Barn*; a beautifully restored medieval building with a springy dance floor and, a sure sign of a classy establishment, a dress code. A small orchestra often played romantic numbers designed for couples to meet and fall in love.

It was ideal for blind-dates. But you didn't stand a chance if you couldn't waltz, foxtrot or quick-step so, my best mate, Davies and I took lessons from an Austrian couple who ran a dance studio above *Burtons the Tailors* in the High Street. These took place on Friday evenings (yet another invasion into our time) and apart from learning to dance, this was also a good place to meet girls who out-numbered the boys two to one.

We never discovered the name of the teacher but he quickly gained the nick-name 'Adolf', given his thick accent, diminutive stature and his propensity to bark at you. I'm sure I heard him snarl on many occasions, "You *vill* obey my orders if you *vant* to learn to dance!" This was usually after he'd walked up behind you and thrust his hands heavily in a downward motion onto your shoulders to ensure they weren't hunched up as if you were trying to bury your ears!

So, armed with at least the basics, we were confident of not making too much of a fool of ourselves and were keen to test out our rhythmic steps on the unsuspecting toes of the *Waterend Barn* lasses. The dancing though, was really bait to chat them up.

One night one of my mates set up blind dates with four girls from Watford. We arranged to meet them inside at 9:30pm. I went to football training with Carlton FC as usual – nothing got in the way of that – so I was late in arriving.

Suitably smothered in *Old Spice* aftershave and wearing my best Italian suit, I went to buy myself a drink. I noticed that my three mates were already on the dance floor doing their stuff with some very pretty girls. At the far end of the bar, there sat a huge, Amazonian blonde girl whose biceps were almost the size of my thighs although, admittedly, not quite so hairy. She had huge breasts, but surprisingly good legs.

My first thought was; the bastards! I'm stuck with a 'hulk' from Watford! I wanted to be sure, so I skulked around trying not to be noticed. I needed to see if my mates and their new-found 'birds' would return to the hulk's table. They did, so my worst fears were

realised. I decided to slink off home, hopefully unnoticed, but Davies spotted me. He took great delight in waving and shouting at me to join them. Sulkily, I did. What happened in the next few hours taught me an important lesson.

Her name was Sue. She was several years older than me and a superb dancer. She had a great smile and laughed at everything I said. She was animated, witty and her eyes sparkled when she spoke. We got on marvellously. After the last waltz, she suggested we all go back to her place in Watford for some drinks.

Sue had a car – I hadn't even taken lessons then – and so Davies, who'd successfully won over his partner, and I were whisked off to an unknown abode in darkest Watford with a feeling of great anticipation. We were not disappointed. After a swift drink and some fumbling to a Frank Sinatra record, Davies went upstairs with his stunning brunette and Sue and I remained in the sitting room. Within minutes, I was flat on my back having the clothes ripped from me. In less than thirty seconds, she was sitting astride my quivering body. She was like a dervish on steroids.

I responded the best I could. Fortunately, I'd lost my virginity at a party about a month earlier to a fiery red-head called "Tinny", so, by no means an expert, I had a good idea of what to do. After 20 minutes, I heard the sitting -room door open and saw Davies peering in. He'd had a similar experience and I think it had un-nerved him!

Eventually, we got dressed and I felt slightly awkward. We couldn't stay the night; I suspected the 'hulk' was married although it was never mentioned. She offered to run us home and we gratefully accepted – we had to go to school next morning!

Davies told me later all he could see when he looked into the sitting-room, were my legs and arms flailing about under an amorphous mound of unattractive flesh! The important lesson I'd learnt was that first impressions are totally unreliable.

Saturday nights were always eagerly anticipated, mainly because I could nurse my hangovers lying in bed on Sunday morning. *The Spot* in London Colney, about four miles from home, was *the* place to be. It was even a step up from the *Waterend Barn* and usually had a sophisticated trio of piano, drums and bass playing cool, mood music. *The Bull* pub was next door so that's where the evening started. There was always someone playing a piano and an old-fashioned sing-song was compulsory including *Down at the old Bull and Bush* and *Goodnight Irene!* It reminded me of my Christmas holidays spent in London. 'Last orders' was at 10.30 pm and so, suitably fuelled up, we'd stagger across to the *Spot* for a little sophistication until 'carriages' – if you owned such a luxury – at midnight.

The trick was to get the last waltz with someone you fancied so that you had a number of options: ask them for a date; cadge a lift home if they had transport; take them home on the last bus which left promptly at 12:05am or persuade one of your older friends who had a car, but had been unsuccessful in 'pulling' to give you both a lift.

Although these options may appear comprehensive enough not to fail, many times Davies and I either caught the last bus, or walked home, alone and miserable, our dreams frustrated until the following Saturday.

In our last year at school, there was a musical revolution going on in Britain that just pre-dated rock'n roll – skiffle. It sounded like a cross between blues, hill-billy and country and western, usually with an exhilarating bass beat and memorable lyrics. Based on just three chords anyone could play it. DIY skiffle groups started up everywhere and Davies and I thought we'd give it a go. All we needed was for someone to learn the three chords and the lyrics to Lonnie Donnigan's songs (he was *the* skiffle supremo), someone who could play drums and washboard, and finally someone who could find a tea-chest, a broom-handle and some twine to make a bass.

Davies learnt the guitar, chords and lyrics, ‘Ginger’ Robinson, a football-playing friend of mine, already had a drum-set. I bought a tea chest from a local removal company for a shilling (five new pence) and together with my mother’s wash-board and an old broom handle I found in the cupboard at home, my investment in the group was minimal.

We practised in Davies’s garage for ages and became, we thought, very proficient. Davies had a good voice and could belt out many numbers before becoming hoarse. Some of the most popular hits at the time were; *My Ole’ Man’s a Dustman* and, *Does Your Chewing Gum Lose its Flavour on the Bed-post Overnight*, so it wasn’t exactly a challenging repertoire.

We called ourselves the *Jailbirds* for no particular reason I can remember, and I painted the tea-chest dark blue with the name written in bright red with paint ‘borrowed’ from Dad’s shed. We touted the local pubs with the offer of playing for free – “Just supply us with beer for the evening” was our negotiating strategy. We were taken on by the *Camp* pub less than a mile from where we lived.

Just as well, because although I thought I was smart in not having the expense of a guitar or drum set, the logistics of getting my beautified tea-chest to the pub was a nightmare. I eventually got Dad to make a wooden trailer which I attached to my bike. We had great fun and the pub nights went really well although I still have the scars on the index finger of my left hand caused by ‘twanging’ the twine on my bass for hours on end.

Music was never a big deal at school, so this was my first meaningful experience of playing an instrument, albeit an improvised one. The school was so disinterested that Colin Bluntstone, a friend and schoolmate a year below me, who’d set up a group whilst still at school, was famously told by Bradshaw, the headmaster, “I don’t know why

you're messing around with this rubbish music, Bluntstone, it's a complete waste of time!"

Colin's group, formed with another friend, Rod Argent, became the 'Zombies', who went on to have massive number one hits in both the UK and US charts and made a great deal of money. Colin was also a useful wing three-quarter and he and I played together for the Old Boys for a season just before his breakthrough. He was a good-looking lad and so he gave up rugby to protect his features for his audience of screaming female fans!

Our night-life had to be financed, beer was ten old pence a pint (about four new pence in today's money) and a shilling (five new pence) for the good stuff! I tried newspaper rounds but I was hopeless at getting up in the mornings, still am. I eventually got a part-time job as a delivery boy for the local corner shop grocer. I worked for two hours straight after school on three afternoons a week and, if I wasn't in detention, I worked on Saturday mornings too, all for the munificent sum of two shillings an hour.

The tools of my trade were an aged black bike with a huge metal basket in the front and a slightly smaller one at the rear, a pair of cycle clips and a faded brown coat with the name, *Brookers* prominent on the breast pocket.

Mr Brooker, proud proprietor of *Brookers – Purveyors of Excellent Foodstuffs*, was a strict disciplinarian and proud of looking after his customers. He always wore an immaculate white coat, rather like a consultant physician, and spoke to his customers as if he were one.

Once loaded up with cardboard boxes overflowing with provisions front and rear and a list of the addresses, I'd be on my way; easier said than done. Balancing an aerodynamically-challenged bike and trying to get up enough speed to defy the laws of gravity was like trying to steer a lump of jelly across an ice-rink!

On many occasions I failed to master this feat, especially on corners or where I failed to detect that the camber of the road had changed. The bike would veer over on its side with the resultant smashing of eggs and breaking of biscuits! I'd carry on if the damage wasn't too bad and explain what had happened to the customer who'd call Mr Brooker and demand a replacement of the broken bits. On return to base, I'd incur his wrath and he'd send me out with a replacement order without payment for the extra time involved.

Amazingly, although this happened a number of times, this wasn't the cause of my getting the sack; it was pure greed and my sweet tooth. I finally mastered steering the loaded bike and so became confident enough to inspect the contents of the basket in front of me as I rode. Biscuits were sold loosely and by the pound. They were placed in white or brown paper bags which were twisted at each of the top corners and, due to their propensity to break or crumble, were always placed on top of the cardboard box. I'd gingerly untwist the corners and open the packet as if handling an unexploded bomb to see what was on offer.

Usually they were custard creams or digestives, fatally, both my favourites. Surely the customer wouldn't miss *one*, would they? *One* was consumed and the corners of the packet carefully re-twisted. Had I stopped there, I might have got away with it, but I simply couldn't resist repeating the process, sometimes three or four times. This biscuit larceny lasted about two weeks before customers began accusing the unimpeachable Mr Brooker of selling under-weight produce and his response was to set a trap that I, blissfully un-suspecting, fell into.

He meticulously weighed the biscuits and had one of his assistants witness the event, before sending me out on the round. He'd asked a couple of his customers to weigh the bags when they received them and to report any discrepancy. The *only* possibility remaining was that the biscuits had been consumed en route.

Confronted with this overwhelming evidence, I sheepishly confessed. I received a ferocious telling-off and told that my employment was terminated. I reluctantly handed back my faded brown coat and cycle clips and accepted that my time working for *Brookers - Purveyors of Excellent Foodstuffs* was over.

Within a few days I got another job working for *Spendwise*, a fruit and vegetable retailer. Mr Spendwise – nobody knew his real name – I suspect he adopted it for commercial reasons – was a kind man, who, despite leaving home at 3.30 am every morning to buy his produce from Covent Garden, was invariably chirpy.

I upset him once though, and he never let me forget it. My job was to ensure that the large containers in the shop were constantly topped up with potatoes, Brussels sprouts, beans and cooked beetroot from the large sacks of produce in the shed at the rear of the premises. My hours were similar to *Brookers* except that Saturday mornings were compulsory. This had a positive effect on me since I simply couldn't afford to get detentions – my financial priorities wouldn't allow it.

When I arrived, my first duty was to inspect the containers. Invariably, the cooked beetroot was always low so my first job was to fill up a decrepit boiler in the back yard, empty a sack of raw beets into it and light up. Usually, it took about twenty minutes for the beets to cook and a further ten minutes before they were cool enough to be drained and put into a basket for transportation to the shop. Whilst the beets were cooking, I hauled sacks of spuds and greens from the back yard, and filled up the containers in the shop.

One Saturday morning when the shop was particularly busy, I totally forgot about the beets! It's a wonder the boiler didn't explode. An acrid smell pervaded the premises; it resembled an especially pungent compost. The water had boiled away completely, the beets were the size of tennis balls and were as hard as stone. No sales of cooked beetroot

were made that day and the usually kind Mr Spendwise showed the other side of his nature. He gave me a second chance though for which I was especially grateful because my mum was a regular shopper there!

Three months short of my seventeenth birthday, I wanted to get a full-time job but had absolutely no idea what to do. This was despite attempts by D A Hopkins, my English teacher, to persuade me to stay on and consider University.

Dad came to the rescue. “Accountancy’s the thing, mark my words. You never see a poor accountant do you?”

“But Dad, I haven’t even got Maths O’ level”.

“No, but you’re good with figures. And you’re persistent. It’ll take you at least five years to qualify and you won’t earn much, but after that, you’re on your way and the sky’s the limit. Do it, son!”

I took his advice, which was the best decision I ever made. It set me up for a fantastic career in business. He was more aware of my strengths and weaknesses than I was!

I studied the job ads and discovered that Marconi Instruments Ltd., a large employer about a mile from where I lived, were offering commercial apprenticeships to anyone with four O’ levels and a good reference from your school. I’d qualified on the first requirement but what about the second?

I still have a copy of the most awful, cringe-worthy letter I wrote to my headmaster, Ron Bradshaw, imploring, or more accurately, begging for a favourable reference so that I could be meaningfully employed. He must have responded well, since I was asked to attend an interview with the Personnel Director, Jeremy J Bliss.

I’ve never been subjected to a more rigorous, comprehensive interview before or since than that personally conducted by ‘JJ’ as I discovered he was known internally. It was like an oral GCE examination and lasted the best part of the day. I thought I’d already

cleared the two conditions mentioned in the advertisement, so I was totally unprepared for the test but within a few days I received an Offer of Employment.

‘JJ’ planned for me to spend two years in the Sales Administration department before moving to the Cost Control department for the remaining three years of the five-year Apprenticeship. I’d be allowed Day-release for the entire period and study for the Ordinary National Certificate in Business Studies and then the Higher Diploma, which gave valuable exemptions for the Institute of Cost and Works Accountants’ examinations.

The pay would be two pounds and ten shillings for the first year rising to three pounds and ten shillings for the next year, and then pay would be subject to a general review. The start date was Monday September 7th 1959.

I couldn’t have possibly predicted the effect joining Marconi’s would have on the rest of my life.

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