



DAVE HICKSON  
THE CANNONBALL KID

# The Cannonball Kid

Published by deCoubertin Books Ltd in 2014.  
deCoubertin Books, 145-157 St John Street, London, EC1V 4PY  
[www.decoubertin.co.uk](http://www.decoubertin.co.uk)

ISBN: 978-1-909245-22-8

A fully illustrated version of this book with statistical appendixes is available as a hardback - ISBN 978-1-909245-07-5. The limitations of eBook format prevented many of the photographs and documents included in that edition to be utilised in eBook format.

Copyright © James Corbett and Dave Hickson 2014

The rights of James Corbett and Dave Hickson to be identified as co-authors of this work have been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be left liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Designed in Liverpool  
eBook cover design by Paine Profitt

James Corbett would like to thank: George Gibson, Kate Highfield, Daniel Lewis, Leslie Priestly, Steve Welsh, Zoran Lucic, Paine Profitt, Thomas Regan, Harry and Philip Ross, Pat Labone, Bill Kenwright, Mark Rowan, Richard Kenyon, David France, Alan Myers, Neville and Emma Southall, Derek Mountfield, Thomas Regan, Howard Kendall, Bob Latchford, Dave Cockram, Wyn Williams, Don Roberts, Arthur Parker, Maria Parker, Steve and David Corley, Tony McNamara, John Sutherland, Jimmy Harris, Tom Gardner, Billy Butler, Claire Minter, Kevin Lewis, Mark Platt, Derek Temple, Gerry Moore, Billy Smith, Ivor Scholes, Derek Mayers, Alec Farrall, Ian Allen.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by the way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the author's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it was published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Every effort has been made to contact copyright holders for photographs used in this book. If we have overlooked you in any way, please get in touch so that we can rectify this in future editions.

DAVE HICKSON

The  
Cannonball Kid

*with*

James Corbett

# Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Foreword](#)

[The Cannonball Kid](#)

[Everton In The 1950s](#)

[Memories](#)

[Fan Memories](#)

[Plate Section](#)

# INTRODUCTION

**by James Corbett**

*This story begins not with the Cannonball Kid, but another hero - mine.*

Charles Mills, or Didi as he was known by my family, was my grandfather, my inspiration, my best friend. He was a great man and a great Evertonian; the finest I ever knew. He never played or worked for the club, nor really came into close contact with its playing staff or management. But for around 80 years he attended Goodison and bred a family of Evertonians. He witnessed every Everton number nine from Dixie Dean to James Beattie ('Beattie' was a word he would utter with a mixture of bemusement and horror late in his life) and the club, together with the Catholic Church and his family, was a central tenet of his life.

Every football-supporting family has its Charlie Mills somewhere in its sprawling tree. Football, I learned soon after falling in love with the game as a child in the mid-1980s, is not just about what happens on the pitch. It is about tradition, shared experience, community, history. My grandfather offered a link between an Everton past that went back to the club's virgin days in the nineteenth century when his own grandfather, an Irish immigrant from Tipperary, watched the first generation of royal blue heroes and my own son's generation in the twenty-first century, where footballers are global icons and multimillionaires.

Evenings at Didi's home in Crosby before a roaring fire, a glass of single malt to hand, would be spent recounting times gone by at Goodison. He attended his first

game in April 1928, weeks before Dixie Dean plundered his historic 60th goal of the season. He witnessed some part of seven of Everton's nine league titles, was at three of their five FA Cup victories - the last with me, when he was aged 70, dancing down the steps of Wembley Stadium - and by my reckoning attended at least 1,500 Everton matches. He saw every Everton great, from Dean and Ted Sagar to Tim Cahill and Mikel Arteta. He saw and experienced so much, not just in football, but in life. But it wasn't at Wembley, or Goodison or Old Trafford or Villa Park, that he encountered some of his greatest moments as an Evertonian. It was high up on the windswept moors of East Lancashire.

Let me take you back. It is a spring night in Oldham. It is April 1953. Everton are not in a cup final, or on the brink of a league title, but ensconced in the Second Division, a dark place where they have resided for the past three seasons.

Fourteen years earlier it had been so different. Then they had won the league title with a team that included Tommy Lawton, Ted Sagar, Joe Mercer and the incomparable T.G. Jones, a man my grandfather claimed was the best player he saw in 80 years watching Everton. That team seemed set to dominate a generation. But three games into the 1939/40 season war had come and changed everything. For seven years there was no league football. My grandfather, aged 15 in 1939, came back - via Somaliland, Malaya, Egypt, Palestine and all places in between with the RAF - a man; his beloved champions returned as a diminished force.

Poor management imposed calamity on his fallen heroes. Mediocrity and then disaster followed. In the real world there was austerity, rationing, smog. The late 1940s and early 1950s were hard times in more ways than one. Then in 1951 Everton were relegated for only the second time in their history.



Just as everything seemed lost, so there came hope. Five games into life in the Second Division an outrageously brave centre forward was introduced from the reserves. With his distinctive quiff and the looks of a Boy's Own hero, he captivated Goodison with his swashbuckling play. He was fearless, at times playing like a human battering ram. He gave people belief where there was none. His name was Dave Hickson.

He was, recounted my grandfather in a brief memoir he wrote of his years as an Evertonian, 'inspiring, fearless - never a Dixie or a Lawton, but what a successor! The games he finished with his head covered with blood were numerous. It was just what the team needed - inspiration.'

Dave dragged a mediocre Everton team by the scruff of its neck and by April 1954 had pulled them back to the brink of where they belonged - the First Division.

Everton travelled to Oldham on the last day of the season needing a win to secure promotion. If they scored six goals they were Second Division Champions. My grandfather recalled:

In a hired charabanc with all my mates we arrived at the ground. The gates were shut and thousands were outside. The stewards were shouting, 'Sorry lads. The ground is overcrowded already.'

For the first 'and only' time we joined the mob. The gates crumbled and we all entered in one mad rush, just in time to see our first goal. Another three came before half-time. Mission accomplished.

The next 'plan' after the game was to find a pub. Late April, it was still light, but with about 55,000 Scousers well and hell bent with the same objective it seemed hopeless. Outside one pub, with about 100 trying for

admission, the manager came out. 'No more in, lads, but I can fix you up in the back garden. Any trouble now and you're out.' We tipped our coach driver who, after our 'natural agreement', led us to the garden and kept his promise of drinking lemonade. That was until about 3am when he managed to get us out with the help of the proprietor.

It then dawned on me that 3am was the time that I started work - in Liverpool. Nemesis threatened.

I was put down in Queen Square (our then premises) to be met by my Dad - then my boss. His first words were 'You're late' (*It was only 3.15am*) and 'You've been drinking again.' (*Is the Pope a Catholic?*)

One of his fellow directors came to my aid: 'Come on Charlie - it's only a one off.'

'It had better be - otherwise he's out,' came the reply.

It had been, he recalled as he poured another whisky in his front room half a century later, 'probably one of the greatest nights of my life'.

To my grandfather Dixie Dean may have been incomparable, Tommy Lawton his hero, Roy Vernon and Alex Young eulogised. But Dave Hickson represented something different: he restored pride in hard times and offered hope when there was none. To a young man making his way in a difficult post-war world, it meant more than anything else.



Dave graced the Everton colours for 243 games, scoring 111 goals. He is sixth among Everton's all-time leading

goalscorers. He never won anything, he never really came close to international recognition – a feat harder in an era of heroic centre forwards than it is today. He played for all three Merseyside clubs. He performed numerous heroic acts on the pitch. But the extraordinary thing about Dave Hickson was not really his feats on a football field, it was his effect on other people. People loved him, even those too young to see him play. He was idolised by a generation of fans. Everywhere he went, he was recognised, loved.

Speaking at his funeral Bill Kenwright recounted, ‘I have a big photo of him in my office and I say, “That was the man who for a lot of kids like me – post-war kids in Liverpool, frightened, a bit shy, timid – looking for a hero, we found one in Dave Hickson.”’

Even during his career, those watching him recognised that he was making history. His most famous game came on Valentine’s Day 1953, when in an FA Cup fifth round tie in front of Goodison’s second highest ever crowd, he returned to the field with a gaping head wound to score the winning goal for Second Division Everton against the League Champions, Manchester United.

On the following Monday the Liverpool Echo correspondent – foretelling my own experiences, and probably those of a generation of Evertonians – wrote in the style of a grandfather recounting a story:

I never in all my life seen a player wi’ so much guts as young Davie showed. Wi’ the blood streaming down ’is face ’e got stuck into ’is job like as if ’is very life depended on it. Twice the referee suggested ’e should go off for attention but Dave waved ’im aside just like a teetotaller refusing a drink.

Well, I’ll grant ’em Liddell were a great player, but that day our Davie were as much a match-winner as Liddell at ’is best.

That game against United is always called 'ickson's match.

What was Dave like? It was difficult to reconcile the rabble-rouser and hard man of contemporary reports with the sweet old man that no one would say a bad word about. Even during his career, football reporters would reflect on this contradiction inherent in Hickson.

'For a quiet, self-effacing man like Hickson to cause such controversy among fans on Merseyside is one of the most inexplicable things about him,' were the prescient words of the Liverpool Echo's Michael Charters in 1959. 'Whatever Hickson did on the field he never went out from the dressing room other than determined to play the game and nothing but the game, but his enthusiasm for the cause and the idolising effect of his many fans often made for trouble.'

Certainly he had a petulant side on the pitch that was out of keeping with his modest demeanour off it. Footage of Tranmere Rovers' 1963 FA Cup tie with Chelsea shows him like a proto-Duncan Ferguson or Luis Suárez, grappling and punching an opponent at one point, arguing with the referee at another and attracting the condemnation of the commentator. 'I just wanted to win,' Dave would say. 'I was just determined to do everything I could for my team.'

He felt victimised by referees, both during and after his career. In days when footballers were supposed to show deference to all in authority, particularly referees, there was a lingering stigma to his disciplinary record. One story has Hickson sat in a compartment of a train at Lime Street at the height of his fame when a guard's whistle blew. Dave popped his head out of the windows and enquired, 'What have I done now, ref?' Such was his sense of humour I can imagine the tale having some basis in fact.

He was approaching the end of his life in the period I spent most time with him, and I last saw him around a

month before his death. I always found him funny, self-deprecating, generous. Everybody knew him. Everybody loved him. He was obsessed with football. He loved Everton. He loved the Everton chairman Bill Kenwright like a son, and considered his family as an extension of his own. He took enormous pride in the ambassadorial role he had held with Everton for nearly two decades. Even though he was frail and not in the best of health, he was insistent that he would fulfil his match-day duties.

He dearly missed his second wife, Pat, who had passed away in November 2010. Following her death Everton filled an increasingly large personal void in his life. At times he would get very emotional about both of them. He lived his life from Everton match to Everton match, and would draw comparisons between the hard-working teams of David Moyes and those in which he had played himself. I asked him who in modern football he most resembled as a player and he replied, 'Victor Anichebe,' the oft-maligned journeyman forward who scored 18 times for Everton between 2005 and 2013. In a late-1990s interview with the author Becky Tallentire, he had answered 'Dion Dublin'.

Like the Moyes era, the Everton teams of the 1950s always fell just short. Dave was convinced 2013 was going to be the year Everton again lifted the FA Cup. Looking back now, it would have been a fitting send-off for the Cannonball Kid, but they couldn't manage it. Dave was devastated by their quarter-final defeat to Wigan in March 2013.

We would usually meet in the Nags Head pub in the Cheshire village of Willaston, where he then lived in sheltered accommodation across the road. He would sup halves of Guinness and order off-menu, insisting that he was only served child-sized portions. 'Make sure they bring lots of ketchup,' he would say. 'I love ketchup!'

We would talk for two or three hours, always about football, but - despite being there under the premise of working on his autobiography - not just about him. He was

rarely critical about a colleague or opponent. Although his memory was sometimes hazy, his knowledge of the game was huge. Sometimes he would come out with a detail or an incident that had happened 60 years previously. As a journalist it is your duty to be sceptical, to question, to check. Sometimes I couldn't believe things that I was hearing, but I would look it up later and invariably Dave would be right about a long-forgotten moment or incident or player.

At the same time he had an official history of himself - centred around the 1953 FA Cup run, promotion the following year, and his status as a number nine icon - that he liked to recount and refer to. He joked about his still magnificent blond quiff, and would describe the technique of rubbing soap and Vaseline into his hair to hold it in place. Although 50 years older than me, he possessed around 50 times the amount of hair, so such information was largely lost on myself.

As his biographer, transcending this official version of his life was sometimes tricky. There were parts - such as his messy departure from Liverpool, after he fell out with Bill Shankly - that he wouldn't discuss, or would just gloss over. I sensed at times that he felt slightly ashamed of his poor disciplinary record, but he would never exactly say so. He probably came closest to the truth about this in a 1955 interview when he said he did not attempt to 'justify' his disciplinary record, 'but would like to say in partial extenuation that everything I have done has arisen solely out of my desire for the success and well-being of the club that has employed me'.

He came from an era before footballers' non-footballing lives were of public interest, and although he was always happy to talk about his second wife, Pat, he was insistent that the rest of his family were not discussed in this book.

His sense of humour could be wicked. With dark irony he would joke about completing the book 'before they carry me away in a box'. Sometimes he would make a play on being a befuddled old man when really he knew exactly what was going on. On one occasion he had been asked by a friend of a friend to obtain a large Everton flag that could be wrapped around the coffin of a young Evertonian who had recently passed away. The chairman of a nearby supporters club was summoned and they reviewed a selection of Everton banners for the task. These had been made up for away games, and were large enough for a coffin - larger than those available in the club shop, anyway - but many boasted completely inappropriate slogans.

'What about that one?' said Dave, innocently pointing to a flag emblazoned with 'Kopites are Gobshites'.

'I don't think the Reverend would like that, Dave.'

'Suppose not,' he said. 'What about that one?'

There was an impish glint in his eye as he pointed at a banner bearing the Everton crest and the legend 'We will never have your shame'.

'Dave, the last thing this poor lad's family are going to see are the words "We will never have your shame" as he's lowered into the ground.'

'Suppose so,' he said, a roguish grin betraying the fact that he was merely winding us all up.

The Everton flag he eventually settled upon bore the dictum of his old teammate and friend Brian Labone: 'One Evertonian is worth twenty Liverpoolians'. Whether, as a former Liverpool player, he consciously believed that motto is another matter. Dave was always very respectful towards his former club, something that was reciprocated by the Red fraternity.

What is clear is that from the moment he first pulled on a red shirt in 1959, many Liverpool fans not only dismissed their concerns about signing an Everton icon, but seemed entirely enraptured by him. On his debut against

Aston Villa, 11,000 more spectators turned up to see Liverpool that day than had done so in the league all season, although many had also crossed from Goodison to see their idol. As the Liverpool Echo correspondent noted, 'One rabid Liverpudlian, disgusted at having two Anfield doors closed in his face on Saturday, told me; "It's coming to something when a Liverpudlian can't get into Anfield for so-and-so Evertonians ..."'

At the time Hickson described his Liverpool debut as 'one of the most wonderful days of my life'. He scored twice that day and was hailed as the 'Red Dean', sentiments that were probably enhanced by his magnificent scoring record during the remainder of the 1959/60 season: 21 goals from 27 appearances, the most prolific spell of his career. In so doing he became one of the very few to transcend the great Mersey football divide.

His career at Anfield ended disappointingly in May 1961. Bill Shankly and Dave Hickson, red and blue icons, was never a match made in heaven. They were too strong willed, too stubborn, too unyielding. Twice Shankly had managed him and twice Hickson had not been his signing. At Huddersfield in 1957, Dave was desperate for a move back to Goodison and the parsimonious Everton board, knowing this, had consciously squeezed every last penny they could from the Terriers' asking price. Shankly would not have been impressed by this humiliation.

In 1961 Liverpool had narrowly missed out on promotion to the top flight, the poor run of form that cost them promotion coinciding with a period in which Dave had been dropped by his manager. Despite asking for a transfer, he returned to the team as the season petered out to its disappointing conclusion. Liverpool wanted £10,000 for him, a fee beyond most clubs in the lower leagues - the stage where Dave was now expected to play - and so the Cannonball Kid announced he was quitting football, to go into business with Liverpool's young winger Kevin Lewis. It



seems as if the announcement was somehow a ruse to secure Hickson a free transfer (Lewis told me while I was writing this book that he had no idea how his name was brought into the dispute) with Dave immediately signing for Cambridge City.

Dave did not speak of this, but he would recall with pride his return to Merseyside and league football with Tranmere Rovers via Bury in 1962. In so doing he became only the second player, after the 1920s goalkeeper Frank Mitchell, to play for all three Merseyside clubs. (A third, John Heydon, did not make a senior Everton appearance, while Kevin Sheedy played for Everton and Liverpool and coached Tranmere.) He enjoyed a decent 18 months at Prenton Park, before embarking on a brief managerial adventure with Ballymena and Ellesmere Port Town.

In the mid-1960s he entered civilian life, working as a rat catcher for Ellesmere Port Council. He still considered himself a footballer, even as an old man. I once asked him how he old he was when he finally stopped playing, meaning as a professional. 'Seventy-seven,' he replied, without missing a beat, 'and that was only because I had my heart attack.' Even after last pulling on his boots, he lived every game in his head.

His team, 'The Over the Hill Mob', were well known for partaking in charity matches across Merseyside, and it was as a veteran that he finally played at Wembley, turning out in pre-match encounters before Everton's run of 1980s FA Cup finals. During the summer he played tennis and cricket until in his seventies.

Although he lived his life through football, like a lot of old players in civvie street, he said he did not venture back to Goodison very often. That changed in 1994 when he retired from his job on the council and two days later took a call from Bill Kenwright with the offer of an ambassadorial job at Everton. 'How would you like to come back, son?'

were the words that Dave recounted again and again, with pride and wonder.

Thus began the final chapter of his life, as an official icon; a living, breathing part of Everton history, who prowled the corridors and anterooms of Goodison day in, day out for the rest of his days. With Pat he worked energetically for charities, notably the Lily Centre and the Everton Former Players Foundation, who - in accordance with Dave's wishes - will receive the royalties from this book. In 2011 his contribution to these causes saw him made a Citizen of Honour of the City of Liverpool.

So often old heroes are shunted aside, forgotten about or, worse, exploited. Not Dave. Everton treated him like the legend that he was and he repaid that with the same commitment he had shown while a player during the 1950s. Everybody connected with the club recognised that. Everybody knew him, everybody loved him.



My reasons for collaborating with Dave on this book are personal, slightly sentimental even. They're born not from my grandfather's memories of him, nor any great desire to write another Everton book. Instead it started with an encounter between my grandfather and Dave in late 2006. Aged 82, Didi was stooped and increasingly frail by then, a little forgetful at times. He had given up on going to Goodison - though never on Everton - a year earlier, when the club moved his season ticket reserved seat to make way for corporate seating. He was finding the crowds a struggle by that stage and the spectre of another flight of stairs to watch James Beattie was too much.

Losing that part of his routine left a great void in his life that we tried to fill in other ways. One December morning I and two of my brothers took him to Goodison Park

for a behind-the-scenes tour. We were the only visitors that sunny winter's day. Our host? Bequiffed, immaculate, endearing - you've guessed it.

For two hours, far more than our allotted time, Dave showed us every nook and corner of the Old Lady. He was patient and kind with my grandfather, helping him on the stairs. Afterwards we sat and drank coffee with him and he listened patiently to the recollections of an old man. We talked about that day for months afterwards. It made our year.

I like to think that Dave saw that my grandfather was a little lost, that he needed a hero's touch, but I probably realise now he was a little like that with everybody.

I saw Dave every now and then after that day, and always thanked him for his time. We discussed doing a book on one occasion, but it came to nothing.

Then in October 2012, I was with him at a dinner at Goodison Park. Dave was nearly 82 by then, the same age as my grandfather when he was shown around Goodison. Dave was increasingly frail and Pat had passed away a couple of years earlier. My grandfather had also died two months before. I too was a little lost without him.

'How's about we do that book?' he asked.

I'm so very glad that he asked. His subsequent company and friendship over the last months of his own life helped me through a difficult period and eased my own sadness. I was born 40 years too late to ever see him play, but I too finally got the chance to revel in the aura of a football great.

What follows is not a conventional autobiography. Work on it was seven months down the line when Dave passed away in July 2013. Many of the interviews needed to complete an autobiography had been finished, but some of the finer details, the verification, the approval for aspects of his story, were still to be undertaken. I have had to leave some parts out because some questions were carried to the