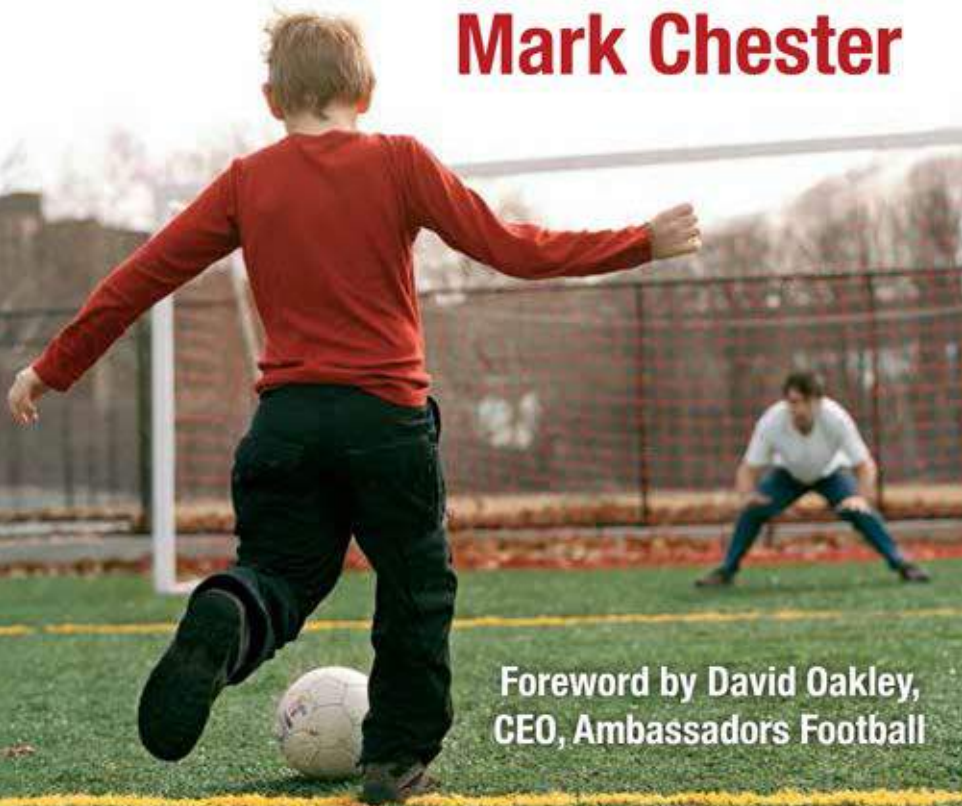


THE SOUL OF FOOTBALL

One man's story of football, family
and faith

Mark Chester



Foreword by David Oakley,
CEO, Ambassadors Football

Written in a clear and captivating style, Mark Chester's book takes us on a journey in search of the soul of football, asking what makes the game truly beautiful. Drawing a parallel between football and religion, he presents deep truths about life and faith through the use of football allegories. His explanations are simple yet profound, uplifting yet challenging. He also shares some of the highs and lows of his own life, ranging from his wedding to a newspaper's chosen 'Bride of the Year' to the tragic loss of a close friend at Hillsborough. Chester's warmth, honesty, humility and good humour shine through this book, which is a truly captivating blend of wisdom and homely anecdotes. I recommend it highly.

PETER LUPSON, AUTHOR, *THANK GOD FOR FOOTBALL!*, SPCK, 2010

Football offers us great enjoyment, whether to school kids playing in a park with jumpers as goal posts or to crowds watching a vital game in one of our mega stadia. Winning seems to bring most happiness, but for those who look deeper, football offers more: a chance to contribute to a team; an opportunity to improve on one's best, to win by playing the right way, to be tested by the challenge the opposition provides; and the possibility of learning lessons in the present for use in the future. This book gets beyond the surface of football, and reminds us that we need to get beyond the surface of life, too.

REVD JOHN K. BOYERS, CHAPLAIN, MANCHESTER UNITED

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**One man's story of football, family
and faith**

Mark Chester

In memory of John McBrien (1971–89)



Contents

Preface: The origin of football	7
Foreword	9
Introduction: The magic of football	11
Part 1: The soul of football	
Chapter 1: It all began in '65.....	17
Chapter 2: Living with fairies in Kensington Gardens	23
Chapter 3: God speaks to my mother.....	31
Chapter 4: Joey speaks to my father	39
Chapter 5: My brother speaks to the nation	45
Chapter 6: Losing my love of football	55
Chapter 7: The fall at Jericho	61
Chapter 8: The beautiful game	69
Part 2: Soccer soul	
Dedicated followers of football.....	79
A new season	83
Understanding the coach.....	85
Footballers' fuel.....	87

The 10,000 hour rule	89
Unexpected call-up.....	91
Cloning Jamie Carragher.....	93
Playing by the rules	95
The greatest player on the planet.....	97
Lionel Messi's mistakes.....	99
Footballers and greed	101
The language of football.....	103
Giving it 100 per cent.....	105
The trials of a football fan.....	107
It's all Wayne Rooney's fault	109
Getting off the bench.....	111



Preface

The origin of football

Once upon a time an architect decided to begin work on a new project. His design was original and innovative, and eventually it led to a blueprint for a sport that would obsess the world. This is how it all began.

God created the first ball:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

GENESIS 1:1

God set aside a piece of land:

And God said, 'Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.' And it was so.

GENESIS 1:9

God grew some grass:

Then God said, 'Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.' And it was so.

GENESIS 1:11

God turned on the floodlights:

And God said, 'Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as

signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.' And it was so.

GENESIS 1:14–15

God made players:

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

GENESIS 1:27

We humans then got involved. We made some rules, picked the teams, decided on a time to kick off—and the game of football was born!



Foreword

Occasionally when you meet someone for the first time, you just know you are going to get on well with that person. This was my experience when I first met Mark Chester about five years ago. This positive feeling was not because I met Mark at Anfield, although it helped, as I am a big Liverpool fan. Neither was it because Mark insisted on driving me back to the train station after the meeting because of the rain, although obviously such kindness helps in friendship. It was something deeper; it was that sense of meeting a kindred spirit.

In reading his book, it makes sense why I connected so easily with Mark and why he is the person I like to ‘hang out’ with when our paths cross at conferences. Mark speaks my language, the language of football, with more than a hint of humorous insight and slightly mischievous banter. If you know football, then when Mark talks or writes about it, you can feel, visualise, hear, smell and almost taste the game. Mark understands the power of football as well, especially when it is integrated within a story.

While recognising the power of football, Mark is not naïve; he understands its limitations and longs for something deeper, beyond the game itself. This is where my connection with Mark really flourishes, as we see the impact of football through the lens of primary relationships with friends, family and, even more profoundly, with God.

For both of us football is a microcosm of life. What you experience in football you can experience in life—joy,

sadness, pain, victory, disappointment, elation. Thus from the experience of football you have the possibility to teach and educate about life. This is what Mark does, using the game in order to enhance precious relationships. Therefore Mark stands on the shoulders of early church writers such as the apostle Paul in taking the well-known reality of sport in order to impart spiritual truth.

The application of Mark's experiential learning approach I have grown most to appreciate is in the father-child relationship. For over 20 years in my work with the Christian charity Ambassadors Football, we have tried to deal with consequences of broken father-child relationships: gang membership, addiction, marginalisation, vulnerability, misplaced sense of identity, low self-esteem, criminal behaviour, alienation. In the last few years we have stumbled across a potential upstream solution to these problems, which is to invest in and support the father-child relationship and mobilise positive father figures for the next generation of children and youth. The solution we stumbled across at Ambassadors, Mark discovered years ago, hence we draw on Mark's insight and experience to strengthen through football the crucial relationship between a dad and his kids.

Mark speaks my language, he understands the 'beautiful game', much of his upbringing is similar to mine, but it is his grappling with the interrelatedness of football, family and faith that really resonates with me. My hope is that as you read on, you too will gain insight and discover new depths of relationship way beyond football itself.

David Oakley, CEO and British Director, Ambassadors Football



Introduction

*What a great day for football.
All we need is some green grass and a ball.*

BILL SHANKLY, MANAGER OF LIVERPOOL FOOTBALL CLUB (1959–74)

The magic of football

My favourite radio programme is Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*. In it, the interviewee chooses which songs, book and luxury item he or she would take to a desert island. To be invited on to the show is surely the loftiest ambition anyone could ever achieve. I'll probably never even get close, but it doesn't stop me planning my appearance—making mental lists of the discs I would select to take with me and thinking about what my luxury item would be. I often change my mind about my chosen discs and book; I never do about my luxury item. It is a ball.

I am fairly certain that soon after I entered this world I was given a ball—if not straight away, then without doubt within my first few years. I have owned hundreds of them since, and all have brought me immeasurable amounts of pleasure. I am no expert on the relative historical significance of items that have impacted the world, but I think the humble ball must be a contender for the best invention in

the history of our planet. Neither do I know the origins of the ball in human history, but I reckon it is safe to attribute the original design to the architect of the universe: God himself. When he designed the planets he made them round. He understood the beauty and functionality of a ball, and now here we live with a ball always beneath our feet. Is it any wonder the sport of football has such a compelling and entrancing power over the human race?

A ball is a beautiful object. Perhaps its beauty comes from its simplicity. It is, after all, only air encased in a man-made skin, but then if you think about an opal or a ruby or a garnet it is, at its most basic, essentially just a lump of rock. We still look at such jewels with awe and admiration. We appreciate them because they are straightforward, easy to understand, easy to appreciate. A ball is the same; it is a jewel of a different sort.

A ball moves beautifully, like a graceful skater or a bird in flight, and it not only looks beautiful, it feels beautiful too. On the day I began to write this introduction I was in a park with my children. We had a ball and were kicking it around, watched keenly by a small boy barely a year old. It wasn't long before he toddled towards us with his eyes fixed on our ball. He pointed and said the word 'ball' as best he could. I got the impression it was one of only a few words he could say. I thought he might kick the ball, but he didn't. He bent down slowly, picked it up and simply held it reverentially, like a mother cradling a newborn baby. I could tell it felt good to him. He smiled.

A ball stimulates the senses from an early age and is accessible to all, regardless of age, race or affluence. There is

a passage in the autobiography of the great footballer Pelé in which he describes some of the first footballs he played with:

We had to make do with stuffing paper or rags into a sock or stocking, shaping it as best we could into a sphere and then tying it with string. Every now and then we would come across a new sock or bit of clothing—sometimes, it must be said, from an unattended clothes line—and the ball would get a little bit bigger, and we'd tie it again. Eventually it came to resemble something close to a proper football.

Perhaps Pelé's testimony supports my theory that the human blueprint includes an instinct for a ball.

But it is not just the look or the feel or the movement of a ball that makes it such a profound item. It is what a ball can be used for, what it can achieve, that makes it such an outstanding example of ingenuity. In leading coaching sessions I often say to children, 'Put your foot on the ball,' or 'Hold the ball still,' but I am missing the point, which is that a ball is not meant to be kept still. A ball should be in motion and we are meant to move with it. A ball compels us to move; it heals us of our stagnation, and it rouses and warms our muscles. A ball causes us to smile and laugh and scream and giggle, and it leads us to communicate in a much deeper way than we do with mere words.

In the final scene of the film *Field of Dreams* (1989), the main character, Ray Kinsella, played by Kevin Costner, meets up with the ghost of his estranged father. Ray's wife says that she will leave them to talk and retreats to the house. Ray and his father exchange a few words before,

struggling to control his emotion, Ray says to his father, 'Dad, you wanna have a catch?'

'I'd like that,' says Ray's father, and they pick up a baseball and simply throw it to one another. It is a poignant moment, a moving piece of film that shows us the power of a ball, as the childlike act of throwing it to one another begins to restore a relationship.

So there it is: my eulogy to the ball. The ball is an object that is accessible, functional and versatile. Frankly, it is a work of genius, and I have decided that I shan't be without one for as long as I live.



— CHAPTER 6 —

Losing my love of football

If I'm being honest, I cannot really remember much about John McBrien before the time we both entered the sixth form at Holywell High School, but we were to become good friends. Looking back now, I realise that in a couple of ways we were similar to each other, which was maybe what drew us together. We were both different from many of the lads around us and had interests that were not really deemed cool by our football-obsessed mates. I had a deeply held Christian faith and John—or Cotchy, as he was known (I have no idea why)—was a member of the local amateur dramatics society. Worshipping God and prancing about onstage in costumes were viewed with equal disdain. But while our chosen activities may have provoked a little mirth among our peers, I think the fact that we were both prepared to be slightly different caused others to respect us—even if, being typical teenage boys, they rarely expressed it. Certainly, Cotchy was esteemed; he was sociable and had many friends, and I admired his ability to remain true to himself and, at the same time, maintain his popularity. Inwardly, I agonised over my failure to be one of the crowd. I found the whole experience of being an unusual sort of teenage lad painful, but Cotchy never seemed to experience the same turmoil and consequent lack of self-confidence. He

was his own person, comfortable in his own skin, and never felt the need to conform just to fit in, which was perhaps why he was so well liked. A good illustration of his single-mindedness was that at our weekly games of football he remained completely unmoved by his fellow players' fierce criticism and complaints when he would not pass the ball—which was 100 per cent of the time! With good nature he just ignored them or laughed off their outbursts of anger. The occasional goals he scored more than made up for the abuse he had to shrug off. I was more sensitive and eager to please.

The other similarity Cotchy and I had was that we both loved Liverpool FC, and although I do not think it was our passion for the club that made us friends, it certainly gave us something to talk about on our walks home from school. Cotchy had a great knowledge of football and an unshakable confidence in his opinions. This could have made him cocky, but nothing could be further from the truth. Cotchy simply possessed self-assurance beyond his years. It was perhaps his interest in politics that gave him his surety of opinion and ability to express it; but whatever the cause, he knew his own mind. I, on the other hand, was beset with doubts and found the arguments of others so persuasive that I became increasingly reluctant to express a view for fear of being exposed as an intellectual weakling. An indication of our character differences is that, all these years later, I can still remember which Reds player Cotchy argued was the greatest—Jan Molby—but I have not a clue which player I rated most highly at the time.

As our friendship grew, I discovered that Cotchy was a member of the Flintshire branch of the Liverpool

Supporters' Club, and I was delighted to hear that a coach of local Liverpool fans—Cotchy always in their midst—went to every match. I quickly joined and regularly began to make the journey over to Anfield to join the throng of supporters on the Kop, swaying and surging our way through matches. Like Cotchy, I loved watching Liverpool play but, unlike Cotchy's, mine was not a love that made me forsake all others, because my heart was first and foremost devoted to playing the game.

It was our contrasting priorities—Cotchy's to watch football, mine to play football—that took our paths in different directions on 15 April 1989. As usual, only a little earlier, Cotchy had said goodbye to his mother and father as he left his house that Saturday morning. He was on his way to join his mates on the Supporters' Club coach destined for Sheffield Wednesday's ground, Hillsborough, to watch Liverpool take on Nottingham Forest in the FA Cup semi-final. Some hours later, football boots in hand, I climbed into the car with my father. I was playing in a match that afternoon in Rhyl, and he was coming to watch. It was a typical Rhyl Victory Club match: banter in the dressing rooms, a few scuffles on the pitch, a couple of yellow cards and some goals in our favour. My father was on the line making his usual mental notes of what the team were doing wrong, ready to point them out to me at half-time, but he was distracted. He had a radio in his hand and was listening to the semi-final commentary through an earpiece. As I walked off the pitch for half-time, he looked worried. 'There's a problem at Hillsborough,' he said. 'It sounds like crowd trouble. People are getting crushed and the match has been stopped.'

In the 1980s, crowd trouble was not unusual in English stadiums. I had witnessed fighting between supporters myself, so at that stage I was not unduly troubled, and I returned to the pitch for the second half without a second thought. As the afternoon progressed, though, my anxiety grew. I could see my father becoming more agitated on the touchline, and I knew that what was happening in Sheffield was not just a few ripped-out seats and a half-hearted pitch invasion. It was something more serious.

By the time the referee blew the final whistle, I had long since lost interest in playing football. Despite being in the middle of a match, everyone involved somehow felt the same rising tension as the rest of the country. When something bad happens—something really bad—the usual atmosphere of everyday life is slowly but palpably smothered by an increasingly heavy blanket of apprehension and despair. At times, bad news seems to seep into the very bones of the nation. We just know something is wrong. On that football pitch in Rhyl we knew that something terrible was unfolding, and as we left the field our fears were confirmed: stories were emerging that lives had been lost in the crush at Hillsborough.

It is perhaps difficult to fully comprehend now, but even in those pre-internet times news travelled fast, and it was word of mouth that carried it rather than our current preference of text on screens. Eyewitness reports led to radio and television broadcasts, which led to conversations. We relied more on the people around us for our current affairs than on the army of journalists we now depend on. And the words coming from the people on the playing fields in Rhyl were horrifying.

I changed quickly, and my father and I headed for home in silence as we listened to the increasingly sombre radio broadcast. When we arrived home, we watched aghast the pictures and reports on television as the toll of confirmed deaths steadily rose. I am not sure when I started to become concerned about Cotchy. At first, my young mind probably just did not make the required connections to appreciate that he might have been caught up in the tragedy. Perhaps I had been blinded by the young person's belief in the invincibility of fellow young people. But at some point worry clasped me, and its grip got ever tighter as the evening progressed. By the time I picked up the telephone and dialled Cotchy's number I was seriously apprehensive, but also looking forward to hearing that he had arrived home and dispelling at least the very personal element of my anxiety about the day's events.

Cotchy's brother, Andrew, answered the telephone. It was a very brief call—one I guess he had repeated many times that evening, and that was mirrored in many other households. In a voice infused with desperation Andrew told me that no news had been received; they were still trying to make contact with Cotchy. This was before the era of mobile communications, so a lack of phone contact in the midst of the terrible confusion after an event of this magnitude—even five or six hours later—was not cause to give up hope. However, both Andrew and I knew, without saying so, that no news was increasingly likely to be bad news.

In the two decades that have passed since Hillsborough I have gone over these events time and time again, not trying to make sense of them—because there is no sense to

be made—but just because I cannot get away from them. They are too horrific to think about and yet too horrific not to think about. However, until writing these words it had never dawned on me that when I telephoned Cotchy's house that evening, the shrill ringing would have given the whole family a brief moment of hope: could it be their beloved son and brother to say he was safe? I had never realised until now that, while my concern might have been appreciated, the sound of my voice would have increased their despair tenfold. Every call they received that was not from Cotchy would be like—and I hesitate to use this analogy because it is so appropriate—another nail in his coffin.

After a night of prayer and fitful sleep, I phoned back the following morning and spoke to Cotchy's brother again. His voice was a whisper. Cotchy would not be returning home; he was dead. His family was irreparably broken, and I had lost a special friend. I put down the receiver and cried.

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'Hello, John. It's Mike here from 6th Rhyl. I've not heard from you, but I assume the game's off in the morning.'

'No, the match is still on, Mike.'

'But, John, there's a couple of inches of snow on the ground.'

'Not on our pitch there isn't, Mike, or should I say there won't be by kick-off. It's all sorted. The game's on.'

In *The Soul of Football*, Mark Chester looks back at his early dreams and aspirations and considers, through the events of his own life and reflections such as 'Understanding the coach' and 'Playing by the rules', what life lessons the 'beautiful game' has taught him.

Mark Chester is a writer and speaker. He is the founder of Who Let The Dads Out?, a movement of churches reaching out to fathers and their children, and works for BRF to support the growth of the movement. He is married to Su, and with their two children, Megan and Billy, they worship at Hoole Baptist Church in Chester. Mark still plays football as often as his body allows, hits a golf ball badly, jogs reluctantly and swims slowly.



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