

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Burchill on Beckham

Julie Burchill

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About the Author

Julie Burchill has written for the Guardian and *The Times* and is the author of a number of novels and non-fiction books including *Sugar Rush*, which was made into an Emmy-winning TV series.

For Stuart Walton

Burchill on Beckham

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Prologue

Who Do You Think You Are?

A WISE MAN once said that satire died the day Henry Kissinger received the Nobel Peace Prize. But for me, satire finally pegged it on that spring day in 2001 when it was announced that Coutts & Co, the royal bank, were to open a special department to court the boy kings of football. Even before it opened for business, some 60 players had signed up.

What space odyssey had led us to these strange days, in this parallel universe, where the Queen's bank danced attendance on young men it would previously not have employed as doormen? At first it seemed like some sort of sarky joke, like that annual day at the major public school when the masters wait on the pupils, and call them 'Sir' in horrible oily drawls. But the royal bank meant business; a spokesperson said, 'There was a time when footballers were known for wasting all their money and ending their careers bankrupt. But all that is in the past; they are much more sensible now . . . There's been a huge influx of money to the game over the last eight years and there's never been a better time for them to manage their money properly . . . They only have about twelve years in their career at the top and we have to ensure they make the most of that.'

All this sounded fine - New Britain, New Money, breaking down the fusty old barriers of privilege, all that jazz - until one remembered that Coutts itself had recently been the subject of much loose talk. It was alleged that such stellar

clients as Andrew Lloyd Webber and Phil Collins had closed their accounts and taken their pennies home in a huff. Fancy - finishing up the stuff left on the side of the plate by characters as irretrievably naff as Phil Collins and Andrew Lloyd Webber! Was this really, then, the New Breed of switched-on, stylish footballer who would take the Beautiful Game for ever out of the sweaty slipstreams of naffness and into the deep blue depths of Cool? Or was the account at Coutts just the latest in a long line of footie follies like mock-Tudor houses, plastic Alice bands worn on the pitch, 'opening a boutique, Brian' and sleeping with Page 3 girls who had higher IQs than you?

The weird, sad thing about English football is that only when players were paid pocket money did they seem like real men; the minute they got a man's wage, they became Lads; then, when they achieved a king's ransom, they became little boys. Many of us were mildly surprised when we discovered that one of David Beckham's hobbies was tracing and copying cartoon drawings such as *The Lion King* - which he would send to his fiancée Victoria Adams as love tokens - but we soon got used to the idea, and probably thought 'Ah, isn't that sweet.' The same with the revelation, made to Michael Parkinson on his television chat show, that he first worked out Victoria fancied him 'when she bought me a big bunny, and I think that was the first time I realised she liked me a little bit.'

But we weren't really shocked, as we would have been if we'd learned this about Stanley Matthews. By this time, we knew that the heartbreakingly named George Best had for three decades been so addicted to the bottomless bottle that he would apparently rather die than stop suckling at its toxic teat, and that Tony Adams had regularly been so out of control on drink that he wet himself. We took to the idea of sportsmen as the new rock stars - drunken, drugged, destructive towards both themselves and their sexy blonde companions - with surprising equanimity. It came as a real

relief to find out that tracing lions and taking receipt of large stuffed rabbits was as bad as it got with the boy Beckham.

Somehow, it made sense; there was a sort of folk memory which understood that once sportsmen stopped playing for the love of the game, things would go horribly wrong. For sport is basically playing, as children play; if this side of a human being is overly concentrated on, obviously everything else will be neglected. By being paid so little, Matthews and his contemporaries somehow brought dignity to the state of being a sportsman; that is, being able to run fast, kick a ball and generally skive off all the boring, soul-grinding, backbreaking jobs that other working-class men had to do. But obviously once huge amounts of money were awarded to adult men for not growing up, they were going to regress even further; it was the pure logic of the playpen.

Once we had Busby's Babes, and we were proud of them; from the Nineties onwards we had Britain's Amazing Footballing Babies, and we hung our heads in shame. They might be physically incontinent, like Adams, or simply emotionally and morally incontinent like Paul Gascoigne and Stan Collymore, but the end result is the same; generally, our footballers are a greater source of shame than pride to us, and have been for many years. And it is hard to believe that the vile behaviour of English players off the pitch is not reflected in the notoriously violent behaviour of England fans abroad, and vice versa; that overpaid players and underclass supporters alike are intent on playing out some sort of *danse macabre* amid the ruins of brute masculinity, determined to take as many as they can down with them. It is very hard, seeing footage of rioting England fans in the cities of mainland Europe, not to remember the last time large numbers of young English men were over there: to liberate Europe from Fascism. At the risk of sounding like a *Daily Mail* editorial - what went wrong?

David Beckham bears a great burden on his beautiful shoulders. While being the most perfectly childlike of