RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Wright Stuff

Rick Glanvill

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For Oliver.
Eye on the ball, son.

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‘The stone that the builder refused will always be the head cornerstone.’
Bob Marley

IN THE END, as in the beginning, there were tears. At the Cup Winners’ Cup Final in Paris on 10 May 1995, the final kick of a fruitless campaign, and perhaps the most unlikely and spectacular strike in the history of the tournament, shattered the belief system, the ‘foundation of hope’ manager George Graham had ground out at Arsenal in nearly nine years at the helm.

‘If you lose hope, or lose belief, you may as well get out of football’, he had proclaimed somewhere along the road to European Cup Winners’ glory the previous year. But by May 1995 Graham had already retreated from the game in a hail of FA bullets and ‘bung’ allegations.

That the projectile scoring a direct hit on his beloved Arsenal battleship should have been fired by the mercurial Moroccan Nayim – an ex-Tottenham staffer for chrissakes – supplied that ironic twist which history dictates must accompany the end of empire. Nayim’s bolt from the blue came down with snow on it to bury Graham’s old boys.

In Paris, the Highbury team’s fabled ‘mental qualities’ were largely absent. If they’d played to the usual pattern and sneaked a last minute goal as Zaragoza had, it would have been business as usual: ‘lucky old Arsenal!’ As it turned out, the Highbury smash-and-grab merchants were the ones who ended up haunting the pitch like bedraggled redcoats.

Some players sobbed. David Seaman, memory of whose heroism against Sampdoria in the semi-finals made his

complacent miscalculation of Nayim's effort all the more impossibly grotesque, was deserted by the old guard, left to stand alone for some minutes until Stephan Schwarz strode over to comfort him.

But for one among them it was second time around: Paris in the spring had broken Ian Wright's heart in successive seasons. The striker had never known tiredness like he felt now. It was overwhelming. Seconds before he'd felt capable of going on for hours. Suddenly, he felt like a machine switched off when running at full power.

In 1994's Cup Winners' Cup semi-final at Highbury, the French capital's finest, Paris Saint-Germain, had watched as Ian pointlessly executed an impetuous tackle in a meaningless position. His rash challenge was to lead to his suspension from the final against Parma in Copenhagen and the denial of a sensational climax to a three-year-old Arsenal career.

Now one year later in Paris, face coursing with tears, shirt tugged out, he was inconsolable. These people were thieves of time, his time. And time has always been Ian Wright's master.

Outside on the boulevards, Arsenal fans were dazed. Someone had torn up the bloody script. It was wrong; this wasn't the kind of thing that happened to Arsenal. Some supporters, silver lining-seekers, were pleased: 'Thank god, now we'll *have* to rebuild the team.' Mindful of Paul Merson's recent drug and drink confessions, one ran up to the coach carrying players' wives back to the airport. 'Oi!,' he yelled, banging balefully, crazily, on the steamed-up window, 'Oi! Mrs Merse! Mrs Merse! Get your 'usband back on that bloody stuff now!'

In the dressing room, the atmosphere was deathly. There was no champagne. Ian Wright wasn't going to shake the bottle out of a window and spray it on the Arsenal faithful like he had last season. Everybody felt for Dave Seaman, who was in tears. He takes things like that very hard. He'd

pulled off some brilliant saves and then blamed himself for the goal. Everybody was consoling him while at the same time trying to get over the fact that they'd lost. It was just very quiet.

While everybody was trying to bolster everybody else, Ian was particularly subdued. The coaching staff were coming round trying to get players' heads up. Everyone was gutted and Ian was the same. They couldn't believe they'd lost like that.

But Arsenal are professionals. For a moment they were down. But they had suffered big defeats before and risen again to regain their composure and hunger. Ironically, as a goalscorer, Ian even appreciated Nayim's finish. It was the sort of spontaneous effort he might have scored himself – the sort he had been scoring all his life in fact.

In truth though the great survivors had been choked. Arsenal is not a popular name beyond the environs of London N5 and the lips of their satellite supporters around the country. Plenty of English people watching the Zaragoza game, and the Reds' many enemies in the press, will have felt the Arsenal had finally had a taste of their own medicine. The Spanish had spiked the Gunners' guns.

What a season it had been – nothing like the usual Highbury version – with scandals, 'bungs', mid-table mediocrity . . . and Wrighty getting his lowest tally in the League since he joined. It was time for change and renewal. Let's have a team that plays football, came the cry from supporters sick of Tottenham getting all the media attention.

George Graham had constructed a side that was ruthlessly efficient, acquisitive of silverware and not always great to watch: the Steffi Graf of soccer. Traditionally, Arsenal are a high-profile club with a sniffy, aristocratic air. Even when they play well, they are rarely credited with excellence and they are frequently pilloried when there is the faintest whiff of disaster or scandal.

In recent years, Ian Wright has simultaneously challenged the image of ‘boring, boring Arsenal’ and suffered the worst slings and arrows of outrageous press coverage. He is a ‘Wright Nutter’ and ‘Public Enemy Number One’. And despite nurturing influence through his friends in the press, Ian doesn’t seem able to shake off that image. The player most likely to score a dazzling hat-trick is also the man most liable to aim a punch at your centre back.

‘When fans meet me in the flesh they know I’m not this person that I’m perceived to be,’ Ian has claimed. He feels he is misrepresented by the media, and it’s tempting to go along with that.

But, by his behaviour, he hasn’t always helped his own cause and he seems unwilling or unable to redress the balance by putting across his more attractive qualities: his warmth, loyalty, keen sense of humour and sensitivity. To football supporters outside Highbury, he’s simply the cocky brat who’s always in the press and into the bargain the guy most likely to sink your team.

His advisers, those who mould his media image as a tough guy, haven’t really helped either. The hatred of thousands of opposition fans is, in a weird sort of way, the ultimate mark of respect. But it’s not the sort of respect Ian wants. He wants to be liked.

In 1995, Ian has reached the stage in his career when most footballers mellow and display largesse. Players of his stature generally move into the public arena as commentators or chat show guests. Ian’s problem on that front is threefold. Firstly, he’s no Gary Lineker. Secondly, he’s still too ragamuffin for a *Match of the Day* presented by Desmond Lynam. And thirdly, Ian speaks his mind, no matter how controversial his opinions.

Ever since he can remember, Ian Wright’s been running. Running on the tarmac of south-east London, running away from inadequacy and privation, running past defenders. But

when you’re running so much you have to know when to stop, and that’s proved difficult for Ian on occasion.

There are some things Ian won’t run from, like injustice or his responsibilities as a father, as a family member and as a role model for the youth of his community. He won’t run from confrontation either.

His career has been a battle fought not on the playing fields of Eton, but on the less salubrious pitches of Eltham, Blackheath, Lewisham and Rotherhithe, and against a society that he often feels has been stacking the odds against him.

As a youth, he was rejected by numerous clubs, and so came late to a game that likes to groom and nurture the model professional from an early age. A self-made star, Ian might not be the model pro, but he is an icon to thousands.

In fact, there are few sights more bowel-loosening for opposition fans than that of the Arsenal striker galloping like an SAS corporal surging behind enemy lines, with their sedentary back four looking about as effective as the Maginot Line.

The fans and players look to the linesman: the flag stays down. Damn. Appeal anyway. One on one with their ’keeper. Ian waits. The goalie jerks . . . Ian shoots the other way. Dead. The net bulges. Ian runs to the corner flag. Brings a little Jamaican dancehall to proceedings, performs a victory ‘bogle’. Fires imaginary guns like a Mafiosi gangster, runs back and thrusts a taunting arm past the enemy’s fans.

Ian has two commodities rare in the English game: flair and audacity. But there’s a catch – Who Dares, Whines. The Wright stuff often does the wrong thing. Ian’s spitefulness is almost as celebrated as his unquestionable brilliance. He’s not alone in that: Denis Law, George Best, Stan Bowles . . . Maradona! All had their nasty alter egos. Why is Ian’s so celebrated?

Does the answer lie in the nature of the man himself, or English football’s reluctance to induct him into the Hall of

Fame?

Some say Ian hasn't done himself any favours in this department. But perhaps we won't allow him to. It's been a battle for Ian to get where he is and sometimes it's difficult to know when to lay down arms: it doesn't necessarily pay to appear defenceless in the face of a relentless onslaught.

Andy Massey, a white guy who grew up on the same Honor Oak estate in south London and played for Millwall Football Club, knows the score. 'When they see him on the box, people go, "Oh you flash black bastard!" And I go, "No, he ain't, he's just like one of us."

'That's how he is. He ain't acting. That's how he's always played football, and that's how he's always been.'

Ian is one of life's high achievers, but he has never ditched his principles. He has risen from estate guttersnipe to burnished idol of football fans around the country, blemished sporadically by a petulance born of the driving desire to make something of himself – not just some*thing*, in fact, but some*one*.

He has become public property, but much of his life remains intensely private, the subject of conjecture and rumour. It's fitting that one of his heroes is Michael Jackson. Like the world's favourite singer, Ian has never really grown up – he too cheats time. Ian has survived controversy with his dignity intact.

But this is not the traditional story of the poor black kid rising from the ghetto to find fame and glory. Ian Wright's family were badly off by any financial yardstick, but in other ways they were rich. Ian's mother Nesta Wright had true pride in her family and brought them up to be strong individuals. In Ian, she produced a man who places a premium on loyalty; whose life has been shaped by his powerful convictions; who is quick to let people into his heart and equally swift to eliminate them; who never forgets the dignity of humanity.

‘I draw my strength and desire from the fact I came into the game late. You want to show people, prove you are good enough. You have a lot of time to make up,’ Ian once said.

‘All the people who rejected me when I was younger must look at it and know they were wrong. That is the sort of thing that pumps you up when you start to do well.’

Perhaps that’s as much Ian’s problem as his strength: too much anger to work out; too many people putting him down; too much negativity.

Perhaps he simply wants success too much. A couple of years ago, the *Sunday Times* invited Ian amongst other celebrities to contribute a rap for a feature they were running. Ian’s was a rare *cri de coeur* that’s quite revealing:

I’m no saint, I’m no sinner
And everybody knows
When you got a reputation it’s hard to explode;
’Cos the media are watching
And everybody sees
If you’ve nothing good to say . . . just keep the peace.
I’m no angel, I’m no devil
But you can surely see
When I’m out beneath the lights, you get everything from me;
’Cos the better you can get
The more the pressure will increase.
If you’ve got nothing to say . . . just keep the peace.

The boy’s a rare British commodity. If you melted Ian Wright down, you’d be left with the essence of whatever it is that makes a winner. But we don’t like ‘winners’, do we? We like good losers.

And Ian has never been a good loser . . .

2 Roots Man

‘Dread he got a job to do and he’s got to fulfil that mission. To see his hurt would be their greatest ambition. But he will survive in this world of competition. Cos no matter what they do, Natty keep on coming through. And no matter what they say, tragedy deh everyday, Natty Dread rise again . . . Have no fear, have no sorrow . . . No matter what game they play, we’ve got something they can never take away. And it’s the fire, it’s the fire that’s burning down every day . . . No water can put out this fire.’

Bob Marley, ‘Ride Natty Ride’

IT’S A POPULAR banality in football that someone like Ian Wright has ‘come from nowhere’. Not only is the statement materially impossible, it is also an insult. Ian Wright’s family, especially his mother, would despise the notion that the Wright household amounted to nothing, provided no root.

In fact, Ian Wright’s home, his ‘yard’, and his family have provided him with a founding stability in a life that has had its share of upheaval. It ingrained in him principles of trust, respect and humanity that persist to this day if you look behind the contorted face of the back pages of the newspapers.

Ian may have travelled a long way from his south-east London council house to the billboards of the nation and the stadia of the world; but in some ways, he’s hardly moved an inch.

Not many people realise there’s a hospital in Woolwich, let alone a military hospital. But it was in the austere Victorian wards of the British Hospital, Samuel Street, where Nesta Jane Wright gave birth to a tiny, ‘bitty’ son she named Ian Edward. It was Sunday, 3 November 1963. Destiny can be cute. Ian was born so near to Woolwich Arsenal it almost seemed inevitable he would later play for the club called

after the area, even though it moved premises north of the river just before the First World War.

On 6 November 1963, Nesta's sister, who had arrived and settled in the same area of south-east London from Jamaica with her sibling, produced another boy, Patrick. The two youngsters grew up pretty much as twins – closer than cousins, less hostile than brothers – and even lived together in a large, bustling house on Manor Avenue in Forest Hill.

It probably never crossed the minds of the two proud mothers that the fruits of their wombs would, between them, eventually have Saturday night television stitched up: Ian Wright gracing the pastures on *Match of the Day* and Patrick Robinson providing the amiable bedside manner as Martin 'Ash' Ashford in the popular BBC soap, *Casualty*.

Patrick suddenly veered towards a Charles Atlas physique in his teens, whereas Ian's bantam-weight build meant that the nickname he acquired on the estate as a tot – 'Little Ian' – still stuck years later.

Ian was the third addition to a family that would eventually number four children. Nesta already had two sons when he was born, and a sister for them all, Dionne Marie, was to follow in the summer of 1969. Ian's father, Herbert 'Buster' McLean, a maintenance electrician in a local cable factory (and also father of Ian's brother Morris, born 16 April 1962), wasn't around long enough to be the kind of dominant father figure that Ian responded to (and sometimes found) over the next three decades of his life. Morris would have to do, and he was just a year and a half Ian's senior.

Typically for the sort of Caribbean family that migrated to the UK in answer to the call from the 'Mother Country' – invited by poster campaigns throughout the Caribbean to help overcome the labour shortage in booming Britain – the Wright family structure was overwhelmingly matriarchal. Nesta, an assertive, ebullient and strict mother, imbued a

strong sense of self-worth and ethics in her offspring that was to instruct Ian in later life.

Buster McLean and she had knocked around together for a couple of years before Ian was born; this was in the days when Nesta first arrived from the Caribbean and settled in Forest Hill, near the South Circular Road, and her boyfriend lived in Lewisham.

Something of a playboy with his dashing good looks, Buster found the matriarchal set-up in her Honor Oak home stifling. Nesta's dexterity as a mother provided ample excuse for him to move on to pastures new. Moreover, she was so loving and protective towards the children, Ian in particular (and perhaps dismissive of his father's usefulness) that Buster drifted away leaving Nesta to cope.

Anyway, he'd done his bit – and perhaps more than Nesta and Ian realised. Back home in East Kingston, Jamaica, the McLeans are well known for their footballing prowess. Three cousins of Buster McLean – Alvin, Bunny and Lloyd – have graced the national team there, which is traditionally regarded as exhibiting almost as much individual skill as the Brazilians while lacking the rigid team coherence that might catapult them on to the world stage.

In the late forties and fifties in the Caribbean, the McLean family enjoyed a similar reputation to the one south London's flying Wallace brothers (members of whom played for Southampton, Manchester United and Leeds in the eighties and nineties) do here. The fact that their adeptness with a football has been passed on to Ian Wright should be a source of pride to the Jamaican game.

The line continues: Ian's children, Bradley and Shaun, are showing inordinate promise for their age. Shaun attends the Tottenham Hotspur School of Excellence (at last his bitter north London rivals may have cause to appreciate Ian Wright's talents) and plays for the youngest team at 10-Em-Bee – his father's old side. At fourteen, his signature is courted by Nottingham Forest amongst others.

Now retired after his fortieth English winter, Buster still lives just round the corner from the Honor Oak estate, though all the Wright family except Ian's children – his grandchildren – have moved away. A framed photograph of Ian, dressed in his Virgin-sponsored Crystal Palace kit, takes pride of place on his mantelpiece amongst pictures of his five other children. Scattered around the walls is evidence of a hobby at which he's quite proficient, oil painting.

At 65, lighter-skinned and an inch or two taller than his famous son, Buster has the same wiry physique, eyes and shape of face, same raffish charm, same amiable nature. He's a dapper dresser too; he says he has to keep up appearances for when people see 'Ian Wright's dad' walking past.

Buster saw Ian regularly in the early days; even after he and Nesta were finished, Ian would visit him in Birmingham where he went to live when Ian was a toddler until he was four years old.

After his return to the area, Buster couldn't avoid bumping into all the people he knew in the tight-knit community of Honor Oak. These days, he rarely if ever sees his son, and life as an electrician hasn't always been easy, but Ian's success is clearly a source of moist-eyed pride for him. He recalls with huge affection the livewire kid romping round the tenements with a ball and a smirk.

In fact, the notorious Brockley estate has unearthed a few gems over the years. Around Ian's time, Steven Anthrobus, who carved a career for himself as a pro footballer at Fulham and elsewhere, was a star player on the hard-contested Turnham concrete. David Rocastle, three years Wright's junior, leapfrogged his friend to make it at Arsenal some years before Ian and was part of a large family well-known to the residents – Rocastle's older brother Stephen showed considerable promise until he suffered a serious illness and his uncle Sam was also an important figure in the local football leagues.

But the Honor Oak estate has an otherwise mundane history. It rose from the ruins of the pre-war slum clearances. Residents arrived from Rotherhithe, Deptford and elsewhere, installed by Lewisham Council from 1936 onwards. Many were the families of dockers.

Sydenham-born Syd Pigden, a robust, avuncular septuagenarian, who taught and coached Ian Wright during the many years he organised sport in the borough, describes what he saw when he first arrived at Turnham School, which nestles on the fringes of the estate: ‘It was literally a deprived area. People used to keep coal in the bath – they’d never had one before. To these people it was affluent; it’s not if you go there now. Many of the fathers were casual dockers.

‘With the advent of the dock labour scheme, most moved away. Younger families came in who had relatives on the estate. There were lots of big families. The Richardsons related to the Cheesemans, the Cheesemans to the Sanders and so on. There were cousins galore. But life was very poor.’

Prime Minister MacMillan arrived in the fifties and announced that people had never had it so good, and so, fleetingly, it seemed. But even as they enjoyed the rare adventure of full employment, the estate dwellers had to improvise to enhance their quality of life. Such experiences invariably centred around the estate: focal point for fun, scrapes and skirmishes.

Turnham Road curves round to encircle the estate. Running between the tenement blocks was another road and in the fifties Pigden and the other teachers used to stage the annual sports day there. Skittles were set up with a sign saying ‘Closed for the day’. Kids sat on verges and railings while their peers charged or jumped around.

‘If they fell over in the road,’ recalls Syd Pigden chirpily, ‘the mums never used to worry, they’d just dust them off . . . not sue the school. It was a community and it was

fun. It was nothing for a parent to say a kid was going to hospital and ask if she could have a shilling for the fare. You knew people, they knew you. None of this hostility there is now.'

In the late-fifties, Afro-Caribbean families began arriving in the area. The virulence of antagonism towards migrants of the time is well-documented, but it is worth restating in the context of that small pocket of Lewisham where Ian Wright was to grow up.

Like most immigrants, Caribbean arrivals tended to cluster together in their new country. This enabled them to reproduce the atmosphere, the food, language and culture from back home, and allowed for more solidarity whenever the 'host' population got shirty. In an alien society, it also provided the basis for a strong sense of community.

The newcomers were confronted with signs explaining properties were available for rent except to 'Dogs, Irish or Coloureds'. Lacking the financial clout to buy their own places until the communities later established partnership funding schemes, the black migrants gravitated towards the tenement housing no one else wanted. British racial discrimination was never more rife than in the late fifties and early sixties and, in particular, it flourished in areas of council housing.

Resentment simmered, as it continues to do, around the allocation of housing according to those in worst need. But with three young children – and a daughter still to come – and many of the usual residential doors shut to her, Nesta Wright was clearly in need of housing. She was living in Greenwich at the time when Ian was born, but when she was offered a place on the Honor Oak estate it was readily taken up.

The estate was administered by the London County Council, later the Greater London Council, who insisted on prompt rent payments as well as exacting standards of hygiene – each tenant had to sweep outside their door

every day, for example. When Nesta moved in, she must have been impressed by its pristine look and the formal, well-organised atmosphere.

But appearances can be deceptive. The estate had its share of problems typical of any concentration of people: family feuds, alcoholic fathers, criminals, custody battles – even some kidnappings. At one stage, if you wanted to buy furniture on the never-never and gave a particular block on the Honor Oak estate as your address, you were guaranteed to be turned down flat.

Behind the twitching curtains, another form of malevolence often prevailed.

‘When the coloured families came there,’ says Syd Pigden, ‘we had to be very careful in the playground – not so much in the classroom – particularly if you had a virulently racist father or mother. Luckily, Ian came when that had largely died out.’ Extinct or not (and that’s very doubtful), in the late sixties discrimination served to corral migrant families together through lack of opportunity. The estate became home to more and more Afro-Caribbean families.

Then as now, Turnham School’s intake had a high black contingent that required new pastoral approaches. According to every reliable survey, Caribbean parents are, if anything, keener on traditional teaching methods than most others. Turnham trod the line between a fervent disciplinarian element and a moderately progressive approach towards ethnic minorities.

For some time, Brockley had been known as a black area, a focal point, and that reputation was enhanced as the community matured through the seventies. That said, there was racial tension throughout south-east London at the time, even though it was Brixton that grabbed the headlines.

The climate in and around Honor Oak was typical. Black and white kids would mix for sport but not on the social side

after school, when they tended to gravitate into separate groups after the watershed age of fifteen, sixteen.

As Ian was growing up, there were often incidents of a racial nature. Houses were daubed with offensive slogans; kids were attacked in the street; sexual jealousy was the cause of fights when the night-clubs turned out their punters. In the mid-seventies, there was, according to locals, some trouble between the blacks and the whites which culminated in white bigots from Camberwell and Deptford attacking the youth club, known as Oakwell, held in the school.

Even though Honor Oak largely escaped the worst upheavals, Ian was raised in a time of racial tension and hostility which left its mark and helped him identify the type of person who would hold him back, harangue him and limit his opportunities because of colour. As a result, Ian's friends were predominantly black kids.

Meanwhile, Nesta had her hands full bringing up the Wright fledglings. There was plenty of brewing testosterone in the home, but precious little wage-earning. 'Though we never actually starved, we never had the normal things most kids have,' Ian once recalled.

Nesta was a formidably maternal figure, running a typical, informal Jamaican household. The food and decor were Jamaican. And there were always aunties and uncles, cousins and friends in the Wright home.

The Jamaican English tongue rattled around the walls of their small flat, cluttered as it was with photos and mementoes. Outside in the mixed environment of the estate and the school, the Wright children quickly learnt the pragmatic art of being bilingual, having one foot in the white world, the other in the black.

It was what you did if you wanted to get on. You could assert your roots in private, with black friends or relatives. But when talking to his teachers or supervisors, Ian was softly spoken, polite, with a mild London accent: 'He never

said the things he does now, like “Nuffink”, in those days,’ claims one.

Still today when Ian’s holding court with any of his many black footballing friends, he sounds and looks like he could be standing on any corner in Kingston – Kingston, Jamaica, that is, not Kingston, Surrey.

Back then, Nesta was a firm mother. Ian responded to her demand for good behaviour without fuss. He never crossed anyone he trusted. And as long as they weren’t in trouble, Nesta was happy for her children to find what fun they could out of sight. Nesta enjoyed a good party herself, where ska, rhythm and blues and rock steady records would rock the room.

But the overriding lesson Nesta conveyed time and again to her children was the importance of self-respect: ‘You’re the greatest, don’t let nobody put you down’. Hers was a ‘can do’ credo. Her kids were capable of anything.

Nesta taught them that it was vital to have regard for authority too. Many Jamaicans carried an inordinate faith in the British sense of justice that was to be sorely tested by exposure to inner city actualities. So there was a proviso: she instilled in her kids the need to stand their ground if they felt aggrieved. The Wright kids should always stick up for themselves when justice was on their side: if someone hits you, hit them back.

She also encouraged Ian’s budding gift for outspokenness and energetic self-promotion. He was special, and she made sure everyone knew it.

Yet when he was eighteen months old, Nesta had a shock with Ian. One spring day he seemed to have stopped breathing. He was terribly short of breath. His tight little chest wheezed like a punctured concertina and he was obviously very distressed. Nesta was desperate; for once she was powerless to help him. She nursed him through until she could see a doctor, who put the incident down to ‘wheezing’.

The attacks persisted though, and eventually Ian was diagnosed as asthmatic. Doctors reassured Nesta that Ian would grow out of it. But as he grew up, he was always especially susceptible to cold weather or moments when he had over-exerted himself. The condition was a major concern.

Sufferers of asthma complain of their chest constricting and of being unable to suck in sufficient air. In bad attacks, you think you're never going to breathe again: in severe cases, this becomes a real possibility. People might wonder how anyone could make it as a footballer with a condition like that: some doctors urge asthmatic children to give up football; others recommend exercise to strengthen the lungs.

Asthma might not have compared with Asa Hartford's condition – the Man. City and West Bromwich Albion midfielder, whom Ian saw on television as a kid, had a hole in his heart, although it didn't stop him from running flat out – but it was a real enough problem for Ian when he was nurturing his career as a sportsman.

After a while, Ian was given an inhaler, and it has remained a feature of his kit bag ever since, even though he hasn't had a serious asthma attack since 1982. But it's not the sort of thing footballers like to be known for – ridiculously, it is reckoned to have an adverse effect on their transfer value. That says a lot about the cynical, superstitious sport in which he has since made his name.

Ian himself has publicly dismissed his asthma as little more than an inconvenience. 'It doesn't really bother me now,' he shrugged a few years ago. 'On the pitch I do special breathing exercises if I become short of breath. But I haven't suffered badly since I was fifteen.'

There are too many myths about the destructive properties of asthma. In most cases, as long as a child is sensible with preventive and corrective treatments and aware of the triggers of their attacks, he or she can lead a

perfectly normal, energetic life. Ian should be proud though of the fact that, like Ian Botham amongst others, he is a role model who is living proof of how little asthma can inhibit a professional sports career.

If Nesta felt helpless when Ian was having asthma attacks, her protective personality was a crucial influence on Ian in other ways. ‘She taught us to appreciate things, look after what we had and always work hard, try to make the most of yourself. She gave us a sense of real values,’ her son once beamed.

Yet as he grew, Ian didn’t always feel that special. It was one thing to have your mother cultivate a sense of your abundant virtues, but it was quite another squaring that with real-life experience outside the sanctuary of home, family and friends. Society wasn’t kind to ambitious, boisterous young black kids. Nesta’s generation was more deferential: England had invited them as guests. Ian was among the first generation to demand more from the relationship with a homeland not of his choosing.

Chief among Ian’s expectations is the most basic: respect; not for being one of the country’s best footballers, but simply as a person in his own right. It’s the Jamaican way: ‘Nuff respect’ is not just a ritual platitude, it is a statement of unity and an article of faith. On the other hand, to ‘dis’ is to disrespect.

It’s always been so, but especially when black people are considered as a lumpen mass rather than treated as individuals in their own right: Ian has always assessed people on how fairly he thinks they have judged him.

Later, when he was a youth, Ian’s sense of worth – and the certainty that he was a child of destiny – was challenged again and again when he felt let down or disrespected. He didn’t always feel equipped to deal with the strain, especially when it affected the dreams that shaped his life. He wanted to be liked and was hurt every time his trusting

nature was misused. In response, he developed a vociferous, if somewhat fragile, ego.

For the time being, he basked in the warmth his mother extended and was oblivious to all the hindrances waiting outside. He was after all one of the Wright kids, and Nesta's kids were winners.

Neighbours and contemporaries remember Little Ian as playful and smiling, a mischievous little scamp always running around with the other kids. He was always competitive too: 'Beat you to that lamp-post!' Even at that age, sport seemed to be the perfect outlet for his energy and will to win.

'There was no *Space Invaders* or nothing like that – not like kids have now,' says one old friend. 'It was a very poor estate. All we used to do was play football or fight, really.'

Ian himself suggests he was a handful, getting into mischief, but nothing above the scrumping or 'knock down ginger' level. As Buster McLean recalls, there would be the occasional irate neighbour haranguing Nesta for a smashed window caused by one of Ian's shots. But what do you expect? Honor Oak folks were living virtually on top of each other, and from the age of five Ian and his mates were always out playing football.

Either way, to his neighbours and pals he was well-known and extrovert even before he started school. But Ian could be quiet when it was prudent to be so: to adults and figures of authority, he was always respectfully courteous and passive – the perfect Victorian child, just as a properly brought up Jamaican kid should be.

What he resentfully lacked in inches, Ian came to make up for with wit and suss. These qualities earned him status and made him an easy boy to make friends with, even if, as he grew older, there was a cruel tinge to his mickey-taking at times. Ian always had to work the frustration out of his system.

Throughout his formative years, one of Ian Wright's biggest influences was, naturally enough, his older brother Morris. At times, Morris and he were even mistaken for one another, even though eighteen months separated their births.

Not much bigger than Ian, Morris was feisty, vocal, tough and respected – with some trepidation – on the estate. He loved football but was a better cricketer – typical of first generation black British kids at the time. (Later too, Ian showed some promise as a bowler: fast, naturally, and mostly intent on taking the batsman's head off.)

Football, however, reigned supreme. Shortly after Ian started at Turnham School Nesta remembers buying him and Morris West Ham shirts bearing the numbers eight and ten. As far as she was concerned, Nesta was probably thinking more in terms of her favourite team, Brazil, and the attacking heroes Pelé and Tostao who bore those numbers rather than the regulars at Upton Park – funnily enough, to this day, she's a Crystal Palace supporter.

Nevertheless, West Ham was an interesting choice. The Hammers weren't the local team, but in the sixties they had two much more tangible factors going for them: the powerful presence, talismanic for young black soccer fans, of cultured defender John Charles and Bermudan striker Clyde Best.

In a First Division roll-call that was otherwise almost uniformly pink, here were people for the two Wright boys to identify with: Best in particular, even if his flashes of brilliance were often outweighed by a juggernaut clumsiness.

Perhaps there was some sorcery in those shirts too, because Ian went on to wear the number ten shirt at Palace and then make the eight his own at Highbury.

Morris was playing football whenever he could at school. Ian was so keen on the game and so eager to emulate his brother that Nesta, at his insistence rather than any local

educational policy, sent Ian to Turnham on half days off. He would shoot and scuff a football around the playground with all the other toughs and softies from the estate.

This was an early demonstration of the fondness for soccer that was to mark out Ian Wright's next 30 years. There was nothing unique about it, though, on a working class estate in south London. But it would come to dominate his entire outlook on life and drive his ambitions. It was his vocation.

The year Ian was born, Olympian heaven descended on the estate in the shape of an after-school play centre set up in the Turnham playground by Bob Mitchell, a balding, stocky fellow from down the road in Blackheath.

Football-lovers among the Honor Oak kids were already lucky to have Turnham nearby. Not only did it stage the Oakwell youth club, possessing an uncommonly large playground that was a decent size for a pitch, but someone had thoughtfully installed floodlights that drenched the players in brilliant light even in winter. (In 1963, such a facility was as rare as it was advanced: the first floodlit football match had only taken place in 1956.)

Outside the school, the Honor Oak estate had little to offer the potential footballer except plenty of willing opposition, dangerous surrounding roads, grey walls and whatever motley ball could be found to kick around. Bob Mitchell's ILEA play centre came as a godsend to parents and children alike.

As soon as Ian finished school, he'd go home, get changed and head straight back for the play centre in the playground at Turnham. There, 'strict Mr Mitchell' and others would organise the boys into teams. Already Ian had developed a taste for hovering in line with the defence, and waiting for the ball to fly over their heads before burying it. He was fast and deadly. He was also what some people might call a goalhanger. In those days, Bob Mitchell never had to caution Ian like later referees would. There was the occasional

tantrum, when he blasted a ball over or when someone else wouldn't pass to him, but little to suggest the temper that is such a mark of his performances now. Ian was generally very quiet, very compliant.

In truth, he never felt close to Bob Mitchell like he did to other elders in his football life: there was always a coolness. Bob encouraged that sort of relationship. It was respectful.

'Bob Mitchell really taught us about football,' says one of Ian's playmates. 'He was a nice bloke. He was really good. We used to play football for hours every day.'

Ian spent every holiday with the other boys at Turnham play centre rushing about with a ball or bat from nine till five.

Adolescents would turn up for a game in the evening, to be joined by a growing Ian Wright and, a few years later, David Rocastle: football was banned from his school, Cardinal Vaughan, because of fighting, so Turnham was essential for keeping his eye in.

In an ideal world, every local school would be as much of a local resource as Turnham was and is. Even now, ex-pupils from the estate ask deputy head Denise Dance for a ball to battle over in the playground.

The school also had a reputation for producing great football teams to compete in the school league and the inter-school Invicta Cup. The kindly but resolute Syd Pigden – Lewisham football's 'Mr Chips' – was organiser of the Turnham School team and the borough league from the fifties until his retirement in 1980.

A non-League referee who was once pummelled with an umbrella by an elderly lady after a disputed penalty award, Syd was a triallist at Crystal Palace and retains a reputation for idiosyncratic but effective coaching techniques based on honest, old-fashioned values.

It's said that he used to bestow on his 'man of the match' the honour of cleaning teacher's boots: kids ran their socks off for the right to apply the spit and polish!

Other practices were more widespread. Selection for the school team, for example. Just a stray dog's stroll from the McLean and Wright dwellings is the Honor Oak sports ground which was to play such a crucial part in furthering Ian's sporting endeavours.

'It was at the top of the estate,' Syd recalls. 'We put down a couple of cricket stumps, and I'd line the boys up and roll the ball across from right to left: "Kick it with your right foot." They'd kick away, and I'd mark down those who could actually kick a ball any distance. Some of them couldn't get near it. Then we'd do it from the other side. Ian kicked it with his left foot as well as his right – children kicking with their non-kicking foot is a thing that separates them. From that you got sixteen boys.

'The goalkeeper always picked himself: "You want to try George in goal." I played a boy with one hand in goal once, he was so keen. Nobody said anything when he let a goal in.'

The next part of the Pigden plan was a 50-yard dash. 'The fastest boy, no matter what size, was centre forward. That's how Ian Wright got to be centre forward instead of left wing. And the two biggest who kicked the ball furthest were the right and left back. Obvious really.

'Your second fastest runner was your centre half. Your tiniest boys became your right and left wings (what foot they kicked with was immaterial, because they could always cut in). There was method in my madness.'

The 'Pigden test' wasn't infallible, of course. Former Arsenal and England international midfielder David Rocastle, now with Chelsea, started his career for Turnham when he was eight – in goal.

'He was very brave, and big for his age – but never a bully,' remembers Syd. 'The year he played in goal was when we conceded the fewest ever. The following year he came up to me in his third year and said, "Please sir, can I play on the field?" I agreed, but I tell you I was a bit