



A MATTER OF OPINION

ALAN HANSEN

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

As Alan Hansen knows only too well, football is a game of opinions. During his long, distinguished career as a player he faced intense criticism from the media which undermined his confidence and often threatened to overwhelm him. But now the boot is on the other foot. Uniquely placed to offer an informed opinion of the players, managers and teams who dominate the game today, Hansen has become one of football's most outspoken and popular pundits - a man respected by both professionals and public alike.

In his revealing autobiography, Alan Hansen looks back on the triumphs and the tragedies that marked his incredible career. As we follow his story - from his modest beginnings at Partick Thistle, to his years of glory at Anfield as captain of the phenomenally successful Liverpool team - we learn of the legends who inspired him, the pressures and fears he endured, and the stories behind many memorable matches. Here, too, Hansen focuses on the dark days of Heysel and Hillsborough, reflecting on the impact these tragic incidents had on his life and on the future of the game.

A Matter of Opinion offers a unique insight into the world of football, past and present, and into the life of one of the most respected British footballers of all time. Frank and forthright, it is as uncompromising as the man himself.

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A
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ALAN HANSEN
with Jason Tomas

To Janet, Adam and Lucy

1 So You Think You Know Me ...?

There are two sides to every story. Mine starts with a centre-forward by the name of Billy Whitehurst.

He played for Oxford United in the 1980s and he was no more than a run-of-the-mill striker compared to a lot of men I played against during my 14 years with Liverpool. But Whitehurst, a Yorkshireman who also had spells with Hull City, Newcastle, Sunderland and Sheffield United, was exceptionally strong - he was six feet tall and weighed more than thirteen stone - and he knew how to exploit this. Indeed, because of his power in the air, aggression and courage, he was one of the opposing strikers who frightened me most - and I do mean 'frightened'.

When the fixtures were published before the season, I would usually look at who Liverpool were playing in the first and last matches, and the dates for our matches against Everton and Manchester United, our major northern rivals. When Whitehurst was with Oxford there was only one fixture I was looking for!

I became particularly neurotic about him when we played at Oxford on Boxing Day 1987. We had beaten Oxford 6-0 at Anfield, and it seemed certain that he would not play in the return game because of a facial injury. I couldn't believe it when I saw his name on their team-sheet before the kick-off, and when the teams came out, I was horrified to see the stitches in his face augmented by what appeared to be staples. You didn't need to be a genius to appreciate that Whitehurst might have felt he had some scores to settle. So, this was one occasion when my penchant for settling on the ball went out of the window. Every time I got it, a voice in my brain screamed, 'Get rid

of it!' When Whitehurst was in the general area of the ball, it shrieked, 'Don't go near him!'

With Liverpool having established a 2-0 lead, Whitehurst seemed to be getting more and more agitated, which was not good news for anyone in a red shirt, let alone the people with the responsibility for picking him up. However, I thought I'd seen the back of him fifteen minutes from the end when, following a collision with a Liverpool player, he went down with a head injury. It caused his wound to open - there was blood everywhere - and the physio who had come on to attend to him said: 'Sorry, Billy, it looks as if we are going to have to take you off.'

Whitehurst just looked up at him and snarled, 'Take me off, and I'll break your ***** neck.'

Without doubt that was among the longest fifteen-minute spells I have ever had on a football field.

Yet no-one would have expected a player with my record to lose sleep over a centre-forward like Whitehurst. My career at Anfield, from April 1977 to February 1991, spanned the period when Liverpool were the best team in Britain if not Europe. In those fourteen years, there was only one season when Liverpool finished lower than second in the table, and only two seasons in which we failed to land a trophy. Despite being hampered by knee problems, I made 621 appearances and ended up with 17 major club honours to my name. Almost everything we touched seemed to turn to gold - especially in 1984, when we achieved the treble of Championship, European Cup and League Cup, and in 1986 when we achieved the Championship-FA Cup double, with me as captain.

Liverpool's trophy-capturing record in the other seasons I was there was: 1977/78; European Cup. 1978/79; Championship. 1979/80; Championship. 1980/81; League Cup and European Cup. 1981/82; Championship and League Cup. 1982/83; Championship and League Cup.

1987/88; Championship. 1988/89; FA Cup. 1989/90; Championship.

I gained three European Cup-winners' medals, and the only player ever to match my total of eight Championship medals was my Liverpool colleague Phil Neal.

But I *always* had panic attacks against men like Billy Whitehurst because they had the qualities I knew I lacked. My skill might have been greater but they were fearless. It makes me laugh when people talk about how confident I seemed on a football field because the reality is quite different. I suffered badly from pre-match nerves, and found it increasingly difficult to cope with the pressures of playing for a club like Liverpool. I have never been assertive. All my life I have been so scared of failure it isn't true. I've inhabited a world of negatives! 'Conservative' is my middle name.

I could never imagine living anywhere else during the first 22 years of my life in the old Scottish mining village of Sauchie, near Alloa. Even when Liverpool signed me, I found it a tremendous wrench to leave. Now I would have the same feeling if I had to terminate my 22-year residency in Southport.

I must have been one of the easiest players the Liverpool board ever had to deal with. Nobody can say I struck a hard bargain in my contractual negotiations - I accepted what was offered and I never seriously considered going anywhere else. It worked out well for me, through the honours I achieved, and the fact that when I retired Liverpool treated me exceptionally well. However, if anyone were to suggest that I lacked ambition, I would have to say that they had a point.

In my TV career, I could have branched out in a number of ways with programmes people have thought potentially exciting opportunities for me, but my temperament has made it difficult for me to take them up. In my first season of *Match of the Day*, it was suggested I might eventually

take over from Des Lynam as presenter. 'I don't think I will,' I said. 'I'll never have the confidence.' As a lad in Sauchie, I found it difficult to have conversations with people I didn't know really well. I even crossed the road to avoid having to talk to someone walking towards me. It was not that I disliked the person, just that I didn't know what to say.

This shyness has also been apparent throughout my adult life. At Liverpool, I hardly opened my mouth for the first six months. Of course, I was no shrinking violet after that but even then I dreaded the thought of having a change of room-mate for away trips. The problem of mixing with players I didn't know was even more acute when I was in the Scotland squad, and a number of people interpreted this as aloofness. That I have become more outgoing has been down to the influence of my wife, Janet, a more communicative and expansive person than I could ever be.

My relative success in TV has probably come as less of a surprise to her than it has to me because she would be among the first to confirm that I have always been opinionated. Though I was never comfortable with airing my thoughts publicly, I was the opposite when surrounded by my family, close friends and colleagues. With them, I have never been afraid to express strong views. It is something I inherited from my father, John - the most opinionated person I have ever come across outside football!

My father, now 72, was also a central defender and played in amateur football in Scotland. Like me, he can argue about the game until the cows come home. It makes for a lot of fun - if that's the right word - when we're together. I've tried to mellow as I've got older. Whenever I become involved in a conversation about football, I give myself a little warning about the need to keep my cool and take on board what the other person has to say - but before long I find myself trying to force my opinion down people's

throats. I can get quite het up at times. This is obviously a big plus for my employers at the BBC - being prepared to say what you think and occasionally crossing swords with people like Des Lynam and other pundits is 'good television', as they say. But the irony of my *Match of the Day* role in analysing the performances of teams and players - and particularly my views on where they might have shot themselves in the feet - is that *I* never took criticism at all well when I was a player!

I hesitate to use the word 'paranoia', but when it came to football pundits putting me under the microscope, I was nothing if not hypersensitive. This is not unusual among successful footballers. Generally, the more accomplished a player becomes, the more touchy he is likely to be about people finding fault with him. In my case, even a comment that might have been deemed totally innocuous by most people would touch a raw nerve. And my photographic memory has proved a mixed blessing: while I can vividly remember all the great moments that came my way, equally clear in my mind are the times when it was suggested I had erred.

It is indicative of the extent to which players care about what is said and written about them - and especially my own need to be given plenty of recognition - that I still wonder if I was given as much credit for my ability as I deserved!

Among the experiences that caused me to feel like that was the general reaction - or lack of it - to my performance in Liverpool's 1-1 draw at Manchester United in the 1984/85 season. It was the last season in which I was able to get forward whenever I wished, before my knee problems forced me to curtail this aspect of my game - and it was one of my best seasons for Liverpool. I played as well in that match at Old Trafford as I've ever played. After the match the Liverpool chairman, John Smith, came into the dressing room. While he was there, with Joe Fagan and the

coach, Roy Evans, Joe turned to me and said, 'Alan, that was the finest performance I have ever seen from a Liverpool defender, and I have seen a few.'

I went home elated, told Janet what Joe had said, and we couldn't wait to get the newspapers the following day to see what they had made of my performance. We bought them all, and not one mentioned it. My central-defensive partner, Mark Lawrenson, attracted a lot of praise, and I could hardly begrudge him that because he was a fantastic player and we had combined well together. But I had played out of my skin too. The Monday papers didn't mention it either. I thought, Well, that's newspaper pundits for you. It sums up how little they really understand what goes on during a match.

When I got to Anfield, I bumped into Roy Evans in the treatment room, and he said, 'I bet you got every paper, didn't you?'

'Too right I did,' I said, 'and I won't be getting them again!'

Although I produced the best form of my career that season - Joe Fagan described it as 'awesome' - I did not win the Professional Footballers' Association or Football Writers' Association Footballer of the Year award, which went to Everton's Peter Reid and Neville Southall respectively. Not only that but another Everton player, Kevin Ratcliffe, pipped me for a place in the all-star First Division team of the year - the only time I failed to get the necessary votes for inclusion in the side. I even got into it in 1982/83, my worst Liverpool season.

I would be fibbing if I said I don't regret never getting my hands on one of those Footballer of the Year awards, but I do feel that such awards can be misleading: they usually go to players in the teams who get the most media coverage. In those days, there was nowhere near as much football on TV as there is now, so opinions about a player were often shaped by what people read.

Kevin Ratcliffe was a tremendous player, and in that 1984/85 season Everton - having spent years in Liverpool's shadow - won the Championship and European Cup-winners Cup double. We didn't win anything, but I still found it difficult to accept that Kevin had performed better than me. Obviously, I wouldn't have dreamed of saying so publicly, but at the risk of being considered a bad loser, I have to concede now that I thought it.

It was the same when I came runner-up in the Football Writers' Association Player of the Year poll, in 1986 and 1990. The 1989/90 season - my last - was very special for me. To be captain of another Liverpool Championship-winning team was a massive end-of-career bonus, given that I was 35 and had been out of action the previous season for nine months due to injury. I felt I had an exceptional season.

However, it was another Liverpool player, John Barnes, who won the FWA's Player of the Year award, even though he had played better in previous seasons than he did in 1989/90. I just felt - and still do - that many of the southern reporters who had voted for him based their view largely on what they had seen of Liverpool in their away matches, on grounds where my ability to involve myself creatively in the play - the most impressive aspect of my game - was inevitably less pronounced.

Football is a game of opinions, and as I have got older and have been able to take a more detached view of my career, my opinions about myself have tended to change. In some ways my self-esteem has increased. When I was playing for Liverpool, I knew I was good, but I never thought I was the best. It was only when I stopped playing and compared myself with other central defenders in Britain that I started to see myself in a different light. I wish I had rated myself more highly during my career because, leaving aside the obvious dangers of putting

oneself too much on a pedestal, I think that that confidence would have made me an even better player.

Even now, though, my appraisal of myself can tend to be quite negative. Although I have tapes of all the big televised matches I played in, I have never sat down and watched more than a handful of them: I hate the way I look when I run. While I was often described as 'elegant' when I was running with the ball, I always felt that when I didn't have it my running style was the exact opposite. I am not too keen on the way I speak either. When I started on *Match of the Day* Clive Tyldesley advised me, 'You should tape the programme, and study your performance every week.' But every time I did it, I cringed. As I said to Clive, 'If I watched myself every week, I might never do the programme again!'

2 'Do I Not Like That'

If Alan Hansen the television pundit had observed Alan Hansen the Liverpool player, he would have drawn your attention to the following faults.

For a start I couldn't tackle. That might seem an exaggeration, but it wasn't too far off the mark if you compared this aspect of my game with that of other defenders. When it came to winning the ball in a direct challenge with someone, I wasn't even in the top half of the table - and if I had to get my body into a position to block the ball, I was even lower. Moreover, despite my height (I'm six foot two), I was no more than average in the air, especially when I faced a strong physical challenge. Indeed, in terms of my general approach to the game, my level of determination and aggression left a lot to be desired.

I often joke about my deficiencies. For example, when people ask why I was not as good in the air as they might have expected from someone of my height, I begin by recounting how I was badly concussed once while attempting to make a headed clearance in a testimonial match at Shrewsbury. The floodlights there were not the best and I accidentally made contact with the mud-covered ball with the back of my head instead of my forehead. What a state I was in. I was dazed for four or five days, which ultimately made me think about what it must have been like for players who were heading in the days when the balls were heavier. It also made me think of what some medical experts have to say about the dangers of heading - so to those who argue that I wasn't dominating enough in the air, my tongue-in-cheek defence is, 'I'm told that you lose 150 brain cells every time you head the ball so I tried to avoid it.'

While I talk a lot on television about the importance of qualities such as character and the will-to-win, I don't think I epitomized these attributes when I started at Liverpool. Even at the end of my career there, when I had become conditioned to the determination that has been central to the club's success, I don't think you could put me in the same class as my inspiring former Liverpool colleague Tommy Smith. I was once talking to Roy Evans about this, and I said to him, 'I never had a big heart.'

He didn't see it that way: 'Well, I think you did because you've had bad knees for as long as I can remember, and look how many games you played.'

Still, while accepting that there are more ways than one in which a player can show such characteristics, I never had any illusions about myself. Suffice it to say that the old motto 'When the going gets tough, the tough get going' is inclined to make me feel slightly embarrassed. Whenever I hear that, I think back to a bitterly cold night in Turin in 1984, when Liverpool, then the European Cup holders, were beaten 2-0 by Juventus, the European Cup-winners Cup holders, in the European Supercup final. Six inches of snow had fallen on the city when we arrived the night before, and parts of the pitch were frozen solid when I went out for my pre-match warm-up. After a couple of minutes, I'd had enough, so I returned to the dressing room and sat in the corner, shivering.

'You're going to love this match, aren't you?' joked Joe Fagan, the manager.

'Too right I am,' I said, playing along with the wind-up. 'This is the finest night of my life, this is.'

At that point, our right-back and captain Phil Neal came through the door. 'What a pitch - great!' he said. 'Some of those Italians won't fancy these conditions.'

Joe and his first-team coach, Ronnie Moran, just looked at me and smiled.

Nobody was more surprised than me when Kenny Dalglish, Joe Fagan's successor and a close personal friend, made me Liverpool captain the following season. Although I spent time with him socially, Kenny gave me no inkling of this: not once did he say, 'Do you fancy being captain?' or 'I'm going to make you captain.' He just sprang it on me, 10 minutes before we were due to take the field for a pre-season game at Brighton at the start of his reign as manager.

He turned to me and said, 'You take the ball,' and I said, 'I don't take the ball.' He thought it was a wind-up. 'You taking the mickey?' he asked. I explained that I never went out with a ball, and he said, 'I want you to go out with the ball as captain.'

If he had given me time to think about it, I might well have said I didn't want the job. In terms of my idea of what a captain should be like, I was never one. The true captains are those who, when you're a goal down, will try to lift the team even if they're having a bad time themselves. I was a great captain when we were 3-0 up and I was playing well. In that situation, what a leader I could be!

As far as my technical ability was concerned, my pace and anticipation, two of the key points of my game, were not always enough to enable me to do my job properly. I remember our League Cup final against Arsenal in 1987, when the Gunners equalized as a result of my failure to deal with two crosses from Viv Anderson. With his first cross, the ball went through my legs as I ran towards him in an attempt to block it; I failed to block the ball a second time as it came back to him and he set up Charlie Nicholas for the finishing touch.

There were other central defenders who would have dealt with the situation more aggressively - and effectively - than I did. I am convinced Arsenal would not have scored that goal if Colin Hendry had been in my shoes because he was tremendous at getting in the way of crosses and shots.

As it turned out, Nicholas went on to score again to give the Gunners a 2-1 victory.

Another challenge I remember - or would prefer to forget - came in a match at Watford, when I gave chase to a player who had burst through from the halfway line and gained about six yards on me. I knew I had the pace to catch up with him before he could manoeuvre himself into a shooting position. Instead, though, I attempted a sliding tackle, missed the ball and he went on to stick it in the net. In my defence, it was a period when I was having a bad time at Liverpool, and I had lost a lot of confidence. However, Bob Paisley gave me the most stinging rebuke I have had from any manager when he told me, 'That was a coward's tackle.'

It was quite rare for me to be on my backside. Defensively, my game was all about jockeying people, and nicking the ball from them rather than steaming into them. I felt I always had to keep on my feet. It became something of an in-joke in the Liverpool dressing room. After a match, the cleanest things among the pile of players' kit in the middle of the dressing room tended to be mine. Someone would pick up a spotless pair of shorts and say, 'These must be Al's.'

In view of this, there are no prizes for guessing that I was never sent off, and hardly ever booked - most managers would say that this is a ridiculous record for a central defender. Also, while a lot of centre-halves have almost as many facial scars as Henry Cooper, I am virtually blemish free. I do have one prominent scar on the forehead just above the bridge of my nose: it didn't come from any bruising encounter with a centre-forward but a collision with a plate-glass panel at the entrance to a youth club in Stirling when I was 17. I was late for a volleyball match, and as I was running into the club, the light made it virtually impossible to see the glass. I smashed straight into

it, and ended up needing 32 stitches in my head and a similar number for gashes in my left leg.

At the hospital shortly after the accident, a doctor spent something like two and a half hours trying to stop the bleeding. At one point, he went off for a coffee, and I got up to have a look at myself. I fainted. It was when they got me back on to the bed that I saw my brother John. He was a great help. His first words to me were 'Brain of Britain!'

I sued the local authority for damages, and received only £700. That was down to my honesty in saying yes when the Edinburgh specialist who examined me was sticking needles in me and asking whether I felt anything. I should have got more than £700, especially as the scar on my forehead becomes embarrassingly noticeable in harsh weather conditions.

I was careful to avoid similar physical damage at the hands of opponents on a football field. I was not a weakling - I had enough strength to get my body between an opponent and the ball and hold him off - but when it came to the really bruising bodily contact, my attitude to whoever I was playing against was 'You don't touch me, and I won't touch you.'

There were some players you could not intimidate even if you had wanted to do so. Rumbustious forwards like Joe Jordan at Leeds and Manchester United, Gary Thompson and Cyrille Regis at West Bromwich Albion (and, of course, Billy Whitehurst!) were so strong and single-minded they seemed to run straight through you. I have often thought I should have waved goodbye to such strikers and gone to play in a country in which the game was less physical than it was in England. However, I think I would have suffered from stress wherever I played.

Even in my present *Match of the Day* role, I get very tense sometimes. Janet says to me, 'Try to relax.' But I say, 'How? If I knew the secret to that, I wouldn't have suffered so much when I was a player.'

The stress of playing for Liverpool was immense. I loved being with the rest of the players for training sessions during the week, and I loved playing. Yet the build-up to matches – and especially the period of 45 minutes or so before the kick-off – were purgatory. The amazing thing was that when I stepped out of the dressing-room tunnel, all the anxiety evaporated. I thought, Where's it gone? It was bizarre. I wish I could have felt like that in the dressing room. I hid it well – the only real giveaway was the number of visits I made to the toilet. But when I was sitting in the dressing room, people would look at me and think I didn't have a care in the world. Billy Joel was one of my favourite singers, and I would be sitting humming one of his songs and reading a newspaper. But inside I was a bag of nerves, and the older I got, the worse I was affected. The high expectations of the club and the fans wore me down. By the time I was ready as a player to call it a day, I felt like a nervous wreck.

Managers have become increasingly switched on to this in recent years. Take Glenn Hoddle, and his decision to bring his faith-healer friend, Eileen Drewery, into the England set-up in the belief that her counselling skills could help to make his players more relaxed and confident, as well as improve their physical well-being. Hoddle was lambasted by the media over this policy and, indeed, it contributed to his eventual downfall. I felt that, providing Hoddle did not force his players to seek Ms Drewery's assistance or make them feel that they needed to do so to be favoured by him, there was nothing wrong with it. If players decided they might benefit from a consultation with her, I would have been the last person to knock the idea. When I was a player, the vast majority of us were sceptical of such outsiders. I remember being told about the assistance Tottenham tried to give their team through the noted sports psychologists John Syer and Chris Connelly. Just before they were due to take the field, players were

apparently told, 'I want you to put all your doubts and fears into a box, lock it and throw away the key.' It was perhaps typical of the puerile mentality of professional footballers then that the idea was dismissed with derision among those with whom I discussed it.

However, I now appreciate why more and more current players are taking the 'mental' side of the game more seriously nowadays - it would certainly have been an advantage to me to have done so. All players suffer some degree of anxiety, and I can understand how some attempt to escape the pressures by turning to drink, gambling or drugs - or, like Paul Merson, all three. One of the problems is that because they are at work for just two or three hours each weekday, they have plenty of time to dwell on their troubles. Outside Liverpool FC, I was able to immerse myself in my family life. Each day it was a bonus for me to be at home when my children - Adam and Lucy - returned from school. I cherished seeing so much of them when they were growing up.

Yet the accumulative effect of those football pressures got to me. I was not only 'gone' physically (because of the wear and tear on my knees) but mentally. I think I knew I'd had enough of professional football during the summer break before my last season, when I started drinking more alcohol. I was alarmed to discover that instead of drinking my usual pot of tea at lunchtime I was having a couple of pints of lager. Most people would not think twice about something like that, but I felt that for someone like me, a creature of habit who thought nothing of having a few drinks on two or three nights of the week but never during the day, the change was significant.

I feel awkward using the word 'pressure' in relation to playing professional football. As a lot of people will point out, 'How can you be under pressure when you're being paid for enjoying yourself? A guy who is unemployed and has three kids - he's the one under pressure.' I can see

that, obviously. But, because of the expectations, being with a club of Liverpool's stature was never an easy ride. To claim that players shouldn't allow this to affect them is a bit like saying that players should never fail to score in a penalty shoot-out.

Liverpool were used to winning trophies. They were elated when they had them in their hands but, at the same time, they were always conscious of the need to keep the players' feet on the ground. The first Championship I won with Liverpool was the 1978/79 title, when we scored 85 goals and conceded 16, and we lost only four matches. It was a fantastic record, but the manner in which it was celebrated was understated. You needed to have played in at least 13 matches to qualify for a Championship medal. When the title was clinched, and we were drinking champagne in the dressing room, Ronnie Moran came in holding a box. 'Right,' he said. 'Who's played thirteen games?' He delved into his box, took out the medals and tossed one to each player who put his hand up, as if he was just handing out sweets.

I just expected a greater measure of pomp and ceremony than there was. Liverpool's message to the players seemed to be, There's no point getting carried away - it's your job to win trophies.

One of the Liverpool dressing-room sayings then - and I use it a lot on TV - was, 'First is first, and second's nowhere.' In other words, winning was everything. This was instilled into everybody at the club, and if you didn't have that attitude, you were quickly out of the door. That's where the pressure came in. You knew that your run of success was bound to end some time. You knew you couldn't go on for ever. I carried the additional burden of knowing that I was far from my best physically because of the wear and tear of playing in so many matches, which explains why, when the curtain came down on my playing career, I was not interested in becoming a football-club

manager. I'd had enough of the pressurized existence that revolved around a Saturday football result.

I was never offered the Liverpool job, although everybody assumed that I would be. What happened was that when Kenny resigned, the local radio station announced that I was 6-4 on favourite to succeed him. Before long, people seemed to look upon it as a *fait accompli*. Even my family were arguing about whether I should accept the post. My father and brother felt I should - they were repeatedly on the phone urging me to have a crack at it - while Janet just said, 'You do what you think is right for you.'

I went to see Tom Saunders, the Liverpool chief scout, who was looked upon as something of a guru at Anfield because of his knowledge of every aspect of the club, and asked, 'Am I in the frame for this job?'

He confirmed that I was, and I said, 'Well, will you go and tell them [the Liverpool directors] that I don't want it?' He said it would be better if I told them myself, so I had a meeting with Peter Robinson, the most prominent member of the board, and told him exactly what I had told Tom. He said, 'Fair enough,' and it was left at that.

There is still an element of disappointment in my family over the decision, not least from my two children. Adam and Lucy are both Liverpool fans - especially Lucy who, like thousands of other teenage girls, is an avid Michael Owen fan. But I knew what I was doing. I knew that Liverpool could not dominate the game for ever, and it suited me to quit while I was ahead. When people ask if I 'bottled' it, I say, 'Too right I did.' I had seen what football management can do to people.

It is an incredibly tough job and even the calmest, most philosophical of men can be badly affected by the stress. When Arsene Wenger became manager of Arsenal, my colleagues at the BBC all remarked that he seemed different from a lot of British managers. He was university-

educated, articulate and, above all, the epitome of calm. Nothing seemed to fluster him. However, when you saw him in the dug-out eighteen months down the line, you got a different picture of him. There was one match when I thought, The tension's got to him - he's gone.

Des Lynam summed it up when he observed, 'Well, he's got the British bug, hasn't he?'

The effects can be frightening. Perhaps the most salient example is Brian Clough, whose life in recent years has been beset by drink and health problems. Even when he appeared to be in peak condition, you could argue that he would have been well advised to stay clear of any manager's post. He did some strange things at times, as I found while I was walking down the players' tunnel at the City ground, for the half-time break in Liverpool's European Cup first-leg tie against Nottingham Forest in 1978. Cloughie, immediately behind me, tried to needle me by prodding the back of my leg. He did it two or three times, and each time I just turned around and glared at him. Neither of us said a word.

All of which leads me to suggest that if you're still sane after ten or twenty years in the job you've done well. So many things can go wrong - so many things that are out of your control - which would never appeal to me. Basically, I wanted to keep my hair relatively black. Also I had a lot of friends in that Liverpool dressing room and I'm not sure that I'd have been able to separate myself from them as their boss.

You have to be ruthless to be a manager. In his autobiography, Graeme Souness put it this way: 'I have come to the conclusion that nice men do not make good managers.'

Kenny Dalglish once told me, 'When you have to make a hard decision, one that is going to upset someone you like and respect, it makes it easier if you think that your family's well-being is depending on it.' It was great advice,

but whether I could ever have applied it in managing a football club is another matter.

As a player, I was generally able to push aside my worries when I stepped through the front door of my home, but I think it becomes more difficult when you're a manager. I also think that Kenny, and a lot of other managers, is obsessed with the game in a way that I could never be. When I did my 1997 BBC television documentary about managers and their way of life - *The Sack Race* - it struck me that even when we were off camera all the managers I interviewed just wanted to talk about football.

Kenny's knowledge of teams and players is remarkable, which is not surprising considering the number of matches he watches. He has the most sophisticated of satellite TV systems at home, and he hardly misses a televised match in the world. He eats, drinks and sleeps football. One reminder of his insatiable appetite for it came when he was Newcastle's manager, and I stayed at his house in the North-east after accompanying him to Glasgow to watch the Celtic-Liverpool Uefa Cup tie in September 1997.

It was about 1 a.m. when we got back, and all I wanted was a quick cup of tea and then to go to bed. Kenny, though, switched on the TV, and clicked through the channels to find a game - any game - to watch. The more channels he flicked through without finding one, the more determined he became.

I learned a lot from my involvement in *The Sack Race*. In addition to Graeme Souness and Kenny, the other managers I interviewed and spent some time with included Jack Charlton and Bobby Robson - vastly experienced as club managers and as managers of the Irish Republic and England national teams, respectively - and Barry Fry, one at the 'have-nots' end of the scale. My overall impression of the lives they have led in the job was that they must be little short of masochists to do it.

Managers tend to be as competitive as they were as players and the buzz they get from competing is like an addictive drug. It is a dangerous buzz for managers because, unlike the players, their influence on performances and results is limited. I wasn't 'hooked' because I looked upon football as a job of work and distanced myself from the more extreme aspects of its competitiveness. But Bobby Robson needed his 'fix' of football, and football management. You would have thought that he had experienced more than enough stress in one lifetime as manager of the England team, a post which is fast becoming almost impossible to handle because of the criticism - not to mention personal abuse - from the tabloid media when things are not going well.

Bobby, like his successors, Graham Taylor and Glenn Hoddle, was put under enormous pressure and the strain showed. There were times when he appeared on the verge of breaking point. But after his spells as a coach abroad with Porto and Eindhoven Bobby jumped back into the high-pressure pot as manager of Barcelona - one of the biggest clubs in the world - at the age of 60! The stress level at Barcelona was no lower than it had been when he was in the England job. The Catalan club, renowned for making life difficult for its managers through its internal politics, were not doing as well as had been expected and there were numerous reports that Bobby would be sacked or moved into a different role. When I met him in his Barcelona office for *The Sack Race*, the thing that struck me most about him was how edgy he seemed. As we were discussing the questions I intended asking him, he got players' names wrong - which is characteristic of Bobby when he is stressed. Then, as he was about to pour the coffee, he knocked over the pot and the cups. I thought, He's a bag of nerves - we're never going to get any good material out of him.

As it happens, we did. The longer I spent with him the more relaxed he became. Finally, I asked him why such a battle-fatigued man as himself was managing Barcelona. Bobby smiled and more or less confirmed that he found the excitement impossible to resist. He made it all sound like a test of his courage. Referring to his decision to move to Barcelona, he told me, 'When I'm seventy-five, at least I'll be able to look back and say that I didn't "bottle" it.'

Little wonder that Bobby was even happy to become Newcastle's manager this season.

It is a similar story with Graeme Souness, who was in charge at Southampton when he appeared in my documentary. In his previous job as manager of Liverpool, Graeme had undergone a triple heart bypass operation, then suffered a relapse as a result of an infection caused by his attempting to exercise back to fitness too quickly. I visited him in hospital at that time and was stunned by how bad he looked. When I returned home, I said to Janet, 'There's no way he's going to go back into football,' which only goes to show the difference between Graeme and me in our attitudes to the game. I told Graeme he must be crazy to subject himself to the 'drug' of football management again, after what he had been through, and he didn't disagree.

I'm sure that he will have remembered our former Scotland team manager, Jock Stein, who collapsed and died of a heart attack at 62, at the end of the vital 1986 World Cup qualifying tie against Wales at Ninian Park, Cardiff, in September 1985. Neither Graeme nor I was in the squad for that incredibly tense match (a 1-1 draw that put Scotland into a play-off for a place in the Mexico finals with Australia) but it was no secret that Stein hadn't been in good health for some time. Doubts as to whether he could cope with the strain of football management had dated back some 10 years, to the day he almost lost his life in a head-on car crash. On top of this, it was common

knowledge that he had heart problems. On the day of the Wales game, there had been much comment at the squad's base in Bristol that he looked unusually pale. In an interview Stein gave a week or two before his death, he was asked whether he had contemplated retirement. He replied that he could not imagine what he would do without the excitement of being involved in football: 'For me, there's no life after football,' he said. 'No life at all.'

When I pointed out to Graeme that the excitement of football management might eventually kill him, his reply was similarly poignant: 'But I need it.'

Barry Fry is another present-day manager with a history of heart trouble. We filmed him in the dug-out during a match, but to appreciate fully the extent of his emotional involvement in the game all you really needed to do was close your eyes and listen to the number of times he screamed and swore. I would place him right at the top of the expletives table with Peter Reid, who also turned the air a particularly deep shade of blue when he was featured in the TV documentary series about Sunderland's Premiership relegation plight a few seasons ago.

Not all managers lose control of themselves. Blackpool's Nigel Worthington is apparently one of the strong, silent types. However, when the local newspaper arranged for a doctor to assess his inner turmoil during a match against Preston - through a pulse monitor strapped to his wrist - the rise in his heart-rate whenever Preston scored was likened to that of 'someone suddenly confronted by a gunman while shopping in a supermarket'.

Even allowing for a degree of exaggeration in that opinion, my views on the manager's lot are best summed up by the immortal words of Graham Taylor: 'Do I not like that?'

I was very fortunate in that I was reasonably secure financially: unlike many other players, I was not forced to remain in the game for the money. As we have seen, several

become managers or coaches for the enjoyment they get from the game, but for others it is a question of Hobson's choice.

In recent years the number of managerial responsibilities has been reduced as clubs have got bigger and more multifaceted. They are not so much football clubs now as business empires, and a manager who in the old days would have run the whole show has become just the head of a department. With transfer negotiations and players' contracts handled by the chairman or chief executive, the manager is free to concentrate on the football side. However, I still don't think the post is attractive.

The financial gap between the haves and have-nots of English football, between the likes of Manchester United, Arsenal and Liverpool and the rest, has become wider than ever. There are perhaps no more than a dozen clubs in the whole of English football in which the manager has what I would consider a reasonable chance of success at the top level. It is said that managers have to learn their trade in the Nationwide League lower divisions, or in non-league football, but I think that any former top-class player prepared to do that must be off his head.

If you fail to make an impact as manager of a club with massive financial resources, at least you know you've failed because you're not good enough. For me, that's much more acceptable than failing because of a lack of money. The methods needed to achieve success with the clubs in the lower divisions are different, and if I were in that position, I would not know where to begin. Even in the Premiership, it seems to me that a number of managers are knocking their heads against a wall.

One who clearly enjoys management is Dave Bassett, whose ability to make bricks without straw has led to a number of unlikely success stories, the most notable of which was his feat in steering Wimbledon from the old

Fourth Division to the First in four seasons. As manager of Nottingham Forest, Bassett led the club to promotion to the Premiership in 1998, but had to cope with the loss of his top scorers – Pierre van Hooijdonk, who walked out, and Kevin Campbell, who was sold by the board (reportedly against Bassett's wishes and without his knowledge) while he was on holiday. Equally revealing about Bassett's struggle to ensure Forest's Premiership survival was that he had less money to spend in the transfer market than most of the other managers. However, none of this seemed to count for much in the eyes of his employers in January 1999 when, with Forest at the bottom of the table – which most people had anticipated before the start of the season – he was sacked.

As an effect of a club's current expectations, I found Bassett's fate frightening. He had built up an impressive CV in management, so I can never visualize him struggling to find another club. But what must it be like for the men who are just starting a managerial career? As Coventry's Gordon Strachan has said, 'The name of the game is building up the right amount of knowledge and expertise – it's all about survival. You just hope that your inexperience, and the mistakes you make as a consequence, will not rebound on you too heavily.'

Strachan rightly singled out the experience of my former Liverpool colleague Steve McMahon to illustrate the problems that confront managers in the cash-strapped lower echelons of professional football. Because of his playing background, Steve was looked upon as one of the most promising managers in the game when he joined Swindon in November 1994, the season after their relegation from the Premiership. But after four tough years there – in which Swindon dropped into the Second Division in 1995 before bouncing back to the First Division in 1996 – the strain seemed to have worn him down. Steve decided to leave Swindon, apparently because of the effect his job had