



**ROY
KEANE**

THE SECOND HALF

with

RODDY DOYLE

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When you're physically in trouble, it plays on your mind. You don't get to a ball, and you tell yourself that you would have got it ten years ago, even though you mightn't have. There's a physical pain that you can put up with every day, but it's what it does to your head. I still look back and wonder if I could have played for another year or two.

'Did I make the right decision?'

My wife reminds me, 'Roy, do you not remember? You couldn't even get out of your car.'

I could, but it would be torture. And getting out of bed. But I'd forget, because I loved the game so much. The car was always in front of me. I wanted to play for another year, and earn for another year.

ONE

He told me how much he admired me. Like all the top lawyers, he was dead polite. I thought, 'He's nice, he'll go easy on me.'

The popular version of the story is that I injured myself – I tore my anterior cruciate – when I went in for a tackle on Alfie Håland. Håland told me to get up and stop faking. So the next time I saw him, I did him. Alfie Håland. I ended his career.

But that wasn't what happened.

My book, *Keane*, came out in September 2002, just a few months after the World Cup and Saipan, and extracts from it were serialised in the *News of the World*. One of the extracts contained this passage from the book:

Another crap performance. They're up for it. We're not. City could have been ahead when Teddy Sheringham stroked the penalty home with twenty minutes to go. Howey equalized five minutes from the end. I'd waited almost 180 minutes for Alfie, three years if you looked at it another way. Now he had the ball on the far touchline. Alfie was taking the piss. I'd waited long enough. I fucking hit him hard. The ball was there (I think). Take that, you cunt. And don't ever stand over me again sneering about fake injuries. And tell your pal Wetherall there's some for him as well. I didn't wait for Mr Elleray to show the card. I turned and walked to the dressing room.

That produced the headlines – it was great publicity. It was perfect in some ways, and I'm sure the publishers, Penguin, weren't too upset, or the booksellers. I understand that when you publish a book you're selling something; you're selling part of yourself. But I didn't anticipate the volume of the coverage. It was unbelievable; it was like I'd killed somebody. It was a nightmare at the time.

The book had been planned – the deadline and publication date – a year before. The idea was that I would finish after I'd played in the World Cup. It was supposed to be an upbeat book, on the back of my qualification from a tough group and a good campaign in Japan. I think it was quite an upbeat book, but I didn't play in the World Cup, and I couldn't leave my house with my poor dog without being followed. That had gone on for a month or two, and it was just beginning to settle down. But now, the Håland tackle was the latest scandal. The media were all over it; they were running the show, demanding action. And, to be fair, I'd given them something to chew on.

The pressure was on the FA to do something about it, and they did. They charged me with bringing the game into disrepute, by committing a premeditated assault on Håland, and by profiting from n

description of the tackle. The charges hurt me, particularly the second one – the idea that I'd almost bragged about deliberately injuring a player, in the hope of selling some extra books.

It was physically tiring. It was affecting my sleep, and my appetite. I was still preparing for games, but I was having problems with my hip. And it was emotionally tiring, too, coming so soon after Saipan. My family, the ones closest to me, suffered. I was a footballer, but I was meeting lawyers.

The hearing took place in Bolton, at the Reebok. It wasn't a court but it felt like a court. I think that was wrong. It was a footballing matter but it wasn't being treated like a footballing matter. It was an FA charge but I was travelling from Manchester in a car with a lawyer and a QC. That didn't feel right. It was quiet in the car; I didn't really know them. There was no positive energy, no 'We'll fight this'; it was all about damage limitation. It was a day at the office for them but it was a lot more than that for me. I knew I was going to lose. But I also knew, when I went home that night, it would be over.

Trying to get into the Reebok that day – you'd have thought I was up for murder.

I wish now I'd made my own way to the Reebok – 'Listen, I'll meet you there.' Actually, I wish I hadn't had a lawyer. I wish I'd gone in and just taken the punishment. The FA charged, and the FA delivered the verdict. Judge and jury. The pressure was on from the media. 'They've got to do what's right for the game.' I'd been in situations before where I'd been cross-examined, and I'd felt that I'd been listened to. This time almost immediately, I felt – 'Just give me the fine.' I never felt that I was getting my point across.

The FA had a murder lawyer. A big shot up from London. Jim Sturman. He was absolutely brilliant; he had me on toast. Jesus – for a tackle. He was a big Spurs fan, he told me. In the toilets, before the hearing was at the urinal beside him. We were talking, as two men in a toilet do.

He said, 'I think you are a top player.'

He told me how much he admired me. Like all the top lawyers, he was dead polite.

I thought, 'He's nice, he'll go easy on me.'

He ripped me to pieces – the fucker. It was his job, to rip me to pieces. I kept thinking, 'I wish he was on my side.'

I was cross-examined for about an hour. He took out the book; he kept showing it to me.

'This is you on the cover. This is your book, isn't it?'

I said, 'Yeah.'

'This is your book, isn't it?'

And I went, 'Yeah.'

'Do you stand by everything you said in the book?'

'Yeah.'

'So, whatever you said in this book—'

'Yeah, but it was ghost-written.'

'This is your book.'

He held it in front of me.

'It's supposed to be an honest book. You said these words.'

'I didn't mean it that way – I didn't say it that way. I'm not sure I said all those words. I had a ghost writer.'

They were genuine arguments but I knew I was going to lose the fight. But you still have to fight. It's like being in a boxing ring. You might be losing, but what are you going to do? You can't drop your hands. You have to keep fighting.

He was very good. I remember thinking, 'You fucker.'

His job was to present a picture of me as a thug, a head case, a man who goes out and injures his fellow professionals. And he did it – he succeeded.

The video helped.

‘Can we see the tackle?’

They had the tackle, in slow motion – my Jesus. You look at anything in slow motion, and it looks worse. Even blowing your nose looks dreadful in slow motion. The tackle in slow motion, from every angle – looked bleak. I felt like saying, ‘Stop the fuckin’ video. Give me the fine and let’s move on.’

Jim Sturman had an easy day. I think he enjoyed it, as a Tottenham fan. The fucker.

I remember thinking, ‘I’m fucked here.’

I sat down.

It was Eamon Dunphy’s turn. Eamon was my ghost writer, and had come across from Ireland for the hearing, to be a witness. He’d already said that he’d used his own words to describe the tackle. Before we went in, I’d been going to say to him, ‘Eamon, if they ask you if you think I intentionally went to injure Håland, say no.’

But I decided not to; I wouldn’t embarrass him by saying something as simple as that.

Sturman asked him, ‘Mister Dunphy, do you think Mister Keane intentionally went to injure his fellow professional, Mister Håland?’

And Eamon’s three words back to Sturman were ‘Without a doubt.’

That was the case, my defence, out the window. Eamon had written the book; he was my witness. I think Eamon felt that *he* was on trial, and that it was almost a criminal court. He wanted to distance himself from it, and I could see his point of view. He’d delivered the book; he’d done his job. I’d approved it. I was on my own; it was my book, my name on it. But I think he might have thought that his account in the book was on trial; he just wanted to get it over with and get out of there. He was rushing for his flight back to Dublin.

I looked at him and thought, ‘I’m definitely fucked now.’

He didn’t go, ‘I think so’, or ‘Maybe’, even ‘Probably’, or ‘I can’t honestly give an answer to that.’

‘Without a doubt’ was what he said.

As the ghost writer, he was supposed to have been, I suppose, in my mind, as he wrote the book. I’m not blaming Eamon – at all. But he didn’t help.

‘Without a doubt.’

I could tell from Jim Sturman’s expression, he was thinking, ‘Nice one.’

It was action; it was football. It was dog eat dog. I’ve kicked lots of players, and I know the difference between hurting somebody and injuring somebody. I didn’t go to injure Håland. When you play sport, you know how to injure somebody. That’s why you see people on the pitch getting upset when they see a certain type of tackle; they know what the intention behind the tackle was. I don’t think any player who played against me and who I’ve had battles with – Patrick Vieira, the Arsenal players, the Chelsea lads – don’t think any of them would say anything too bad about me. They’d say that I was nasty, and that I liked a battle, but I don’t think any of them would say that I was underhanded. I could be wrong, of course. Maybe hundreds would say, ‘You fuckin’ were.’ I kicked people in tackles, but I never had to stand on the pitch and watch someone I’d tackled going off on a stretcher. I’m not saying that’s an achievement, but they always got up and continued playing.

There was no premeditation. My simple defence was, I’d played against Håland three or four times between the game against Leeds, in 1997, when I injured my cruciate, and the game when I tackled him, in 2001, when he was playing for Manchester City. I’d played against him earlier that season, and he’d had a go at Paul Scholes. If I’d been this madman out for revenge, why would I have waited years for the opportunity to injure him? I mightn’t have got that chance. Players come and go. My whole argument was that I’d played against him.

I've watched old games, where Håland is trying it on, booting me. He was an absolute prick to play against. Niggling, sneaky. The incident took place in a match against City. But I'd played against him when he was at Leeds. The rivalry was massive between United and Leeds. Was I going around for years thinking, 'I'm going to get him, I'm going to get him'?

No.

Was he at the back of my mind?

Of course, he was. Like Rob Lee was, like David Batty was, like Alan Shearer was, like Dennis Wise was, like Patrick Vieira was. All these players were at the back of my mind. 'If I get a chance, I'm going to fuck you, I'm going to hit you.' Of course I am. That's the game. I played in central midfield. I wasn't a little right-back or left-back who can coast through his career without tackling anybody. Or a tricky winger who never gets injured. I played in the middle of the park.

There's a difference between kicking somebody and injuring somebody. Any experienced player will tell you that.

Håland finished the game and played four days later, for Norway. A couple of years later he tried to claim that he'd had to retire because of the tackle. He was going to sue me. It was a bad tackle but he was still able to play four days later.

'The ball was there (I think).'

I'm convinced that there were just two words that cost me. Those two words in brackets – 'I think' – left it open to interpretation that I went in on the man, and that I didn't care if the ball was there or not, and that I'd been lying awake for years, waiting for Alfie Håland. I *knew* the ball was there. But he got there before me.

The two words in brackets cost me about four hundred grand.

It was a long day.

The decision – the verdict – was given that afternoon. There was talk of an appeal, but I think my solicitor, Michael Kennedy, used the word 'closure' – 'We need closure on this, Roy'. It was a good way of describing it; I just wanted closure. I'd pay the fine, and the legal costs. They fined me £150,000, and my legal costs were over fifty. Throw the original fine in on top of that. I'd been fined two weeks' wages by United when I'd made the tackle. I'd been given a four-match ban. Now the FA imposed another ban, five games. Double jeopardy. I had to sell a lot of books. But I was glad it was over. I think it was draining me and my family.

I should have gone to the hearing without any lawyer, and taken my punishment. They were always going to find me guilty. There was a media scrum outside the front door. I was never going to walk out and go, 'I got off.'

Do I regret what was in the book? Probably not, because I'd approved it before it was published. Did I focus on every word? Obviously not, because I don't think I would have put in '(I think)'. Did I try to injure Håland? Definitely not. But I did want to nail him and let him know what was happening. I wanted to hurt him and stand over him and go, 'Take that, you cunt.' I don't regret that. But I had no wish to injure him.

Yes, I was after him. I was after a lot of players, and players were after me. It's the game. We have the great goals, the saves, the battles. But then there are parts of the game we don't like – diving, cheating, the bad tackles. They're part of the game. People want to avoid them, to pretend they're not there. But there are players playing today who are after other players. Seamus McDonagh, the goalkeeping coach, has a great saying, advice that he gives to goalkeepers: 'When you're coming for crosses, come with violence'

Nobody says it publicly. It's not tiddlywinks we're playing.

~~Håland pissed me off, shooting his mouth off. He'd tried to do me a couple of times when he was Leeds. He'd come in behind me, quite happy to leave his mark on the back of my legs. There are things I regret in my life and he's not one of them. He represents the parts of the game I don't like.~~

Looking back at it now, I'm disappointed in the other Manchester City players. They didn't jump in to defend their teammate. I know that if someone had done it to a United player, I'd have been right in there. They probably thought that he was a prick, too.

Everyone was telling me to move on, and I think I did move on. It had been a difficult few months. I was all about playing football. And this case had no redeeming features. Michael said, 'We need closure', and that worked for me. I believe that if you do something wrong you should take your medicine. I never felt that I was the innocent victim. I should never have spent my money on lawyers. I should have just said 'That was what happened. I didn't mean it that way – but, obviously, it's in the book.'

I thought it was about survival, making the damage as small as possible. I wondered why I was there – a bit. I wondered why I had a lawyer. This wasn't about winning or losing, or right and wrong, innocence or guilt. It was about damage limitation. I might have come out happier if the fine had been less. But the size of the fine didn't surprise me. The pressure was there, to punish me. The legal and logical arguments were never going to work: I had a ghost writer who put his own style across; they were Eamon's words; I'd already been punished; my right to free speech.

When free speech was mentioned, Sturman just laughed.

'Does that mean I can go down the street and abuse someone? Freedom of speech!'

He said that before we were even up and running.

'If your case is based on freedom of speech, don't give me that nonsense.'

I said to myself, 'It's all we've got.'

He was brilliant. But he had a good case. And he had the video evidence. It was probably the easiest fee he ever earned. He didn't have to break a sweat.

TWO

Footballers are intelligent. There were no rumblings in the dressing room; there was no 'The empire's crumbling.'

We'd come straight from the west coast of America – I think it was Seattle – and a few of us were left out of the team. I liked playing in every game but when the manager left me out of this one I was quite relieved because I was knackered; we all were – jet-lagged. I remembered sitting beside Ryan Giggs in the dugout and the two of us were laughing at some of the other lads out on the pitch.

We were playing Sporting Lisbon pre-season, to celebrate the opening of their new stadium, and I saw how good Ronaldo was that day. He was playing for Sporting and he was up against John O'Shea. Sheasby ended up seeing the club doctor at half-time because he was having dizzy spells; he was being twisted inside-out.

The club had been watching Ronaldo, and I think they concluded negotiations after the game. We always joked with Sheasy that he'd sealed the deal by playing like a fuckin' clown against him. In fairness to Sheasy he was jet-lagged, like the rest of us.

Ronaldo arrived for the start of the 2003–4 season, and I liked the lad straightaway. He had a nice presence about him, and a good attitude. What impressed me most was that he'd been given the option of staying in Lisbon for another year, on loan, but he said no; he'd come over to Manchester straightaway. I thought it was a good, brave decision – because he was only seventeen. After the first few days, watching him train, my reaction was, 'This lad is going to be one of the world's greatest players.' I didn't say it publicly, because I'd always be wary of building a player up too early – or knocking him down.

He looked like a player. You have to look the part, and he did. Zidane looked like a player – and Ronaldo looked like a player. The shape, the body language – they were there. A bit of arrogance, too. But he'd a nice way about him; he was very likeable. We forget that he was very heavily criticised when he first came on the scene. He was going down too quickly when tackled, his final product wasn't good enough. But again – he was only seventeen, a kid. I was playing youth football for Rockmount, in Cork, at that age. He was amazing. He was immediately one of the hardest working players at United. Most of the players I knew worked hard, but Ronaldo had the talent on top of the work rate.

He was good-looking and he knew it. He was vain in that sense – at the mirror. He was a big lad, a big unit. I'd think, 'Good on yeh.' Looking at some of the other lads in front of the mirror, I'd think, 'Yeh fuckin' nugget.' But Ronaldo had an innocence to him, and a niceness. I don't think he ever slackened off, or that he was ever more worried about the mirror than his game. I always felt that football was his love. He's still criticised for going down too easily when tackled, and he was hammered for winking after Wayne Rooney was sent off in England's game against Portugal in the 2006 World Cup. But that's the game, and he plays it

It's embedded in the foreign players, in their style of play – winning a free-kick, getting an opponent sent off. It's natural to them. If they get tackled near the box, they're going to go down.

Everyone loves the Gazza stories, the tragedies, but it's great to see a player fulfil his potential. Ronaldo had a lot of critics but I think people just got tired of chipping away, and conceded that he was due a bit of credit. You could see it as unfortunate that he's been around at the same time as Messi, but Messi gave him a target – 'I want to be better than him.'

Younger players bring a different energy, a lack of fear; they'll try things. I was thirty-two at the start of the '03-'04 season, but it wasn't like I was thirty-eight. I didn't feel that I was being pushed aside. But, all the same, I knew that the club was like a machine – the Ronaldos would come in, and the Rooneys. When I was a young player myself, I'd seen Bryan Robson and Steve Bruce leaving. So when you reach the age I was now, you're always looking at the exit door. I wasn't fearful, or threatened. There was that understanding, this is the game. You reach thirty-two and you're coming to the edge of the cliff. A sports psychologist who once came to United said that the descent could be gradual, or 'Bump!' – you're over the cliff. You just hope it will be gradual.

I went downhill at United, in a nice way. I was still playing. I was doing okay; I wasn't embarrassing myself. But I wasn't dominating games like I used to. The great thing about top players coming to your football club is, you want to impress them. It's their job to impress you, but you want to impress them. That's why there's a lift when a top player arrives. 'Fuckin' hell, I don't want him to think I'm crap. I don't want him thinking, "He's on his way out".'

The dynamics of the club were changing. Huge figures had left. Peter Schmeichel went in 1999, and was very hard to replace. We'd had Fabien Barthez, Mark Bosnich, Taibi, Roy Carroll. Now we had Tim Howard. But it would be 2005, when Edwin van der Sar arrived, before Schmeichel was really replaced.

I had a bust-up with Peter when we were on a pre-season tour of Asia, in 1998, just after I came back from my cruciate injury. I think we were in Hong Kong. There was drink involved.

Myself and Nicky Butt had had a night out, and we bumped into Peter at the hotel reception desk. It was about two in the morning. We said a few words to one another – a bit of banter, a bit of stick. I went to Nicky's room for some room service, had a sandwich, got up to go – and Peter was waiting for me, outside the room.

There'd been a little bit of tension between us over the years, for football reasons. Peter would come out shouting at players, and I felt sometimes that he was playing up to the crowd – 'Look at me!' He was probably also doing it for his concentration levels, keeping himself on his toes. But I felt he did it too often as if he was telling the crowd, 'Look at what I have to deal with.' I wouldn't say we disliked each other, but we weren't best buddies either.

He said, 'I've had enough of you. It's time we sorted this out.'

So I said, 'Okay.'

And we had a fight. It felt like ten minutes. There was a lot of noise – Peter's a big lad.

I woke up the next morning. I kind of vaguely remembered the fight. I was sharing with Denis Irwin, and we were a few minutes late for the bus going to the airport. We got a call from the physio: 'Where are you?' Denis was one of the best pros you could ever come across, so being late for the bus tarnished him; you would have thought he'd been caught with drugs or something. He was having a go at me.

I remember saying to him, 'I think I was fighting last night.'

My hand was really sore and one of my fingers was bent backwards.

The manager had a go at us as we were getting on the bus, and people were going on about a fight in the hotel the night before. It started coming back to me – the fight between myself and Peter.

Throughout the flight, Peter wore his sunglasses. He never took them off, and it wasn't very sunny.

We landed – I don't remember where. When the team arrived at a new destination for a game, two of the players had to go and do a press conference. And this time, it just happened to be myself and Peter.

In the meantime, Nicky Butt had been filling me in on what had happened the night before. Butty had refereed the fight. He even got a new nickname for it – Mills Lane, after the famous boxing referee. Anyway, Peter had grabbed me, I'd head-butted him – we'd been fighting for ages.

At the press conference, Peter took his sunglasses off. He had a black eye. The questions came at him.

'Oh, Peter, what happened to your eye?'

He said, 'I just got an elbow last night, at training.'

And that was the end of it. The tour finished eight or nine days later and nobody said anything – none of the staff, nobody. My hand had recovered, and Peter's black eye had faded. But the first day back at the training ground, the manager pulled myself and Peter into his office.

He said, 'The two of you were fighting.'

He knew exactly where we'd fought – I think he mentioned the twenty-seventh floor. He told us that we were a disgrace to the club, and that we'd woken Bobby Charlton up, that Bobby had come out of his room and seen us.

'Do you have anything to say?'

Peter put his hand up.

'Gaffer, I want to apologise. It was all my fault. I was waiting for Roy in the corridor. I take responsibility.'

The manager went, 'Oh, you're a fuckin' joke', and kicked us out of his office.

Peter took responsibility for the fight, which was good. I admired him for it. But Sir Bobby could have tried to break it up.

Looking back at colossal career milestones, I remember many events very clearly, but quite often I don't know what years we won the League. But I do know we'd nicked it from Arsenal the previous season 2002–3.

We were playing away to Tottenham on a Sunday in late April, and then at home to Charlton the following week. We were travelling on the day before the game, by bus to Stockport station, then train down to London. Arsenal were playing that afternoon at Bolton, and we needed them to slip up. I drove to the Four Seasons Hotel, in Manchester, where we were leaving the cars before getting on the bus.

That bus journey from the Four Seasons to the railway station in Stockport became one of the highlights of my career. Arsenal had been two up when we got on the bus, so they were now ahead of us in the table. Then the news came through that Bolton had pulled it back to 2–1. Djorkaeff had scored for them. And just as we arrived at the station, Bolton made it 2–2.

We still had games to play and win, but we knew on the bus – and it wasn't cockiness; we were hopping around like a load of kids, hugging one another – we knew the title was ours that day. If you'd passed us at Stockport railway station, you would have seen a load of men on a bus, jumping up and down. We were back in it and we knew we wouldn't let go.

Finishing on top was never easy. It's been said about the Liverpool team of the eighties that they had a drawer full of medals and their coach, Ronnie Moran, would say, 'Take one if you think you deserve it.' It always looked easy for Liverpool, although I'm sure it wasn't. But I watched them when I was a kid, winning all the time. When I became a player I learnt, quickly, that winning League titles is not easy. We had to fight for our success. But we were hungry. I don't think we were ever blasé about previous successes. I never thought we could live off the past and switch off for a year or two.

The top sports people aren't content with a single victory or triumph. I was surrounded by players who

were like that. We were all pushing one another along. The message came from the manager and the fans: 'Don't relax just because you've won a few now.' You win something and you say, 'It's gone', and then you move on. I can be critical of myself for not enjoying the experience of winning, but – it was part of my DNA – I just wanted to go on and win more.

Arsenal were good. Arsène Wenger was reinventing the game, apparently. Sugar lumps at half-time. They were a very good counter-attacking team. The previous Arsenal teams, under George Graham and Bruce Rioch, had been a rigid 4–4–2. They would always have held their positions; you could almost predict where each player would be. Now, under Wenger, they had more pace, they had more movement; they were moving positions, interacting. They had people like Overmars, Bergkamp, Henry. They were changing not just the face of Arsenal but the face of the Premiership, too. Pace, players moving into different positions, away from the 4–4–2; brilliant on the counter-attack, and much harder to play against. They could hurt you much quicker now. I think Arsenal took counter-attacking to a new level. Not just away from home – at home, too. And they were a team of big characters, big personalities. Vieira, Keown, Campbell, Adams, Henry. They might just have had an edge over us. But it was good for us. We had to up our game.

Myself and Vieira were at the forefront of the rivalry between the two teams. Neither of us went out our way to become – almost – the symbols of that time. Your position in your team will, in a sense, mould you into the kind of character you become, and what part you're going to play in the club. I've worked with Lee Dixon, who was with Arsenal, and Denis Irwin, at United. You just knew they were full-backs – brilliant full-backs. But you don't see full-backs leading many teams. I think the fact that myself and Patrick were playing in the middle of the park made us the centre of things. The timing couldn't have been better. Our teams were in their prime, both of us liked to tackle, our games were very physical and – at the time – he irritated me and I'm guessing I irritated him a little bit. Maybe he loved me – I don't know. But I didn't like him. But I also knew he was doing the best for his team, like I was doing for mine. 'I don't like you, but I look forward to playing against you.' And there was always the thought: I wouldn't have minded if he had been in my team.

The tension, the build-up to the games, made great TV.

As Arsenal were getting stronger, we were having a dip. Although it didn't show at the start of the season.

We won four of our first five games. This isn't arrogance, but that was the form we would have expected. Although we were beaten by Southampton. Tim Howard made some great saves – but that was what he was there for; he'd brought his gloves. Kevin Beattie scored their goal, a header from a Graeme Le Saux corner.

We drew 0–0 with Arsenal. Ruud Van Nistelrooy missed a penalty; he hit the crossbar. Vieira had been sent off, and there was a bit of argy-bargy afterwards, because the Arsenal players were blaming Ruud for getting Patrick sent off; they said he'd overreacted. I was holding Ruud back that day. Giggsy and Ronald were charged with bringing the game into disrepute, along with a couple of the Arsenal lads.

We always ended up having a laugh about the charges – the fines.

'I hope they fuckin' hit you with a big fine.'

Giggsy was fined, and we knew Giggsy liked his few bob. When I'd come back from the Håland hearing there'd been no sympathy in the dressing room.

'Oh, you fucker – that's a heavy one. How are you going to deal with that?'

We'd slipped up against Arsenal. A 0–0 draw should have been a reasonable result, but not when you miss a penalty. Beating them would have given us that bit of momentum. I would never have expected Ruud to miss a penalty. Because Ruud Van Nistelrooy was brilliant.

There was a Champions League game last season, United played Bayern Munich, and Danny Welbeck went through, one on one with the keeper. He missed it. Ruud Van Nistelrooy wouldn't have. Ruud was the best finisher, ever, but especially in one-on-one situations, just the keeper to beat. When Ruud was going through, one on one, I never doubted him. Some players would be going, 'Fuckin' hell – hard and low? Or dink it over?', but when Ruud was through there might as well have been no goalkeeper.

Ruud had his own traits; he could be moody at times – unlike me. But he was a good guy. He missed the Cup semi-final because of an injury – I think it was the one against Arsenal, at Villa Park, in 2004. He came down the morning of the game and said, 'I can't play, my knee's sore.'

And I went, 'What's up with you?'

I had a sore hamstring myself.

He said, 'Oh, I've been feeling my knee during the night.'

And I was, like, 'It's the Cup semi-final, for fuck's sake.'

He said, 'Well, I've only got one body, I need to look after it.'

I was thinking he was the fool, but I think now that I probably was. I played, and my hamstring was fuckin' killing me. I think I actually had a torn hamstring. Ruud ended up playing in Spain till he was thirty-nine, and he still looks twenty-one. And I thought he was the idiot.

I got on well with Ruud. I got on well with all the foreign lads; I used to enjoy picking their brains. I wished I was a bit like some of them – a bit laid back, like Dwight Yorke, or clever like the Dutch lads when it came to looking after themselves. I wasn't jealous; I was intrigued, curious about them. Not playing when you're injured – that was pretty sensible. But I was conditioned to think that not playing if you weren't 100 per cent fit was a sign of weakness, and that you should be strong and play when you were injured. But the clever lads won't be limping around when they're forty-five, and they won't be having hip replacement. My tradition was different – 'Don't show you're hurt, just get on with it.' Don't be weak, play when you're injured. Brian Clough detested players who were injured. He'd have banned a lad on crutches from the ground. What we see as heroic, I think now is probably weakness.

'Can you go for us?'

I'd take a painkiller, and play. No one put a gun to my head, but I wish I'd had the strength of character of the foreign lads. Even in their attitude towards moving clubs. Nemanja Vidić announced that he'd be leaving United at the end of last season. He didn't torture himself with, 'Oh, what'll they think of me?' He just said he'd be going and he had a good season for United. The foreign lads are not shy about making a good living. 'I've had my two years here; I've had enough.' They end up having great experiences, in different countries.

★

I scored in our 4–1 win over Leicester.

I didn't score as many goals as I used to. My role in the team was changing. I was now more the sitting midfielder. I think the manager and Carlos Queiroz, his assistant, might have had their doubts about whether I had the discipline to do the job, because my game had been all about getting forward. But I was comfortable in the position, saving my body, using my experience. It fell into place; it suited me. I still like the odd opportunity to get into the box. I would never have been the classic sitting mid-fielder like Claude Makelele; he wouldn't budge. Playing against Leicester, I didn't have to babysit the two centre-halves. I could still go forward, at the right time. If I saw a space or a gap, I'd take it. This time, the opportunity was there – a run behind the defenders; the keeper, Ian Walker, came out, I went around him, tapped it in.

At the start of the new year, 2004, we were at the top of the table. But we were used to that. We'd won fifteen, lost three – against Chelsea, Southampton and Fulham – and drawn one.

Some of the new players were taking time to settle in. Kléberson came in, but he had no luck. He picked up a bad injury. His girlfriend came to England with him. She was very young, and heavily pregnant. He found it hard to settle and get going – to get some good performances under his belt, a couple of good games, get his confidence going. Eric Djemba-Djemba – a really nice lad – struggled. He couldn't get a good run of games. David Bellion came in from Sunderland. He was another nice lad, but I think the club might have been a bit too much for him. When I was a young kid at United, Nicky Butt and Paul Scholes were coming through. Now, the likes of Beckham and Jaap Stam were leaving and I'd look at some of the new lads and think, 'No, they're not the answer.' It was just a step too far for some of them.

But we always had a good dressing room – and that's vitally important. I remember when Diego Forlán came in, and it wasn't quite happening for him. If a player tried – and Diego did – we'd drag him with us, we'd try and help him. Plenty of praise in training, or during games; not getting on his back. Diego was honest, so in training you'd go, 'Unlucky; it'll come good tomorrow', not 'You can do fuckin' better than that.'

I wonder about the current United dressing room. When a manager like Alex Ferguson is replaced, the new man needs a helping hand along the way. Does that mean that every player should like the new manager or his coaching staff, or love his new sessions, and everything about him? No. I look at the current players, and they should have been doing a lot better. It might be argued that it was up to the manager to motivate them. But not liking a manager, for whatever reason, can never be an excuse for not going out and doing your best. Looking at what happened to David Moyes, I have to conclude that he can't have had a strong dressing room; he had a weak dressing room. If some of the players weren't 100 per cent behind the manager, then they all slackened off. You can have personality clashes, dips in form; you can have injuries, crises, or the club can be going through a transitional period – but you still go out and do your best. I don't think all of the United players went out and did that. They can't have – because they ended the season so far adrift of the top. I watched them play, and I always thought, 'You *can* do better.'

When Diego left, he had a chance to say goodbye to us. Often, players are just gone – another club, sometimes another country – but Diego did say goodbye.

'I'm off, Roy.'

He shook my hand.

'Where are you off to?'

'Villarreal.'

Villarreal were just starting to make noises in Spain.

I said, 'Where's Villarreal?'

And he went, 'It's twenty minutes from the beach.'

We laughed.

I went, 'You got your dream move, Diego.'

Diego went on to have a brilliant career, and I wasn't a bit surprised. But it just didn't work for him at United.

I rang him when I was managing Sunderland, after we got promoted. He was in Spain.

I said, 'Diego, would you fancy coming to Sunderland?'

He said, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah. But I've got a get-out clause in my contract.'

I went, 'Go on – tell me what it is.'

He said, 'Thirty-eight million euros', or something.

So, I said, 'I'll call you back', but I never did.

I don't remember there ever being a real bad lad – poor attitude, poor time-keeping – in the United dressing room. You might ask does being late make you a bad lad? Yes, it does, in a dressing room full of hungry players who want to keep winning trophies. If training starts at half past ten and a player is coming in at twenty past ten, I would class that as being late. Officially on time – but you're late. If you can't get by ten o'clock, have a bit of banter, get your strappings done, your massages done, you're late. Preparation is half the training.

I'd expected more of Verón. When he arrived in 2001, I was delighted. He played in my position but the competition was good for me, and the club. It would keep me on my toes. I never resented the arrival of new players, even if they played in the same position as I did. It didn't quite happen for him – but technically, he was a very good player. Maybe English football – the conditions, the pitches, the weather just didn't suit his style of play. You'd end up scratching your head, sometimes.

With a lot of the foreign lads – and I think I understand this a bit more now than I did when I was a young player – it was the culture, or the weather – the environment – things that I took for granted.

'What do you mean, the weather?'

I used to have conversations with Ronaldo and Mikaël Silvestre, and they'd speak to me about the weather.

I'd go, 'Lads, when you signed, you must've known it fuckin' rains a lot in Manchester.'

They'd go, 'We knew, but we didn't know it would be this bad.'

When we know that a player is getting fifty or sixty grand a week, we don't have the patience to wait for foreign players to get used to the environment they've moved to. If they're used to going for a cappuccino at half-ten at night, sitting on a balcony somewhere, and all of a sudden it's dark at half-four and it's fucking freezing, that is going to change them. I know this, because they told me. Fabien Barthez and Laurent Blanc used to smoke together in the toilets, at half-time. They were French – they smoked. If it had been a couple of Irish lads, I'd have been shouting at them: 'Yeh dirty bastards – get out!'

What was good, when I first went to United, was that there were people there to help me – the staff and in particular, the players. Even a gesture from a player, to make you feel welcome. It might have been going for a pint – not that I needed much encouragement. I don't know if that happens with the foreign players now, but you can't underestimate its importance.

We'd lost Beckham. It was sad to see him leaving, but the writing had been on the wall. It had got to the stage where I think it suited both Becks and the manager to part ways. Some moves suit everybody, and this was one of them.

There was tension between him and the manager. There'd been the incident after the FA Cup fifth-round game the previous season, when Arsenal beat us 2–0 at home. Ferguson kicked a boot on the floor in front of him and hit Becks over the eye. So, Becks going to Real Madrid – when these deals happen, you don't fall off your chair. It happens. Players leave under different circumstances. I don't even remember if Becks said goodbye. The game is horrible like that. Jaap Stam left – he was just gone! The wives are gone, the kids are gone. They haven't gone to a club down the road; they've moved to another country. At the time, you think, 'That's the game.' It only seems strange afterwards. But that's the gig – it's life.

I suppose, as a player, there's a selfish side to the way you look at it. 'I've got to look after myself a bit when players are coming and going.' Becks had been a brilliant servant to the club, but he wasn't being shoved out the door. There are certain deals that suit everyone – the player, the club he's leaving, the club he's going to. It's the machine – players in, players out. I knew: it was Becks one minute, and it could be me the next.

I was in the dressing room when Ferguson kicked the boot. I thought it was quite funny – although not at the time. We were still upset because we'd been beaten by Arsenal, at Old Trafford. They'd knocked us out

of the Cup, in front of our own fans. It was claimed later that the manager aimed his kick but that was utter nonsense. He kicked the boot – ~~managers kick boots every day of the week.~~ But the fact that it hit Becks was a pure accident. It could have hit anybody, or nobody. But Becks – of all people. It cut him above the eye. A manager can't be hitting players, or grabbing hold of them. But the fact that it was Becks made it almost comical. And the manager didn't mean to hit him. If you tried it a million times, you wouldn't be able to do it. It was an accident.

But I didn't like it. The media attention, the sensational reporting, didn't help the club.

I remember the club doctor, Mike Stone, coming into the dressing room after training and telling Rio to go up to the medical area for the test. The drug-testing people were waiting for him there. They could turn up at any time.

He forgot, and left. It slipped his mind, and he paid the price for it. He was banned for eight months. It wasn't given the benefit of the doubt, which was a bit harsh, I thought. Why couldn't they have gone to his house that afternoon? The whole system could have been a bit more flexible. But not doing the test seemed to be regarded as the same as failing the test.

He suffered for it, and so did the team. If it had been me, and the doctor had said I had to do a drugs test, I'd have gone and done it. It wasn't something I'd have forgotten. It wouldn't have been like collecting a letter at the office, or remembering your boots. When a doctor says you've to do a drugs test, it's not an everyday thing. But, then, some people are genuinely forgetful.

This was Manchester United, so it became the big story. But I wondered at the time why they didn't just follow Rio, go to his house that afternoon. But then, from the doctor's point of view, you treat people like mature adults. You tell a man to go up for a drugs test, and you expect him to do that. In any other workplace, it would have happened. We can give footballers the benefit of the doubt – 'Ah, they're footballers, they live in a bubble, they're a bit out there.' But we also have to go, 'Fuckin' hell', sometimes. Just do the drugs test.

I don't think I was annoyed at the time, and I don't think the other players were either. But, ultimately, the team suffered. I didn't look at Rio and think that he'd been up to no good, or that there was a hidden reason for what occurred. I think he genuinely forgot. We all paid the price. He was a very good player and we missed him, especially in the second half of the season when the crunch games were coming up.

I'd been tested myself a lot of times. It happened mostly after matches and, I think, twice at the training ground. It was a pain in the arse, although I never had a hostile or negative attitude towards it. I just thought people were doing their jobs. If you won, you'd want to be celebrating with your team-mates and if you lost, you'd be fed up. After games, you're dehydrated. At the '94 World Cup, I was tested after the Holland match, in Orlando, Florida. I was there for about three hours; and this was immediately after we'd been knocked out of the World Cup. I would imagine that if we'd won the game I'd have pissed a bit quicker.

We only drew one game in the first half of the season, but we drew a lot more in the second half – with Newcastle, Leeds, Fulham, Arsenal and Chelsea. Draws in the Premiership aren't the end of the world but too many of them, for a team like Manchester United, can have a negative impact. There are good draws away to Chelsea, away to Arsenal – and bad draws – at home to Newcastle and away to Fulham. But too many of either won't win you titles. We beat Bolton and Southampton, and our away win against Everton was brilliant. Louis Saha scored two for us, and so did Ruud; one of the goals was his hundredth for United. We were 3–0 up at half-time, then they came back to 3–3. Ruud's second goal, a header, came very near the end. But then we went and lost to Wolves and Middlesbrough.

Scholesy was scoring regularly for us. He was a top, top player. But I still don't fall for the boy-next-door image, or that he's dead humble; he has more of an edge to him. Everyone thinks he lives in a council flat. The Class of '92 – all good players, but their role at the club has become exaggerated. 'Class of '92' seems to have grown its own legs; it has become a brand. It's as if they were a team away from the team, and they're not shy of plugging into it. But we all had the same aims; we all had the hunger.

We knew we were going through a difficult spell – not for any big reason, like Rio's ban or Beckham's departure, or the manager suing the Irish shareholders about who owned the race horse, Rock of Gibraltar. But these things, in combination, weren't helping – more negative energy around the place.

The dip isn't exactly normal, but it happens to any club. It happened at Barcelona recently and, after Real Madrid beat them in the Champions League last season, suddenly people were questioning Bayern Munich – Guardiola had got it all wrong! It's very hard to stay at the top. Players leaving, players settling in, or not settling in. The difference, when it comes to Manchester United, is that it will get a lot of attention and it will be exaggerated. We had to learn to deal with that; it was part of the package of being a United player. There really is an extra burden in playing for Manchester United. There really is – that isn't arrogance.

We were beaten at home by Liverpool – always a tough game. We lost to City, away, 4–1. This wasn't the City of today. They didn't have the same money back then, or the players. I wasn't playing in that game. I never lost to Manchester City.

A few new players arrived during the January transfer window. Louis Saha was a good player, and he always played particularly well against United when he was at Fulham. So the manager would have seen him at his best. He was a nice lad, but he had a lot of niggling injuries. I think there might have been a question about his willingness to play through the pain barrier. He kept the medical staff busy; they were never going to be out of work.

I never minded losing matches, as long as we had a fuckin' go. I also had the intelligence to understand that we were going through change. It was always going to be tough going. It wasn't Norwich who were pipping us. It was Arsenal – and Chelsea were on the verge, finishing second and third, even before the money and Mourinho arrived.

We weren't sitting back, going, 'What's happening to us?' We had to step up again. There was a frustration; we shared that with the fans. But we knew we weren't a million miles away. We had Ronaldo. The next year, we'd get Rooney. They were outstanding. You'd look at them, and go, 'We're fine.'

Footballers are intelligent. There were no rumblings in the dressing room; there was no 'The empire is crumbling.' The players knew: we had new lads settling in, Ronaldo was only seventeen. 'Give it time, there'll be no problem.'

Arsenal, then Chelsea, were the top dogs now. But they were up there to be shot at – like us.

In the Champions League we'd coasted through the group stage. We played Rangers, and it was brilliant. It was the first time I'd played at Ibrox. I'd been there before as a fan – a Celtic fan. We trained on the pitch at Ibrox the night before the game. It's usually a low-key event; you do a light bit of work. But as we got off the bus for training, I got a nice little welcome – 'You Fenian bastard.' I'd have expected it on the night of the game, but not the night before. I don't think it was the doorman who said it, but someone in that general area.

We won, 1–0. Phil Neville scored. That's what was memorable about the game, not that I was called a Fenian bastard but that Phil scored. He didn't score many. We hammered Rangers at Old Trafford. Diego Forlán had a great game that night.

We topped our group with fifteen points, and drew Porto in the first knock-out round. I was sent off in the first game, at Porto. We were 1–0 up; Quinton Fortune followed up after their keeper, Baía, had fumbled

Scholesy free-kick. Then we went 2–1 down. Benni McCarthy scored two great, almost freakish, goals that night, including an unbelievable header; I think he was at the edge of the box. To go from 1–0 up away from home – job done – to 2–1 down; I just got frustrated. We were losing – that was it. I stood on the goalkeeper, Baía. He came out and I carried on. I didn't stamp on him, but I stood on his back; I used his back as leverage. He rolled around like he'd been shot. All I can say is, we were losing 2–1, and it frustrated me. I can see now that, in the Champions League, away, it's a decent score. But I had this idea that we should have been winning every match.

I was embarrassed, and upset, later in the dressing room. The manager didn't really shout at me that night. He just went, 'Fuckin' hell, Roy.' I don't remember the manager or any of the players having a go at me after I'd been sent off. They didn't have to; I'd be beating myself up. I knew I'd let people down; I'd let my team down. Excuses were no good. But it was just as well that no one did say anything to me, because I'd have gone for them if they had. I'd have accepted an attack from the manager, but not the players. I knew I'd let them down.

I had to watch the second leg up in the stand, in the directors' box. It was torture. Scholesy had a legitimate goal disallowed; he was ruled offside – dodgy linesman, the whole lot. We would have been 2–1 up. In the last minute, Phil gave away a free-kick, Tim Howard made a mistake, Mourinho was skipping down the sideline – we were out. I hated being a spectator; it was horrible. The result might have been different if I'd been playing. Every player should think that. You have to feel you can make a difference.

Porto went on to win the Champions League that year, against Monaco. Monaco had knocked Chelsea out in the semi-final. But Monaco were very average; Chelsea should have battered them. They blew it.

Those two games gave us our first sighting of Mourinho. I didn't think he was out of order running down the sideline. It was Porto; to knock Manchester United out was a big night for him. I think he knew it was a defining moment in his career. But I'm not sure that I'd have liked playing for him. He plays *too* many games with the media. I understand the need for games. But there comes a point when you think, 'Don't play mind games today.' And poking the Barcelona coach in the eye – I wouldn't have done that. If I was still a player today, I'd like to think that I could work with Pep Guardiola. I like his style, and his presence, and the way he conducts himself.

We had a tough run to the FA Cup final. Everyone likes a cushy home draw but the tough games never bothered me. There'd be an edge to them, and if we were beaten it couldn't be written off as a 'slip-up'. We had to get past four Premiership teams, Villa, Manchester City, Fulham, and then – in the semi-final – Arsenal. There was a great atmosphere at that semi-final at Villa Park because, really, that game *was* the FA Cup final. We went into the game thinking of it as the final, and I think Arsenal did the same. The Cup final was played at Villa Park that day. We beat them, 1–0.

There are certain games you go into, when you know that if you're at your best, you'll win. It's a great way to approach a Cup final; it's a great feeling to have. We could be at our best against Arsenal and Chelsea, and still lose. But, unless we did something silly, we were going to beat Millwall.

The preparation for the game was the worst I'd ever had. I wasn't feeling well. We'd gone down to Cardiff two nights before the final. Cup finals were being played in the Millennium Stadium there while Wembley was being redeveloped. Everyone enjoyed playing in the Millennium; it was a better stadium than the old Wembley.

We ate at a fish restaurant on Thursday night. I was a bit of a health freak, and I had some scallops. I'm not sure now why I'd have been eating scallops, because I wasn't a big lover of fish. 'Well, it looks healthy and fishy – and I'm near the sea', so I had them. I'm blaming the scallops, but I don't think I was wrong anyway. I was afraid I'd miss the game, so I kept it to myself. I wouldn't have jeopardised the team, but

knew that if I was in any way fit, with my experience I could stroll through the game.

~~I didn't eat much on Friday, and I ate nothing on the day of the game. But I remember thinking, 'I'm from Millwall; if I'm 10 per cent right, I should be able to get through it.'~~

But I felt awful.

About ten minutes before kick-off, after the warm-up – still feeling weak – I threw my guts up in the dressing-room toilet. I felt great after that. I drank a load of energy drink – it would have been Lucozade or Red Bull – and got through the game quite easily. We dominated possession, so I didn't have to use too much energy.

One of Ferguson's great strengths was that he always had a feel for the group when it came to team talk. He knew what would be needed. He'd spoken to us all week, building Millwall up. That was common sense. But in the hotel on the morning of the final, he spoke about the United players – us – where we were from, the different nationalities; he made different points about each of us. I remember thinking, 'Brilliant.' It was just what we needed, a feeling of pride – we were all together. There was no real logic to it, but it felt right. I've given team talks myself since, and I've often thought, 'I don't know where that came from', but it felt right. And I thought, that morning in Cardiff, that there was that pride. We were all playing in the Cup final. 'I'm from Mayfield, and I'm playing with Ruud Van Nistelrooy and all these other lads – Ronald van der Werf from Portugal. It's amazing that we're all together.' It wasn't about Millwall, and it almost had nothing to do with the Cup final. It was about us as a team. Ferguson always got it spot-on. We didn't need a tactical talk that day – 'Watch their full-back, watch their centre-half, watch Dennis Wise, he'll be grabbing your balls or pinching you' – none of that nonsense. Our attitude was – in a nice way, 'Fuck Millwall, we're Manchester United, we'll do what's right for us, we're all in this together, we're all from different countries – it's brilliant, our families are here, we're going to win this game.'

It was the only time I've played in a Cup final that I knew we were going to win. It was confidence, not arrogance. We had better players, *and* our attitude was right. All week, the press had been full of FA Cup shocks – Southampton against United in 1976, Sunderland beating Leeds in '73 – but I knew it wouldn't happen to us. Our group was too strong.

We won 3–0.

We wore replicas of Jimmy Davis's top – DAVIS and his squad number, '36' – when we were going up to collect the trophy and our medals. I'd suggested it. Jimmy was a good young player; he was out on loan, at Watford. He drove into the back of a parked-up truck, at about five in the morning. The team went to the funeral; it had been very, very sad.

So we finished the season with the FA Cup. Arsenal won the Premiership – and they haven't won it since. They started to lose some of their strong characters, and quite a few of them were irreplaceable. Character is just as important as skill.

THREE

The Highbury tunnel was a strange one, like a little alleyway. Very tight. It was hard to avoid contact with people, even if you were trying to.

The rivalry between ourselves and Arsenal brought energy, and passion. It was brilliant. I hated them. There was an element of jealousy there, too, because I knew they were a bloody good team. But ultimately, they made me a better player. I had to be at my best. Petit and Vieira in the middle of the park. I couldn't have an off day against them. When we lost games to Arsenal I was the first man to shake the hands.

Chelsea were bringing a new challenge. But Arsenal – it was electric. And the crowd; their old ground Highbury, was an old-fashioned stadium. People said that it was a tight pitch but apparently it was the same size as most other pitches. But we seemed to have less time on the ball and their fans were almost literally on top of us. It made for a great atmosphere.

We've not seen the like since – that bitter rivalry. There isn't as much physical contact in the game now. Clubs are buying a different kind of player – technically gifted, but not fighters. But maybe it was just timing. It wasn't just myself and Patrick; there were so many rivalries all over the pitch. I see players in the tunnel today, hugging one another before a game. I don't think any of the United lads would have disagreed with me; they hated Arsenal. And the Arsenal lads hated United.

Which of us was the better team? You couldn't call it. We were like two heavyweights battering each other. Patrick was the new kid. He's five or six years younger than me – not that he looks it. He was a physical player. He was an important player for them, and I was important to United. There were always going to be fireworks. The way we both played, it was never going to be friendly. That would have been impossible. It wasn't as if we were both right-backs, and we'd never come into contact with each other. We were in the centre of the park and we were hitting each other at pace. That was going to lead to confrontation. It could be pointed out that I had a short temper but the way we played – it had nothing to do with temper. We were both trying to control the pitch, and the game. We were leaders, and if a leader is given to heated confrontation, other players will respond. It's normal. Patrick is six foot four – a big six foot four. He's a big guy. But I always tried to look at his height as a disadvantage, for him. When it came to getting little breaking balls, I was sharp; I could read the game a little bit better than him. My anticipation and touch were a bit better, I think. But, in a run for the ball, he was quicker than me. He should have had the advantage on me for headers, but I had a good spring on me. I'd had my running battles with Arsenal before Vieira arrived, right back to my days at Forest. I'd have had run-ins with Ray Parlour and Martin Keown. There was Paul Davis, John Jensen, David Rocastle. None of them were choirboys.

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