

A person is shown from the chest up, lifting an orange jersey over their head. Underneath, a white t-shirt is visible with bold black text. The background is dark.

**I AM
THE SECRET
FOOTBALLER**

Lifting the Lid on
the Beautiful Game

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the Beautiful Game

guardianbooks

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CONTENTS

[Title page](#)

[Copyright information](#)

[INTRODUCTION](#)

[CHAPTER 1: FIRST STEPS](#)

[CHAPTER 2: MANAGERS](#)

[CHAPTER 3: FANS](#)

[CHAPTER 4: THE MEDIA](#)

[CHAPTER 5: TACTICS](#)

[CHAPTER 6: THE BIG TIME](#)

[CHAPTER 7: AGENTS](#)

[CHAPTER 8: MONEY](#)

[CHAPTER 9: BAD BEHAVIOUR](#)

[CHAPTER 10: THE END LOOMS](#)

[INDEX](#)

INTRODUCTION

Paul Johnson, Deputy Editor, Guardian News and Media

“I am The Secret Footballer” is both a declaration and a device. Since he wrote his first column for the Guardian 18 months ago, there has been a sustained effort to unmask The Secret Footballer. Jigsaw identification has been attempted through forensic analysis of his pieces using names, games, clubs and matches. Fans’ forums debate in a knowledgeable and thoughtful way. There is a dedicated website at whoisthesecretfootballer.co.uk. Dozens of players have been identified as him. According to those who think they have cracked a code, he plays for Blackburn, Sunderland, Fulham, Bolton, Wolves, Burnley, Newcastle, Leicester, Liverpool, West Ham, Everton, Spurs, Birmingham or Celtic. And a few others.

On his Wikipedia page the entry says he is English and has turned out for at least two Premier League clubs. The argument and search for clues are fun and understandable – and it may be that someday he will decide to reveal himself as the author. But to write as he does, in such detail about the game and the people in it, would be impossible out in the open. His club(s) wouldn’t like it, and would probably cite breach of contract. His agent wouldn’t like it and his manager(s) would be somewhere on the other side of incandescent.

He tells us what it is like to score against Manchester United; about John Terry and his own reaction to being whacked in the face with an elbow: “I kicked him as hard as I could across the back of the legs and he crumpled to the ground.” He describes vividly the impact on life of a £1.4m-a-year contract (along with a £19,000-a-month mortgage) and how, in his words, it “opens up a host of recreational possibilities”. The sharks, the brown envelopes, the deals, the convoluted bonuses, the malicious managers and understanding managers; supportive team-mates and those tortured and fearful of the end; the media, the women and the drink are all here, in a range that goes from the amusing to the terrifying.

But The Secret Footballer is different, and those differences which mark him out started early on in life. He describes his working-class background, playing in hand-me-down trainers. He came out of a loving and supportive family with his father encouraging him to read classics – Shakespeare, Dickens

Joyce etc. He didn't get into football by the usual route and has struggled with the paradox of living dream playing football but having to deal with the aggravations and frustrations off the pitch. The same tension shows with his continued determination not to leave his roots behind while developing taste for fine wine, art and luxurious holidays. Those pressures built up to the point where he became insecure, reclusive and volatile; seeking help and put on medication after finding himself coming home from training and sitting in the same chair until it was time for bed. All of it is told as the reality of his life.

Some years ago, reading the FT at weekends, The Secret Footballer enjoyed a column written anonymously by an estate agent which opened up a world many buyers and sellers have extensive experience of, but which, to those in the know, is very different: far more complex, potentially dangerous and duplicitous. The comparisons with football were only too obvious. Football, a game watched by millions, is digested and dissected in fine detail in print, on the radio, on TV and on the web. Managers and players give interviews, ex-pros write columns. Tactics, personalities, money and motives are debated endlessly. And yet what do we really understand? The Secret Footballer's answer to that is simple: not that much.

So he had the idea for a column. We (Ian Prior, the Guardian's sports editor and myself) were approached and thought it had amazing potential. But we were worried: would he write honestly, would he hold back, could he sustain themes, could he write at all? All those thoughts disappeared the moment the first piece arrived – and he has got better and better ever since. This book was his idea. It is all his own words, his own experiences, his own thoughts, his own emotions. He is a remarkable man.

Paul Johnson

London, August 2011

CHAPTER 1

FIRST STEPS

When I started playing football for a living, I vowed that I would never turn out like the embittered
older professionals that my new club seemed to have made a point of collecting. Far from offering any
advice or guidance, they took every opportunity to rub my face in a mistake or faux pas. In those days
I had no idea that footballers started training at 10am and finished at midday. I remember hanging
around in the changing room after my first session waiting to be told that I could go home. Nobody
sits you down with a “how to” guidebook and fills you in on football etiquette. You’re either what
managers refer to as “streetwise”, or you’re too naive for your own good. In my case, I was as raw
my football.

I still think that I am incredibly lucky never to have gone through the youth system, for two reasons.
Firstly, I have always had huge problems with anyone in authority, especially if that authority
abused for the purpose of making the rulemaker feel more important than they actually are. Secondly,
I much prefer to play what has become known as “street football”. You can spot a manufactured
footballer a mile off but the players who are naturally gifted and are almost uncoachable nearly
always offer the most excitement. For example, Lionel Messi and Wayne Rooney do not need to be
coached: they play like they did in the street as 10-year-olds. Granted, they may need integrating into
a style of play or formation but on the whole they are playing off the cuff. I am no Messi or Rooney
let’s make that absolutely clear – but for the best part of my career I played as if I had nothing to lose.
I loved going up against players who had been given everything on a plate, and walking off to collect
a bottle of champagne for man of the match. Not because I like champagne – it just felt like a victory
for all the people back home who never made it to the big time.

As a newcomer, I immediately made a beeline for the corner of the dressing room, far enough away
from the dominant players and close enough to keep my face in the manager’s eyeline. Unfortunately
on my first day as a professional, a Scandinavian player, who was one of the embittered old pros, took
exception to my choice of seat and threw my clothes all over the changing room while I was having
lunch. I came back to find my belongings strewn over the corridor and in the shower room. This was
shock for me: I’d assumed that a team was exactly that – a team, a group of people who looked out for
each other, helped each other and fought as one. How wrong I was. If there is one thing that I have
learned, it is that every single player in every single dressing room has an agenda. It doesn’t matter
they are your closest friend or your sworn enemy – everyone is in it for themselves. The realisation
that some of these players were playing football because it paid the bills and, worse, that many
of them were terrible, was an eye-opener for me. But at the same time it gave me the most enormous

confidence boost.

As a kid I played football day and night – I used to take a football to bed with me so that I could do keep-ups as soon as I woke up, before school. Every day after it I'd go through the VHS version of 100 Great Goals (the one with Bobby Charlton on the cover), crossing off each goal as I recreated it either in the park, with the swings wrapped behind the metal posts, or “down the back”, where there were two perfectly proportioned chestnut trees that provided more space to pull off the long shots like Emlyn Hughes's screamer for Liverpool (I can't remember the number now but it was a personal favourite because you could hear Hughes yelling wildly as he celebrated the goal).

That's why I wanted to play football: it held the possibility of so much glory and happiness and an escape from the mundane life that came with growing up in a small town. My ambition was to win the World Cup. I had a 1986 Panini sticker album that my dad bought for me, and looking at all the foreign players in their different-coloured strips was so exciting – players like Socrates and Russia's Rats, Rummenigge and, of course, Maradona. It offered a doorway to the wider world and I was hooked. Years later one of my team-mates was called up to play for England; he was the first player I knew to be selected for the squad. It was an exciting time for everybody and I couldn't wait to ask him what it was like. “Oh, it's quality, mate,” he told me. “They give you 50 grand just for your image rights.”

I can't tell you how happy playing football made me as a kid. It was just the best thing in the world to be able to go outside and kick a ball around for hours pretending to be Ian Rush or Glenn Hoddle. But although I was immersed in football, my dad took it upon himself to educate me, and not only the game he loved. The small group of people who know I'm the Secret Footballer have all asked me the same question: where do the bizarre, and sometimes leftfield, hooks to the column come from? The answer is Dad's vast collection of literary classics, including Shakespeare, Dickens and Joyce, and original vinyl from greats such as the Beatles, Pink Floyd, Dylan, the Stones etc. While some of my friends went for the traditional beach holiday, Dad would think nothing of driving to Denmark for two weeks on a farm, listening to drug-inspired rock'n'roll while we were made to read literary classics in the back seat. For a 10-year-old, I'd argue that's not normal. But I wouldn't change it for the world.

Not that I was an academic. I found one of my old school reports that reads, “***** does not listen and so misses key instructions, leading to his falling behind.” The subsequent improvement in my attention only highlighted a startling inability to care about what was being said. Football was all

wanted to do: it was morning, noon and night and I was convinced I'd "make it". My parents encouraged my football career and every weekend drove me to my next match. I played for the best local teams, the county and district sides, as well as my school, and was known in our area as one of a crop of very talented players who were emerging. Some of these players did go on to become professionals, some drifted into respectable jobs, and others, like me, didn't have a clue what to do if their football career never materialised. And as the years went by the prospect of playing professional football began to seem as likely as my getting any further up Kate Brookes' inside leg during our science lessons.

Around the age of 15 and 16, a few of my team-mates were picked up by professional clubs, the pinnacle of which was when a lad signed for Tottenham's academy (he was released two years later). I had trials myself and generally performed well but my situation wasn't helped by the fact that scouts in this country are not coaches or managers. Whenever I went along to one of these trials, the lads who were 4ft nothing would immediately be put out on the wing to rot, while the ones who were a foot taller than everyone else were put in at centre-back, despite telling their scout that they were a centre-midfielder or a target man. Time and again this happened. It used to piss me off but, more than that, it used to piss off my dad, who'd had to drive to the end of the country to see his son played as a right-back for an hour and then at left wing for 15 minutes.

In fairness, scouting for kids at the top hasn't improved that much. At the very top of the game, the trawler net has never been bigger and it has never been easier to land a prize catch. A friend of mine who has been a scout for a leading club for more than 10 years told me that if he were lazy, he'd never even have to leave his office because clubs further down the footballing pyramid regularly call him up to offer their best youngsters. "Every year those phone calls come a little earlier and the kids get younger." And he should know.

In early 2012, Chelsea paid £1.5m for Patrick Bamford, an 18-year-old striker who had played only 12 minutes of first-team football for Nottingham Forest. Frank Clark, the Forest chairman, explained how things have changed. "We used to be able to hold on to players for a couple of years into the first team, but now the real big clubs are paying fortunes for kids of 13, 14, 15, 16." The scary thing is that my friend admits he doesn't even have to get it right. "If I beat off the competition from the other big teams I've done my job. If the player doesn't become a first-team regular, then that's the coach's fault, not mine."

When bigger names are involved, it is easier still. A few years ago I was talking to another friend of

mine who at the time was the chief scout for one of the top clubs in the Premier League. We were having coffee and I casually asked how life was. His team had just won the Premier League title and I expected it to be all sunshine and happiness. But his answer caught me completely off guard. “Every year it’s the same, mate. After the manager and the coaching staff get the budget through from the owners, we all sit down to run through the possible transfer targets. They’ll look at me and say: ‘We need an attacking midfielder.’ And I’ll say: ‘OK, well, there’s Totti, Kaka and Ronaldinho.’” I have no experience as a chief scout but, if the day ever comes when I’m offered this position at a top club, I can’t see it being overly demanding.

In terms of my own attempts to break through, it was pretty hard seeing some of my team-mates picked up by professional clubs. I didn’t feel they were as skilful as me – stronger maybe, and certainly better-built at the age of 15, but definitely not as good with the ball. Unfortunately, at the time clubs were more interested in physical attributes than in technical ability.

Thankfully, while a lot of my friends were “experimenting” in the drugs scene of the late 1990s, I managed, mentally at least, to escape. I had made the decision that whatever I was going to do in my life, a good proportion of it would not be spent wasting away in my home town, where precious little of any interest ever happened. It was while I was planning my getaway (a week before I was due to leave the country) that my mum took a telephone call from a scout asking if her son would like to come for a trial match next week with a team he was working for. At the time, I was playing non-league and picking up about £30 per week. As I later found out, the scout had been contacted by one of my old managers, who had told him that I had enough potential to warrant a second look, provided the club felt it could commit to enough extra coaching to turn me into a polished professional.

I don’t remember an awful lot about that trial match. My head was still filled with the possibility of what I was starting to think of as freedom, so at half time when the manager collared me in the tunnel and said, “Cancel your holidays – we’re going to sign you,” any joy that I may have felt was tempered by the fact that I had paid for a one-way ticket to San Francisco and was only really thinking about what I still had to buy from Superdrug.

I have thought about that moment almost every day since. I wonder what would have happened if I had the strength to turn him down. Despite wanting to play professional football since I could walk, I had seen enough of life to realise that once you are tied into something, it is often very difficult to get your liberty back. I wonder where I’d be now. Would I have won medals and enjoyed 15 minutes of fame and recognition for doing something well? Would I have had those intense moments of sheer

happiness after scoring a goal or winning a crucial match? The real questions to ask are: would I have more “real friends” if I’d been around for just one weekend in the last dozen years? Would I have been able to make my best friend’s wedding, where I was supposed to be best man, rather than getting turned over at Arsenal? Would I have been able to attend the funerals that I have missed, and where my absences have mostly never been forgiven? Would I be on anti-depressants, as I am now? Would I have pissed off the amount of people I have because I just don’t want to be like them? And would I know how to measure my life in real terms, rather than by money and success on a football pitch? Again, who knows? As somebody once said, football was my favourite game.

But I did sign (£500 a week, which was a fortune to me) and I set about my new-found career with the overriding feeling that they’d let someone in the door that perhaps they shouldn’t have, an outsider into the inner sanctum. And now that I was in, there was fuck-all anybody could do about it. That feeling has never left me.

If I’m honest, my first impressions were that I’d made a massive mistake. The standard was poor, some of the players were detestable and the lifestyle was something that was completely alien to me. I’d sit at home for hours in the afternoons wondering what to do, and when I came into train the next day I’d get abuse for being “different”, whatever that means. Because I had no experience of playing “banter”, some of the more vocal members of the squad would hammer me every day for their own amusement. Pastimes included saying “Shhh” every time I tried to speak until eventually I’d have to give up, or trying to get me to remove my hat when we had lunch, claiming it breached club rules. Then there was the time they stole my phone and texted the manager, thanking him for “last night”.

I remember one day sitting in the changing room before training, when some of the senior pros were talking about a “third man run”. Having never heard this term, I innocently asked if they could explain it to me. They just looked at me in utter disgust. The silence was only broken when one of the more bitter players, who wasn’t getting a game at that point, said: “And we wonder why we don’t win many games when we’re signing this sort of shit.”

There were other incidents that stick in my mind. A few of the senior players would pass the ball to me as hard as they could in a weak attempt to make me miscontrol it, which was pathetic, although I’ve since found out this sort of initiation test happens at every level. On Dwight Yorke’s first day as a Manchester United player, Roy Keane fired the ball into him deliberately hard so the striker would be unable to handle it. “Welcome to United,” Keane said. “Cantona used to kill them.” As much as I resented what the senior players were doing to me, in some ways it worked because I always arrived

training before anybody else, and left last. It strengthened my desire to be better than them and leave them behind.

After about six months, I had demonstrated that I was more than capable of playing at this level. I was performing consistently and regularly winning the man-of-the-match award (we couldn't afford champagne, so it was just a photograph with the sponsor and an acknowledgment in the next home programme). I was beginning to make a name for myself, which meant that those who had made life difficult for me initially began to ease off. Around this time, the manager was able to move a good number of the older players on and my standing in the changing room went from zero to hero. I had certainly come a long way from my debut, when I remember hearing one of the away fans call out my surname. Stupidly, I thought that somebody I knew from back home had come to watch me, so I turned to look. With that, the whole stand shouted "Waaaaanker!" before laughing uncontrollably. I'd completely forgotten that playing football at this level meant you had your name plastered on the back of your shirt.

I still didn't particularly like the day-to-day life of a footballer. I enjoyed the games, even though we were by no means world-beaters, but during the week there was absolutely nothing to do apart from sit at home and read or watch TV. Often I'd try to stay at the club for as long as possible just for something to do. I'd spend hours hitting the ball against a wall that had numbered squares on it. Sometimes we'd play against each other – you had to hit all six squares in order and the first to do so won a fiver. But there was only so much you could do at the club on any given day. The facilities were fairly basic: we had a head-tennis court that was a death trap as it was surrounded by razorwire, and a car park that doubled as a space to practise long passing until I smashed the manager's window and ruined it for everyone. My long passing has since improved but the £180 bill for a single pane of glass still strikes me as steep.

On a normal day we would meet at the stadium before travelling to the training ground. I didn't have a car so I would grab a ride with a player who sat next to me in the changing room along with his circle of friends. They were a very tight group of black players and I'd have to put up with some pretty awful R&B on the ride over, but for some reason they warmed to me and christened me an "honorary brother". The title meant that they had my back; if I was in trouble, they would look after me, and if I made a mistake, they would tell me. And when it came to the point when I was on the verge of leaving the club for pastures new, they made phone calls to some of their old clubs on my behalf. I owe them a lot for their grounding.

The difference between bullying and banter is best illustrated by something that this group
players used to do. Once a week, one of them would come in early and set up a sort of makeshift
barber shop. Then, one by one, the other black players would come in and have their hair clipped and
styled while reading magazines. I was always the first player to arrive from outside this group and feel
that they had warmed to me sufficiently for me to start engaging in banter of my own. So I would say
“Fuck me, Desmond’s here again.” Or I’d nick the scissors and pretend to cut the hair of whoever was
sat in the chair, while playing the barber from the movie *Coming to America*. “Every time I start
talking about boxing, a white man gotta pull Rocky Marciano out they ass. Fuck you, fuck you and
fuck you. Who’s next?” I think they laughed out of pity, as my impressions were average at best, but
was great for race relations. One day, however, I walked through the door and was jumped by five
black men wielding a set of clippers, who then set about shaving off all my hair. And I do mean *all* my
hair.

As I became better known, I began to taste the benefits that came with being a professional
footballer. By this time, I’d left home and moved closer to the ground and was living near another
player who I travelled in with. As our club had next to no money, we’d have to travel to away matches
on the day of the game, which is unheard of higher up in football. We’d arrive back late, sometime
2am or 3am, depending on where we’d been playing, before getting in the car and driving the 20 miles
or so back home. At that hour the streets are almost empty and we’d generally go through red lights
and get up to a fair speed as we made our way out of the city. One day, however, we were pulled over
by a policeman on a motorbike and, fearing the worst, we got our excuses ready. In the event we
needn’t have bothered. As soon as the officer saw the pair of us in our club tracksuits, he began to
congratulate us on the result of the game before escorting us out of the city.

From that moment on we had a police escort to the nearest A-road after almost every away game.
He would wait for us to arrive back at the stadium and have a quick chat about the result, the club and
football in general before seeing us safely out of town. I suppose that would be the highlight of the
graveyard shift for a policeman in that part of the world, and we were certainly grateful. I can
remember that we used to beat ourselves up about whether we should give him something for his help,
besides the kebab we always offered when we’d stop for some late dinner. We eventually decided on a
club pin-badge (money was tight back then) and to our delight he wore it on his police jacket for the
rest of our time at the club. And he probably still does.

Thinking back to those days, though, there are many reasons why being a virtual nobody made

playing football so much more enjoyable. There was little pressure on the club or me to do well but was very hungry to succeed anyway; that is a fantastic combination, and something I'd give a lot of experience again. The manager expected me to make mistakes, as did the fans, but I always wanted to be perfect, and so long as my performances fell somewhere in the middle I knew I was doing OK. Very often, though, they were excellent and pretty soon I became a big fish in a small pond.

To see this same situation played out today, with me being the elder statesman, does not make me unhappy, or bitter, or jealous. Instead, I try to help where I can to improve the next generation of players, even if sometimes it is incredibly frustrating when they can't do something that senior players take for granted.

A few years ago, I gave serious consideration to giving up football altogether to pursue my other passions, only to have a moment of clarity that prompted a complete rethink. Sometimes when the games are coming thick and fast, and you don't see your family, you aren't playing wonderfully well and the results are poor, things can get on top of you. I would later come to realise that this was depression knocking at the door, and my answer to it was that I'd be much happier doing something else. Standing in the tunnel before a match against Liverpool at Anfield, I had a brush with something that Marcel Proust describes as "a remembrance of things past". As our coach gave each player a ball, I lifted mine up to my nose and sniffed it. Don't ask me why – I had never done it before as a professional, or since. The ball was brand new and looked so inviting. The smell took me right back to my council estate and the moment when my mum and dad bought me one of my first full-size footballs, an Adidas Tango. Everybody knows that smell of a new football and at that moment it suddenly filled me with all the reasons I had ever wanted to play the game – it smelled of happy times and familiarity. As the noise outside grew louder and the familiar opening notes of You'll Never Walk Alone made their way through the tunnel, I told myself to keep that moment at the front of my mind for as long as possible.

It is often said that 95% of what happens in football takes place behind closed doors and, believe me, the truth is far stranger than fiction. You might see us for 90 minutes on a Saturday and form many of your opinions about football purely on that fleeting appearance. You might watch analysts drone on about tactics without realising what they are saying is predesigned to fit a narrative and barely scratches the surface. Perhaps you've read about the infamous Christmas parties in the tabloids and wonder if they are as crazy as they would have you believe. Maybe you simply don't understand how young, seemingly healthy athletes, who appear to have it all, can be depressed. Maybe you have

seen a couple of the so-called Wags on TV and wonder what their lives are really like. Perhaps you've
always wondered how a player can perform poorly for one club and yet blossom at another. Is there
really a racist undercurrent in the modern game? How important is the manager or the captain? Are
the officials biased towards the big teams? What do players really think of TV pundits, the FA and
Fifa? What are the benefits of the foreign players or a top agent on transfer deadline day? How do
player bonuses work? What matters more, cash or cups? And what do players really think of you, the
fans?

The only way you would ever find out the answers to many of those questions is to read a book that
was written in total anonymity by a player who has played at the highest level. In this book, I will try
to explain exactly how football really works, away from the prying eyes of the outside world, but
drawing on my own experiences. Many of these stories I shouldn't be telling you about. But I will.

CHAPTER 2

MANAGERS

What makes a good manager? I've played for great managers, and I've also played for one or two who
were so bad that I would happily have faked my own death to get out of working with them for a minute longer. The best managers gain the absolute trust of their players, put you on your toes whenever they set foot in the room, and have a playing philosophy that is greeted with enthusiasm and carried on to the pitch with spirit and belief. Above all, though, a manager must have the respect of everybody at the football club.

Simple qualities are priceless. Players want a manager to be consistent and honest. Nobody wants to sit on the sidelines watching, but an explanation of why you are not in the team, especially if you have only just been dropped, can go a long way to quelling discontent. Players will respect the manager for pulling them aside even if they don't agree with the decision. Man-management skills like this send out signals to the players; they keep everybody united and, as a result, extract the absolute best from the squad. When the opposite happens, unrest festers and stories start to surface about how the manager has "lost the dressing room". This does actually happen – perhaps not as regularly as some would have us believe, but there are certainly occasions when players collectively lose respect for a manager. I've experienced it. At that time, it was because of a shared belief that our tactics were flawed, and that the manager was making us look like poor players and, in turn, lose matches. Although a manager can sometimes be a convenient scapegoat, on this occasion our unhappiness was completely justified.

Players are subject to disciplinary procedures, but there is no written warning or fine system for managers. Instead players stop trying in training and in matches and lose heart. A friend of mine recently told me that things got so bad at his club that a group of players began to speculate that it was a deliberate ploy by the manager to get himself sacked. After all, where else, apart from maybe in the banking world, can you get a multimillion-pound payoff for failure? This certainly got me thinking about who might have done the same thing.

Managers don't have to be loved. I know a few players who despise their boss but remain extremely successful under him. Similarly, I know one or two managers who put up with a lot of nonsense from some of their players because they are extremely important to the team. It's about mutual respect, not mutual affection.

Some players want to be managers. But some managers still want to be players. I remember at one club being fined for going out to a pub with a couple of friends while injured. Although this was on a Tuesday evening, and therefore I had not broken the rule that you must not be on licensed premises 48 hours before a game, my manager claimed that any alcohol would hamper my rehab. He fined me twice.

weeks' wages. I didn't argue, but as I left his room he turned from manager to player and, with a big fat, stupid grin on his face, said: "By the way, did you get hold of anything?" He was asking if I had escorted a young lady home, although he knew I had a long-term girlfriend. He turned out to be more disappointed that I had no story to tell than with what he was fining me for in the first place. That day we both lost respect for each other but for very different reasons.

I am often asked about fines. Some people seem to have a preoccupation with the money that footballers earn, and I suppose fines are part of that. I can't remember exactly how many times the various clubs that I have represented have officially fined me, but it's no more than half a dozen. Apart from the times I have had to cough up a fine that goes into the players' pool and contributes to things like a Christmas party or an end-of-season jolly, these must number in the hundreds.

The smaller fines that go into the players' pot range from about £10 to £200 and can be for anything from leaving a water bottle or a piece of kit on the training ground (they both have your squad number on them) to being late for training. But it's not uncommon for a supertax of up to £2,000 to be levied at a top club for a particular misdemeanour – it all depends what crime the players want to attach the fine to. At one club I played for, we had a team-mate who was always late for training, so we put our own £500 supertax on the offence. He still turned up late and, as a result, made a major contribution to the hiring of a private jet for the lads' Christmas party. You may think the fine quite steep for the offence but lateness is, in my view and that of many other players, unnecessary and disrespectful to everyone else.

For a long time, I refused to pay any fines at all. I just couldn't understand how anybody could take money from me unless it was stipulated in a legal and binding contract. At one club we abolished them for a time, much to my delight, but what began to happen was a breakdown in social standards. Many of the players started to take the mickey by arriving late and becoming lazy in their etiquette, deliberately leaving their kit on the training pitch for others to tidy away and parking wherever they wanted. They didn't even turn up for team-bonding piss-ups, which, believe it or not, can be important when it comes to integrating new faces. After a while I began to wish we could fine a few of them to teach them a lesson. The system does seem to work.

The big official fines are quite rare and only come about if there is a complete and obvious breach of the club rules. I know a couple of players who have been fined a week's wages for not turning up for the annual Christmas visit of the children's ward at the local hospital. Sadly, they were happy to pay it meant not having to go.

I remember when I signed for a new club and couldn't find the spa that they had gone to for the day (no Sat Nav back then). I just went home. The next day the manager asked me what I thought the fine should be. "Probably the day that I missed is fair, gaffer," I said. (Well, it was worth a go.) "Nice try," he said. "If you can't at least be fair about it, then you can give me five days' money instead." That was a lesson learned and about £12,000 lost.

The most unjust fine of all time (and this is my opinion, as there isn't an official list or anything) came a few years back when a manager and I were having a total relationship breakdown and we were barely on speaking terms. As a result, he was trying to fine me for the smallest of indiscretions, which is standard practice when trying to get a player out the door. When a player reaches this point at a club it is not uncommon for him to start playing silly buggers by throwing a few sick days in here and there, but on this occasion I was genuinely ill and needed to be near a toilet at all times. I had been awake all night feeling terrible and in the morning I called the physio to tell him I wouldn't be in for training. Five minutes later, having relayed our conversation to the manager, the physio rang me back. "Sorry, mate – he wants you in to see the club doctor." The doc later told me that the manager had actually called him away from his practice in the hope that I wouldn't turn up and then he could fine me for wasting the doc's time and faking illness. "I can't come in," I said. "I've got the shits – I'll never be able to do half an hour in the car." The physio duly told the manager but it didn't cut any ice and I was told that unless I turned up at 10am to see the doc, the manager was going to fine me a week's wages. Only in football can an employee be threatened with a fine for being ill.

I dragged myself to the car, packing extra pants and a towel to sit on (well, there was no need to ruin the leather) and began the drive in. Ten minutes in, I made the first of four stops by the side of the motorway, much to the amusement of the commuters, before arriving at the training ground at 10.40am.

I walked into the training ground and made my way to the physio room. "Bloody hell, you look like shit," he said as I stumbled in and fell on to one of the massage beds. The doc came over, took one look at me, prodded around my stomach for a while and then diagnosed me with gastro-something-or-other. Just then the manager poked his head in the door. "Is he ill?" he said, looking expectantly at the doc. "Yes, gaffer, he most definitely is ill," replied the doc. "Right," said the manager, and turning to me he continued: "You better get yourself back home to bed then, rather than spreading that around here. Oh, and by the way you're fined a grand for being late this morning." I didn't say anything.

I was still fairly young back then, but as you get older and become a more senior member of the

squad, things start to change. A manager may ask your opinion from time to time and, since assuming this position, I've found it a challenge to tell the manager what I really think.

During the hiring process for a new manager at one of my clubs, the hierarchy asked me into a room to discuss potential candidates. This is highly unusual and, as I told them at the time, very uncomfortable for a player. Imagine sitting in a room with a board of executives and being asked to "give a view" on potential new bosses: it can only end in disaster. I felt that anything I said was some stage likely to get back to the new manager as well as the other candidates. So even the managers I knew I wouldn't enjoy working with ended up receiving a glowing review.

The reality is that the last thing a new manager needs is for his players to be calling the shots because that is the slippery slope to ruin. By the same token, he doesn't want to alienate the squad before he gets his feet under the table. The first week of a new manager's reign is often fairly low-key. There are handshakes and pleasantries while he takes in training from afar, making mental notes about each player's game and behaviour.

One or two players will go out of their way to kiss his arse but even as I get older and more aware that this man hands out the contracts, I refuse to break my moral tradition. I do, however, take the time to have a chat about football with him while dropping in little-known names and results from abroad in a fairly weak attempt to showcase my broad knowledge of the game, because I have more than one eye on a part-time scouting-cum-coach role when my playing days are over.

There can be an immediate turnaround in fortunes for a club that changes its manager. I won't say that tactics have nothing to do with it but when I hear a pundit say something like, "He's got the team organised", in reference to a team's improved results, I cringe. Often it has little to do with hours spent on the training pitch and more to do with the players trying that much harder.

The indifferent form a team has shown previously can sometimes be put down to the fact that the players have become so comfortable with the manager that they ease off mentally and physically. You'll know this has happened when you hear a manager say: "I have taken this team as far as it can go." That roughly translates to: "This group of players no longer fear or respect me and, ultimately, are no longer motivated by me."

The biggest mistake a new manager can make is to get too close to the players as a way of getting them onside. I had one manager who would crack jokes with us as we were walking out to play a match, only to bollock us for being a goal down at half time. It smacked of double standards and because of that he never had the respect that a manager needs from players earning big wages and

harbouring even bigger egos. There are better ways to endear yourself to the players.

A new manager needs to stamp his authority on the squad quickly, and to achieve this very often he will sacrifice a player, as was the case at one of my clubs. It doesn't matter if that player is capable and well liked (actually, these players are the preferred targets). The process generally involves the player being singled out for ridicule in training and made an example of at every opportunity, before being sent to train with the kids and ostracised from the first team. It is meant as a clear message to everyone that the manager is in charge.

I don't like this method: it is completely unnecessary and suggests a total lack of man-management skills. A friend of mine suffered this treatment during the 2011-12 season and, believe me, he wasn't a lot of fun to speak to at the time.

The rise of managers such as Arsène Wenger, José Mourinho, André Villas-Boas and Brendan Rodgers has also won over the players who once believed that the only manager worth signing for was the one who had a few medals tucked away from his playing days. In truth, lots of managers have no input during training and there are more than a few who leave everything to their coaches, especially if they are well liked and respected by the players. I am told that one ex-Manchester United player turned manager has a reputation for showing his face only on Saturday for the game.

Not so long ago I bumped into an acquaintance on a beach in the Caribbean (he was there for an open pros' tournament, which essentially is an old boys' piss-up in the sun courtesy of a sponsor who wanted to meet all his heroes) and he invited me for a drink in the hotel bar that evening. I went along not realising that he was going to "open up" to me about how management was not at all like he expected it to be. This man had been looking forward to becoming a manager for years, since his playing career hadn't exactly set the world alight. He loved football and was convinced that he had more than enough to offer if he ever got a chance in the hot seat. He had collected every coaching badge available including the pro licence that costs about £5,000.

He'd been in his first managerial job for less than a year when he realised he'd made a mistake. "I didn't appreciate just how much there is to do," he told me. "I knew it would be tough and that I would see less of my family, but in the end I wasn't seeing them at all because at 10pm, after I'd finally got off the phone, I would sit in a dark room watching Elfsborg v Malmö in the hope of finding a player."

Being a manager is exactly what it says on the tin. It's about managing situations and problems, whether that's people, tasks, the media, expectations or whatever. When I put it to him that perhaps he had a bit of a problem with the art of delegation (well, if they're down you may as well stick the boot

in – that’s what I was always taught), he conceded that it could well be a valid criticism. But he also reminded me that I had never been a manager.

I take his point, because I may easily suffer from the same flaw should I ever enter into management. I find it very hard to trust other people with important responsibilities, because invariably they won’t do what I would have done with the same task. They will put their own spin on something instead. And if you prefer to retain control of every single decision at a football club, then I’m afraid you won’t see your family. You probably won’t even see daylight.

I have had a manager like that – a complete control freak who had all the staff a manager could ever need but simply couldn’t bring himself to let them get on with their jobs. And these were talented guys. I felt particularly sorry for our sports scientist, who would set out a programme only to be usurped by a man who knew nothing about sports science. The same was true of our chef, who at one point was told by the manager that he wasn’t allowed to cook with salt any more. As they say, a little bit of knowledge can be a dangerous thing.

But then again, success and failure could well depend on which way a manager operates with that character trait. A friend who played for Chelsea under Mourinho told me that on a pre-season tour of America, the squad had been booked to do a photo shoot for their sponsor, Samsung. Upon hearing that Samsung hadn’t provided any riders for the players, Mourinho promptly instructed his team to get back on the bus. After a lot of panicking, presumably by Samsung’s PR department, it was agreed that a box packed full of electrical products would be waiting for each player upon their return to England. I have no idea whether that story is true but that’s what this particular player told me and he has no reason to lie. I like to think that it is true because I quite like the cut of Mourinho’s jib anyway, and if a manager did that for me, setting aside the freebies for a moment, I would instantly feel that we were all in it together and that he had my back. I would want to play for that man and do well for him.

That’s not to say that players don’t have responsibilities to their clubs. Companies such as Samsung pay a small fortune for the rights to exploit their sponsorship of Premier League football clubs and they have very tight contracts that make sure they get access to the players. Sometimes, however, it isn’t always obvious – to the players at least – exactly what is going on around them.

I remember when I realised that a break we were enjoying somewhere near the equator was in fact nothing more than a massive networking exercise for our manager. The first clue that something peculiar was taking place came when we arrived at a brand new all-singing and all-dancing hotel slung bang on the sea front. We had our pictures taken with what felt like every one of the hotel’s 1,500 staff

before going for a swim in the sea to stave off the jet lag. That evening we were given dinner by some seriously wealthy hosts who, as it turned out, owned the restaurant we were in and had flown the whole squad out in business class.

These guys began to crop up again and again throughout our stay, and each time they did we were always in a restaurant, a shopping mall, a hotel or a nightclub that they owned, having our pictures taken under the place's signage. The patronage that our Premier League club afforded all of these companies must have been hugely valuable, so let me tell you what I think. I think that same manager goes back to that hotel every year for his holidays and will continue to do so until the day he dies. I am also willing to bet that he never pays for a single thing when he's out there. But I suppose that's business.

I have been dragged to just about every event you can imagine, having photographs taken in my club tracksuit and smiling like an idiot with no clue as to why I am there. On one occasion our squad spent the day walking around a manufacturing plant for home decor, signing autographs for all the workers. As far as I'm aware, none of the players received any home furnishings out of it – not that we needed any. Our manager probably didn't need any either at the time. But if he does in the future, I'm sure he'll be fine. This sort of thing probably happens at every level to varying degrees, but the difference between the squad turning a blind eye or coming to resent their manager could well lie in the success that the club enjoys on the pitch.

It's all about retaining the confidence of the players by treating them in a way that doesn't demean them. A friend of mine who used to play for Manchester United told me that even when he knew his time was up at Old Trafford, he was still treated with the same respect as anybody else in the squad. While that is not necessarily a rarity, it certainly isn't an approach adopted by every manager he and I have played under. The appreciation for what Sir Alex did for his career when it would have been far easier to do nothing at all is something that humbles my friend to this day. "I can still call him and know he will spare me as much time as he can for a chat, and whether it's a week, a month or a year since we last talked, he remembers my kids' names and always asks after them."

For the record, another friend who currently plays for United always refuses to be drawn into conversation when I ask him about Ferguson, and is not backward in telling me that the reasons are fear, loyalty and respect, in any order you like.

Keeping the players on their toes is a high-wire act encompassing trust and respect and not, as one of my old managers thought, about organising as many nights out as possible, regardless of results,

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