



**REVISED
AND UPDATED
EDITION**

GARY SUTHERLAND

HUNTING GROUNDS

A SCOTTISH FOOTBALL SAFARI

**'An ambitious and witty journey
in search of hope and glory'**

STUART COSGROVE



HUNTING GROUNDS

A Scottish Football Safari

For you, Dad

HUNTING GROUNDS HUNTING GROUNDS

A Scottish Football Safari

Gary Sutherland

Foreword by Stuart Cosgrove



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FOREWORD

‘Have Fun in Methil.’ Those are the first tantalising instructions in Gary Sutherland’s ambitious and witty journey in search of hope and glory. Who could resist the offer to experience the heightened entertainment of East Fife?

Scottish football is an asylum and patients wander towards it every Saturday, muttering to themselves in various deranged states of insanity. I cannot look at the tortured faces in Hogarth’s famous painting ‘Bedlam’, without thinking of Morton fans.

To suffer defeat and to be denied trophies are the childhood traumas that lie buried beneath our memories and anxieties. There are those that gravitate towards success hoping it will save them, they are the fans that follow ‘big teams’ hunting the glory of fame and greatness. But viewed clinically, this is little more than a Napoleonic complex, and proves that imperious grandeur is the most distressing illness of all.

Gary Sutherland spends more time with the charming eccentrics of the lower leagues, people, who do not conceal their deficiencies and could not even if they tried. I count myself among their number. As a fan of St Johnstone, I have always been ‘at-risk,’ a psychologically-troubled child, vulnerable to breakdown, and trying throughout life to stave off full-blown mental illness. To help me, I hoard memorabilia, collect worthless trivia and pursue bizarre and often paranoid theories about my club’s uniqueness.

Did you know, for instance, that Pontius Pilate was a St Johnstone fan? The guy who sent Christ to his crucifixion was born in the small Perthshire village of Fortingall, where his father was stationed as a Roman centurion. When it comes to celebrity-fans, few teams can match Pontius Pilate. Hearts have Ronnie Corbett but it’s not even in the same millennium, never mind the same league. I like to imagine that Pontius didn’t gloat and gave the Saviour a good send-off. ‘Sorry to sentence you to death Jesus, but here’s a DVD of Roddy Grant’s goals for your Last Supper.’

I share Gary Sutherland’s belief that you can pursue enlightenment in the most mundane places – Glebe Park, the pie-hut at Montrose, and the historic Portaloo that once disinfected urine with considerable dignity at Dumbarton’s Boghead stadium.

Boghead, even the name bristles, with filth.

By embarking on this journey you will soon discover that it is in lower-league Scottish football where history is really made. Queen of the South are the only team whose name appears in the Bible. Raith Rovers are the only team who have been shipwrecked on their way to a preseason friendly. And Alloa Athletic fans show a deft understanding of fascism when they claim that Adolf Hitler got them relegated.

These shards of uniqueness should be cherished. Hundreds of players have won a Champions' League medal, but only Livingston have had the sheer bravado to go into administration when their shirt-sponsor was *Intelligent Finance*.

So go with Gary, meet the muttering masses, drink from the stained glass of Saturday, and relish the unexpected eccentricity that you meet on the way. Have Fun in Methil.

SJFC, close season, 2007/8

INTRODUCTION

42 grounds in the space of eight months. Dozens of pies and more pints than I probably needed. Countless trains and numerous buses. Many miles walked and one ditch fallen into. Howling wind, torrential rain, snow, sleet and that other phenomenon which I'll call 'sleesh', which is a bit like sleet only wetter, though not quite rain, and unique to Scotland.

To be honest, I don't know how I managed it. I had 15 grounds under my belt by the end of September and 33 before January was out. That's ridiculous. I'm not sure I could repeat the feat and I suppose I don't have to. But would I do it again? Don't be daft. I had my Scottish football safari and lived to tell the tale.

It was a time of Jose Quitongo. A time when St Mirren played at Love Street and Gretna were busy living the dream. A time when the very notion of Rangers facing the threat of liquidation would've seemed preposterous.

I don't remember there being so much doom and gloom around Scottish football back then in the 2006-07 season. I mean, it wasn't all magical. Some of it was dismal but it wasn't this grim.

Hey-ho.

Casting my mind back now, a wet Tuesday night in Coatbridge sticks out, though not because it was terrible. Whereas the pie at Somerset Park truly was terrible. But I smile at the memory of bringing an Italian postman to a Dumbarton game and watching East Stirlingshire run rampant at Firs Park.

East Stirlingshire no longer play at Firs Park. They play at Ochilview, the home of Stenhousemuir. And guess what? You can now take the train to Alloa!

Not long after I completed my Scottish football safari, Gretna stopped living their dream and Annan arrived on the scene. I've gone to Galabank for this new edition and also made a return to Methil to see East Fife in action, something I'd been meaning to do. Talk about bonus chapters, eh?

Five years ago, my original ground-hunting expedition reached its conclusion on the edge of the world on a particularly gusty afternoon at Gayfield. I was almost swept away that day in Arbroath.

If you're reading this, it's likely that you spend your Saturday afternoon, and perhaps the occasional midweek evening, at a football ground, whether it be at Glebe Park or Borough Briggs or Firhill or wherever it is your team shines or otherwise. And if not, then I recommend you get out there and catch some games. Because Scottish football needs you. You just don't need to be trying to cram 42 grounds into a single season like I did.

But explore away. Go to Methil, if you like.

Gary Sutherland, May 2011

KICK-OFF

'Listen, dear, I'm going to be late tonight.'
'Where are you off to?'
'I'm journeying to the centre of the earth.'
'Oh. Where's that then?'
'Methil.'
'Have fun now.'
'I will. Bye.'

Have fun in Methil. Ha. What does my wife think is in Methil? Disneyland? I'll tell you what's in Methil. East Fife are in Methil. And Methil is in east Fife. A paradox that does not concern me, because only the football matters. Or, more accurately, the grounds. All forty-two of them. That's how many there are in Scotland. That's how many I'm checking out, in one season. Before I check out.

Welcome to my ...

(a) season of misadventure (b) magical mystery tour (c) odd odyssey.

Or all of the above.

People do strange things. Even football supporters. For instance, collecting grounds as if they are bagging munros or tigers. Not all football supporters gather grounds. It's more a minority pursuit. The vast majority make do with the one team, turning up at the same place every other week, perhaps travelling to away games, depending upon the extent of their passion. I am joining the tiny minority. My intention is to bring this peculiar habit out into the open, so that there can be a better understanding. (Because it's not normal.) You never know, perhaps in describing my personal descent into madness, I will sow the seed of obsession in others, and they might follow. Or maybe they won't. Still, there are lessons to be learned from this tale. Like the difference between Fir Park and Firs Park (aside from the obvious fact that one is singular and the other is plural). And being able to tell your Balmoor from your arse and your Borough Briggs from your elbow.

I am a ground-hunter.

Admitting you have a problem, they say, is the first step on the road to recovery.

The Scottish football season is a long, hard season. That season is winter. Everywhere you go you always take the weather with you. Snow, sleet, hail, rain, a hundred different strengths of wind, ranging from windy to really windy. Look! The sun! And there it goes, behind a cloud. Never to be seen again.

If nothing else, I am well equipped. My wife can confirm that. Coat. Check. Hat. Check. Gloves. Check. Scarf. Check. Balaclava. Check. Silver long johns. Check. Climbing boots. Check. Crampons. Check. Flask of soup. Check. Kendal Mint Cake. Check. Compass. Check. Satellite Phone. Check. Distress Flare. Check.

Am I ready? Ready as I'll ever be for this mostly solo expedition to the North Pole (Elgin), South Pole (Berwick-Upon-Tweed), Back of Beyond (Forfar) and, as previously hinted at, the perilous Journey To The Centre Of The Earth (Methil).

If all roads led to Hampden, this would be a piece of cake. I would get on the Cathcart Circle at Glasgow Central and get off at Mount Florida. Simple. I live and work (sort of) in Glasgow. But not all roads do lead to Hampden, or all railroads for that matter. There is another matter. I cannot drive. Not because I have had one too many. I just can't drive. I have never tried and I never plan to. And my wife won't drive me. And neither are any of my friends willing to ferry me about. (Call yourselves friends?)

Ground-hunting without a car does make it more challenging but I like a challenge. Show me a challenge and I'll show up and take it on (within reason). Relying on the vagaries of public transport to get you to the Scottish football church on time would just be too much for some folk. However, I don't have a problem with public transport. In fact, I quite like it. Particularly trains. They struggle to run at times but so do a lot of Scottish footballers. Anyway, why would you want to be in a car, stuck in weekend traffic due to 'essential' roadworks, when you could be enjoying the freedom of the train and the convenience of a table upon which to sit your can - or indeed crate - of beer?

I could rail against the shortcomings of the rail service in Scotland. Platform alterations, delayed departures, outlandish fares, signal failure. The default Scottish response to being stuck-on-the-track is hacked-off passengers muttering 'this is ridiculous' and tutting a lot. Tut enough and the train might start up again. What we, the Scots, do is stoicism, with an air of disgruntlement. That is our failsafe coping mechanism. We're good at it.

We are also good at drinking on trains. Especially on Saturdays when battalions of broad-shouldered blokes in T-shirts (whatever the weather) clamber aboard with clinking bags. Tssst. The grand opening of the first can before the journey gets under way. Yes, it's nine o'clock in the morning, but so what? You'll have had your breakfast. Time. To. Drink. And by the second can you're shouting. And by the third can you're singing your team's songs. And by the fourth can you're swearing and staggering with your swollen bladder down the aisle in search of a toilet (which will be out-of-order). Your drunken antics are annoying the heck out of your fellow passengers, but you are oblivious to them. Everything is a blur. Probably the match will be too.

Naturally, there will be none of that nonsense from me. Well, maybe a wee bit. We'll see. I need my wits about me. Otherwise I might end up stranded in Alloa. Then I won't know what to do. Probably set off the distress flare and chew on some mint cake while awaiting the arrival of the rescue helicopter. 'Winch me up and get me the Clackmannanshire out of here.'

I'm not blind to this. I've seen Scottish football. But not all of it. I have some notion of what I am letting myself in for. I know that the fancy-pants player in the white boots will have trouble trapping the ball. That the completion of a pass merits a round of applause (especially a square pass). That winning a corner kick is the next best thing to scoring a goal. That there will be extended bouts of head tennis in the middle of the park. That the ball will be booted out of the ground. That with hoof there is hope. That showboating leads to sinking. That hatchet-men like to hatchet. That supporters heckle and curse and bawl and spew. That there is fat chance of quality amid slim pickings. That it will probably be more eye-watering than mouth-watering. That this business is the results business. ('We are not here to entertain.') That wonders will never cease. While the wind and the rain never let up. That the floodlights will come on at half-past three.

Oh God. What have I done? What am I doing? Football can be a cruel game but this is bordering on self-abuse. Football flagellation. It is probably illegal.

Hey, it might all work out. Maybe I will have F.U.N. on my tour de ground force. Once I have seen all that there is to see, from Aberdeen to Stranraer, and reached Level 42 along with Nirvana, I might want to do it all over again. In reverse.

Scottish Premier League, Scottish First Division, Scottish Second Division, Scottish Third Division, Scottish Cup, CIS Insurance Cup, Challenge Cup ... Cowdenbeath, Stirling Albion, Queen of the South, St Johnstone, Airdrie United, Kilmarnock, Clyde ... Somerset Park, Stair Park, Easter Road, New Douglas Park, Cappielow, Almondvale, Tannadice ... wherever I lay my hat is my home. But I have to wrap this all up in one season. (I'm being hard on myself. Plus there's a certain satisfaction in it. If I make it.)

There aren't forty-two weeks in the Scottish football season. I will have my work cut out. I'll be fitting in a few Sundays ... and Tuesdays ... and Wednesdays. This will take over my life and I will have to be extra-nice to my wife, but hopefully it won't be grounds for divorce. I'm not overly bothered about the order of grounds that I visit. I'll be making it up as I go along. I work best that way. But it's not fiction. My one desire is to make the last ground Arbroath's. I'm not sure why. There is something about Gayfield. The idea of concluding my mission on the edge of the world. And who knows, maybe Gayfield will throw up a surprise ending. We will just have to wait and see.

I'll be sitting with the home fans. In all cases, even head-cases. I'll be away from home, but I won't be an away supporter. If I'm at Recreation Park, I'm with Alloa. If I'm at Dens Park, I'm with Dundee. If I'm in Methil, I'm sure to be having a whale of a time.

I have a season ticket to Scottish football. Here I go, into the great wide open, on safari. I'll survive. mean ... it's not like it's Mission Impossible or anything.

EPISODE **1**

MISSION POSSIBLE

(THE POLISH MENACE)

OBJECTIVE:
To go to Celtic Park
and watch Celtic.

SCENARIO: Celtic, the defending Scottish champions, are playing Kilmarnock in the Scottish Premier League.

DATE: Saturday, July 29, 2006. A significant day. One overflowing with optimism. The first day of the Scottish football season. Oh, it's going to be good this year. Haud me back.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION: Celtic are located in the east end of Glasgow. Parkhead precinct to be precise.

CULTURAL NOTES: In the east end of Glasgow - the Celtic end of Glasgow - there is plenty to see besides football. For instance. There is the People's Palace on Glasgow Green, and near that is the people's market, The Barras, where you can buy fags and socks, amongst other stuff, and, if you fancy a music gig instead of a football gig, there is the people's concert venue, the unbeatable Barrowland.

CELTIC PROFILE

KICKED OFF: Three fat ladies ... 1888. Hearing of Celtic's formation, Vincent van Gogh cuts off part of his left ear and gives it to a prostitute.

TRUE COLOURS: The Celtic colours are unmistakable. Red, white and royal ... I mean green and white. Hoops.

BADGE OF HONOUR: The four-leaf clover on Celtic's badge is symbolic of the club's Irish roots. We asked all 42 clubs if we could use their badges in this book for illustration purposes. Celtic said no. So we're not displaying any badges. Thanks Celtic.

NAME CALLING: Not content with one nickname, Celtic have several. First of all, there is the Hoops. Then there is the Bhoys. And there is also the Tic, which sounds parasitical.

MORTAL ENEMY: Amazing But True. Celtic are not that keen on Rangers. Yawn. And the feeling is reciprocated. The Old Firm. Where would Scottish football be without them?

AREN'T WE BRILLIANT?: Celtic's greatest achievement was in becoming the first British club to win the European Cup. Jock Stein masterminded the defeat of Inter Milan in the 1967 final in Portugal. And the Lisbon Lions were lionised. Heck, they deserved to be.

MISSION LOGISTICS

ALIGHT AT: Dalnarnock train station. Reasonably close to Celtic Park with trains running regularly from Glasgow Central lower level. You could catch a bus to Celtic Park from the city centre, with local services trundling along either London Road or Gallowgate. If you are fighting fit you can actually walk to Celtic Park from the city centre and there are Celtic fans who do just that. Allow

yourself half-an-hour. Excluding pub-stops. There are an unfeasible number of pubs on the way to Celtic Park, so one thing is certain. You will never have a drouth. I start counting pubs on my walk to Celtic Park, but I decide to stop when I reach 100.

A Pint At: There are a gazillion Celtic-friendly pubs lining the path to Celtic Park. If you are looking for something traditional (sawdust on the floor etcetera) then one well-known Celtic pub on Gallowgate is Baird's Bar, where Kenny Dalglish once held a Celtic press conference, just for the hell of it.

MISSION DEBRIEFING

Field of Dreams: Celtic Park is the home of Celtic but it is also known as Parkhead and as Paradise in the minds of the Celtic fans. There is no doubt about it that Celtic Park is an outstanding amphitheatre. They don't throw Celtic fans to the lions or anything like that, but if they were to throw them to the Lisbon Lions, then they would not mind too much. The Celtic crowd is renowned for generating an incredible atmosphere, without the aid of a generator, on European nights. But on a run-of-the-mill-dull-as-ditchwater domestic day, with, say, Kilmarnock dropping by instead of, say, AC Milan, you could hear a pin drop. The front façade of the ground is quite ugly, architecturally, but it is what's inside that counts, isn't it? And Celtic Park shows up nicely given the correct conditions (i.e. testing opposition in a decent competition) when the up-for-it Celtic supporters do their scarves routine with 'You'll Never Walk Alone'. A sight-and-a-half to behold. Celtic Park is the biggest football ground in Scotland and is also one of the biggest in Britain. I happen to discover that the Celtic Park toilets are hotbed of illicit smoking in a smoke-free nation. The steward is not a happy steward as he too makes the discovery when he walks in and finds legions of Celtic supporters contentedly puffing away. 'Anyone caught smoking in here,' shouts the steward, 'will be pissed on by Gordon Strachan.' At least I think that's what he said. Lordy.

Super Pies Me: The match-day catering vans which clog up the approach to Celtic Park, and will clog up your arteries if you're not careful, offer a wide range of culinary treats. Simply you are spoiled for choice. You can have chips and curry sauce. You could have chips and cheese. Chips and bolognaise. Chips and chips. It is difficult to decide. Once you get inside Celtic Park, they won't even sell you chips. Instead they serve 'fries' which come as part of the 'Captain's Deal' of burger, fries and coke, for just under a fiver, in a deal negotiated by Neil Lennon's agent. (Stephen McManus has since held out for an even better 'Captain's Deal'.) For a split-nanosecond I am tempted by the 'Rollover Hot Dog'. It is, allegedly, 'The Best Hot Dog In The World'. But I don't play the lottery and don't really fancy my chances with the Rollover. So, instead, I play it cagey and plump for the Celtic pie. I find the meat interior of the Celtic pie to be pinkish, a slight worry, but not sufficiently worrying to warrant me not scoffing it. It is also very, very salty. I have no option but to buy a bucket of coke and wash it all down and hope for the best. I feel quite sick.

GAME ON: Celtic 4-1 Kilmarnock

CELTIC GOALSCORERS: Zurawski 25, Jarosik 38, Nakamura 75, Zurawski 90.

KILMARNOCK GOALSCORER: Naismith 87.

CELTIC: Boruc, Wilson, Caldwell, McManus, Camara, Nakamura, Petrov, Jarosik (Sno 84), McGeady, Zurawski, Miller (Riordan 88).

KILMARNOCK: Smith, Fowler, Lilley, Greer, Hay, Naismith, Johnston, Wright, Di Giacomo (Leven 69), Invincibile, Nish (Wales 63).

HEAD COUNT: 54,620. Surely the biggest crowd of the season. For me at least. Unless there is unexpected unprecedented demand for the Angus derby at Links Park.

Report Card: Celebrating Celtic unfurl their championship flag and promptly set about flogging Kilmarnock. Maciej 'Magic' Zurawski magics up a magical finish after Kenny Miller robs David Lilley, but not at gun-point, as the defending champions get their title defence under way in the proper manner. New Bhoys Juri 'Jurassic' Jarosik feasts raptor-like on Celtic's second before Shunsuke Nakamura knocks in Celtic's third from a crafty free kick. Steven Naismith pulls one back for Kilmarnock and offers his side some hope (some hope!) before zippy Zurawski decides to order a double and Celtic's fourth. Which upsets one Celtic fan who suddenly leaps from his seat to shout 'Polish bastard!' because Zurawski, the cretin, has only gone and ruined his coupon. Celtic ease to an easy opening day victory and canter on to have another league title wrapped up by, oh, October, since everyone else in the division is, well, rubbish.

Going For Gold: My piano teacher used to give me gold stars if I had practised. You may wonder why I am telling you this, but the system used by my piano teacher is the system I propose to use for the purpose of rating the matches I attend throughout the silly season. I never, ever, got ten gold stars in one sitting from my piano teacher but the perfect match will be awarded the perfect ten gold stars. Conversely, any game that scrapes the bottom of the barrel will be denied any gold stars. Logically, an average contest shall receive five gold stars. So there we are then. Now. Celtic versus Kilmarnock? Good value for goals and some neat passages of play from Celtic, but let's face it, as a 'contest' it is pretty one-sided, and the Celtic supporters don't seem terribly excited about it either. It may be that they are hard to please but it could be that there are simply too many foregone-conclusion fixtures like this for Celtic in the Premier League. Kilmarnock are one of the better teams in the top flight, but not today sadly. Over the piece, I believe this one merits a total of seven gold stars, which is the benchmark for the other forty-one games I am planning to fit into my packed social schedule between now and next summer. Jesus, that seems miles away. It is only July now.

Fanfare: The Celtic supporters seem strangely subdued. In fact, it would appear that the majority of them are half-asleep. Maybe they are blowing off their post-season cobwebs still. They haven't fully got into the swing of things yet. The Celtic season ticket holder whose seat I am occupying isn't here today - he fancied a game of golf instead. That's devotion for you. The idea of Kilmarnock does not arouse much excitement. Not even when it is flag-raising day and Celtic are cuffing Kilmarnock. The first Celtic chant clocks in at 73 minutes. It is a lacklustre chant of 'mothehoo, mothehoo'. Which roughly translated means 'c'mon the Hoops, c'mon the Hoops'. One thing you can say about these Celtic supporters, and you can't take it away from them ... they manage to out-sing those Kilmarnock supporters. Wherever they are.

Music To My Ears: The contented Celtic fans filter out of Celtic Park with Goldfrapp's 'Number One' on the sound system. You cannot really argue with that. Celtic currently are Number One.

Incidental Weather Report: It would not be Glasgow in July without a downpour. The Celtic fan in front of me picks up a discarded plastic bag and puts it on his head. An improvised hat. Nice look. Practical use thereof.

MISSION POSSIBLE **2**
EPIISODE
(ATTACK OF THE PRSO)

OBJECTIVE:
To go to Fir Park
and watch Motherwell.

SCENARIO: Motherwell are playing Rangers in the Scottish Premier League. Rangers have a new manager and his name is Pepe Le Pew. No it isn't. It is Paul Le Guen.

DATE: Sunday, July 30, 2006. The first Sunday of the new Scottish football season. The day after I witness Celtic take care of Kilmarnock. My wife is totally thrilled by my absence. No, really, she is.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION: The shire of Lanark. Or Lanarkshire, if you like.

CULTURAL NOTES: According to my dog-eared copy of *Scotland The Braw*, a singular guide book which is now sadly out of print, 'Motherwell has little to offer the visitor'. But if I were you, I would not want to be turning my nose up at the Motherwell Heritage Centre, where the industrial history of Motherwell is laid out before you. On top of such treats, if you make your way to the top of the glass tower, you will be afforded a stunning panorama of the surrounding area. Sounds like the perfect day out to me, but I'm easily pleased. I'm looking forward to my trip to Cowdenbeath.

MOTHERWELL PROFILE

KICKED OFF: 1886. Queen Victoria receives Burma as a birthday present.

TRUE COLOURS: Motherwell are the only Scottish football club to combine amber and claret. I mean, why would you?

NAME CALLING: The Steelmen. Because Motherwell was the steel town but the steelworks are gone now. The Well is acceptable shorthand for Motherwell. If your team happens to lose to Motherwell, which might not happen very often, someone might ask you 'is your mother well?' The important thing for you to remember is that this individual cares little about your mother and they are just taking a rise out of you. Motherwell were at one time known as the Dossers. Whether this was because they were a lazy bunch of arses, I'm not entirely sure.

BADGE OF HONOUR: The Motherwell badge tells you everything you need to know about Motherwell and then some. The crest incorporates a football (because Motherwell play football, sort of), some fir trees (because Motherwell play football, sort of, at Fir Park) and a depiction of the now-defunct Ravenscraig steelworks.

MORTAL ENEMY: Motherwell's enemies are football clubs from other Lanarkshire towns, like Hamilton and Airdrie. And Albion Rovers if you really want to stretch the regional rivalry.

AREN'T WE BRILLIANT?: Didn't Motherwell do well when they became Scottish Champions? In season 1931/32. Much later, 1991 in fact, Motherwell were involved in a gripping Scottish Cup final with Dundee United at Hampden, and emerged victorious in a 4-3 thriller choreographed by Michael Jackson.

MISSION LOGISTICS

ALIGHT AT: From Motherwell Central train station it is about a fifteen minute walk to Fir Park through the people-heavy pedestrianised shopping precinct. Top tip. Airbles train station is closer to Fir Park. It leads to a similarly scenic stroll but minus the commercialism of the shopping precinct. Trains to both Motherwell Central and Airbles can be caught, with a large rod, from the lower level of Glasgow Central and journey time is approximately half-an-hour.

A Pint At: The Fir Park Social Club is bang next to Fir Park would you believe. As an away fan – or neutral – you are sure to be made most welcome, provided you make a donation at the door. Say £20. I am faced with a lengthy queue at the bar because there are a lot of Rangers fans here today. Half-a-dozen of them are deep in discussion about their drinks order. ‘Right. So that’s twenty Miller, two spicy and coke, five vodka lemonade, three Bacardi Breezers and two Irn Bru?’ Steady on the Irn Bru I’m thinking. A lot of Scottish football fans are as much devoted to drink as they are to their football team. With such a high alcohol intake, they surely can’t be taking in much of the match. At the bar I call out the modest order of ‘a pint of lager, please’. The smell of pakora wafts through the corridors of power of the Fir Park Social Club. They are happy to feed you here, as well as water you. Overall, the Fir Park Social Club is an agreeable beer haven, but if you are looking for an alternative then there is the Electric Bar next to Airbles station, where the atmosphere is electric.

MISSION DEBRIEFING

Field of Dreams: Fir Park is one of those higgledy-piggledy stadiums where the stands are all different sizes and seem to bear no relation to each other. But you get a great view of the game. At least from the East Stand which is full of Motherwell supporters and me. One thing that puzzles me about Fir Park is that I don’t recall seeing any trees. Next to the club shop at Fir Park is the Davie Cooper Memorial Wall. All the bricks carry inscriptions from Motherwell fans praising the late wing legend and proclaiming their feelings about their club. Best Left Foot. Born To Be Well. Mon The Well. A Fan Through Thick And Thin. And, my personal favourite, Ah’ll No Be Back Next Week.

Super Pies Me: The Motherwell pie is a pie of convenience. Convenience food, if you like. Basically you can join the East Stand pie queue before half-time – thus significantly slashing the waiting-time and, by simply rotating your head 90 degrees, you can continue to watch the match unfold as you await delivery of your baked goods. Now how handy is that? Unless, of course, the match happens to be shite, and you want to avoid watching it for a bit, in which case, I suggest you should just look straight ahead at the pie counter, or shut your eyes. The Motherwell pie is okay. But no better than that. I wouldn’t have it again. And I don’t have to. No one’s going to make me go there again.

GAME ON: Motherwell 1-2 Rangers

MOTHERWELL GOALSCORER: O’Donnell 52.

RANGERS GOALSCORERS: Sionko 8, Prso 65.

MOTHERWELL: Smith, Kerr, Craigan, Quinn, Donnelly, Foran (Fitzpatrick 78), O’Donnell, McGarry (Clarkson 78), Paterson, McCormack (McDonald 61), Hamilton.

RANGERS: Letizi, Hutton, Svensson, Rodriguez, Smith, Sionko (Novo 80), Clement, Hemdani, Adam, Prso, Buffel (N’Diaye 90)

HEAD COUNT: 11,745.

Report Card: A wasteful Rangers side pass up hatfuls of chances but still manage to beat Motherwell.

Libor Sionko nets on his Rangers debut, the highlight of his Rangers career. But, after a bad batch of botched bloopers from the bungling Thomas Buffel (the chief miscreant in the misfiring Rangers ranks) Phil O' Donnell levels for Motherwell to make them feel better for a bit. It looks as if the home side might just pinch themselves a point from this keenly-contested contest. Until, that is, big giant Dado Prso makes amends for a pony-tale of missed opportunities, the muckle Croatian cracking in a winning header at the near post near the end. New Rangers manager Paul Le Guen later expresses his Gallic relief at victory. This is just the beginning for Le Guen. And it's quite near the end too.

Going For Gold: You know, I have got loads of these gold stars. I keep them all in a box. Motherwell and Rangers together serve up a reasonable treat (albeit with some crap shooting from Rangers) and keep us all guessing almost until the end, like Rolf Harris used to do. ('Can you tell what it is yet?' I dunno, Rolf. A kangaroo?) I was about to award this fixture seven-and-a-half gold stars. But I fear that may be me being overly generous. I have a very ungenerous nature. So I will rein myself in, and put on my sensible beret, and dish out a level-headed seven gold stars. Which is the same as Celtic received. Which means neither of the Old Firm can complain about bias or agenda, which is what some of their fans tend to do when they think somebody's got it in for them. But that is enough Old Firm. There is more than the Old Firm in this all-encompassing book. There is Peterhead. And Raith Rovers. I could go on. I will go on.

Fanfare: Not much in the way of melody from the Motherwell supporters. Meanwhile, the Rangers fans sing songs they shouldn't be singing. The Rangers fans are quite close to the Motherwell fans and there is one dodgy moment when a rotund Ranger fan stands up and makes an obscene gesture in our direction. His gesture consists of him clutching his crotch. Nice. A Motherwell fan jumps from his seat and makes a measurement with his index finger and thumb. A small measurement. 'It's that size' he shouts. This does not dissuade the Rangers fan who persists with his public show of vulgarity. He does not give a monkey's how small the Motherwell fans think it is. You get away with an awful lot at football grounds. If you tried in the streets, you would likely land yourself in a real spot of bother.

EPISODE
MISSION POSSIBLE 3
(REVENGE OF THE SAINTS)

OBJECTIVE:
To go to Love Street
and watch St Mirren.

SCENARIO: St Mirren are playing Motherwell in the Scottish Premier League. Motherwell again. I don't really want to be watching Motherwell for the second week running. I don't have anything against Motherwell. No grudges. It's just that, unless you're a Motherwell fan, you probably shouldn't be watching Motherwell every week. Or two weeks in a row. I guess these are the kind of hardships I have to deal with between now and the end of the season, or between now and whenever I eventually make it to match forty-two. Better to grin and bear it ... barely. At least my friend Alex is joining me for this one. Alex is a Buddie. He is a St Mirren fan. This is the only flaw I can think of in his otherwise faultless character.

DATE: Saturday, August 5, 2006. Amazing! August already. The season is flying by. Blink and I'll miss it. This will all be over in no time. Won't it?

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION: Paisley is situated on the northern edge of the Gleniffer Braes on the banks of the River Cart. Basically, it's near Glasgow.

CULTURAL NOTES: The Paisley Pattern was actually designed in Paisley. You will notice that pretty much everybody in Paisley sports the Paisley Pattern. On ties, shirts and what-not. You can seek out the story of the recognisable swirling teardrop at Paisley's museum and art gallery. You might not want to do that. But the option is always there.

ST MIRREN PROFILE

KICKED OFF: 1877. Swan Lake debuts to rave reviews but there is a lukewarm reaction from Scottish football fans.

TRUE COLOURS: Black and white vertical stripes.

NAME CALLING: The Buddies refers to both the people of Paisley and their football team. (When I say 'both the people of Paisley' I don't mean that there are only two people in Paisley.) The Saints is another nickname of St Mirren, who are renowned for playing in a saintly manner. St Mirren players rarely receive yellow cards. Never mind red ones.

BADGE OF HONOUR: The St Mirren badge is a variation on the Paisley coat of arms which appears to involve a couple of stars and what looks like a bit of a chessboard.

MORTAL ENEMY: That would be Greenock Morton then. Paisley Panda, the confrontational and often controversial mascot of St Mirren, has long been known to rile the good folk of Greenock with his soap-brush brandishing and banjo-strumming. Except today when I look at him patting little St Mirren children on the head, I think: 'What a nice panda'.

AREN'T WE BRILLIANT?: St Mirren are so astonishingly useful they have won the Scottish Cup three times, most recently in 1987 when they defeated Dundee United in the final, the last time the Scottish Cup was won by an all-Scottish side. It has since been won by an all-Lithuanian side. St Mirren's list of honours also includes the Barlow Cup which was a short-lived cup competition, jointly-sponsored by Ken Barlow and Gary Barlow.

MISSION LOGISTICS

ALIGHT AT: How to get to Love Street ... well, you could fly to Glasgow airport. It's only half-a-mile from Love Street. Maybe you can take a taxi to the ground? Alternatively, trains run frequently from Glasgow Central to Paisley Gilmour Street from where it is a two-minute walk. If you require any clothes washed, you can pop them into Soapy Suds Laundrette on Love Street. While you are waiting on your wash cycle to finish you could drop into Davies Deli for a bite to eat. That is if you can't hang on until the half-time pie.

A Pint At: As you exit Paisley Gilmour Street station you will probably spot The Hole In The Wa' across the road. The Hole In The Wa' is a pub - with four walls - and I note that you can get a half-and-half for £1.70 and that their karaoke list has just been updated. The Wee Barrel, on Love Street, is well-placed for the football and this is where I've arranged to meet Alex, my Buddie. The pub has a most unappealing frontage and had Alex not recommended the Wee Barrel, I do not think I would have given it a second glance. I barely give it a first glance. But I make my way in and it is actually quite a good pub, all things considered. If you happen to be in Paisley in spring, you could do worse than make for Paisley Town Hall and the Paisley Real Ale Festival, which is the biggest beer festival in Scotland and has been on the go for over two decades. Belch. Probably better doing the beer festival after the football.

MISSION DEBRIEFING

Field of Dreams: The eponymous St Mirren Park is home to St Mirren but the fans and everyone else call it Love Street. Love Street is a true jumble of stands, old and new, the main stand pinched from somebody's Subbuteo set and the more new Reid Kerr College stand vaguely resembling one of these new supermarkets that keep popping up across the country. St Mirren, in fact, struck a deal with a supermarket, which dealt with the club's debt problem and they are soon moving into a new stadium not too far away. But, meantime, the North Stand is where the barmiest Buddies can be found grumbling or cheering, depending on what is happening on the park. The North Stand is reached via a steep ramp and it is a satisfying ascent. It is also a satisfying descent. They should build more of these ramps in Scottish football, you know.

Super Pies Me: Oh dear. There is either something lurking in my St Mirren pie that shouldn't be lurking. Or I am hallucinating. How should I put this? Hmm. This is difficult ... I know! Have you ever seen The Lost Boys? Well ... you know the scene in Kiefer Sutherland's cave where Michael and the vampires of Santa Carla are tucking into Chinese takeaways and Michael looks down into his carton of noodles and the noodles are worms? And Kiefer, the cool vampire, laughs at Michael and looks him right in the eye and says 'Noodles Michael ... they're only noodles.' Now, I am not suggesting for one moment that there is an actual worm in my St Mirren pie. But there is a minuscule rogue element amid the meat. It could be a bit of an eyelash - a cow's eyelash? - but then again it would seem to be moving.

GAME ON: St Mirren 2-0 Motherwell

ST MIRREN GOALSCORERS: Sutton 17, Quinn 51 o.g.

ST MIRREN: Smith, Broadfoot, McGowne, Potter, van Zanten, Lappin, Brady, Molloy, Murray, Sutton, Kean (Corcoran 75).

MOTHERWELL: Smith, Quinn, Craigan, Donnelly, Paterson, Kerr, McGarry, O'Donnell, Foran (McDonald 53), Hamilton,

HEAD COUNT: 5,036.

Report Card: Dining in the Premier League restaurant again after five years' absence, St Mirren go to the top of the table (eh?) after their not-very-difficult win over an out-of-sorts Motherwell side. The First Division flag is hoisted on the tiniest flagpole before the game gets started and the home fans are lifted not by the police but by man-of-the-match John Sutton who is presented with an opportunity he simply cannot miss, being a striker and all that. Motherwell's Paul Quinn thoughtfully extends St Mirren's lead with a goal all of his own, or an own goal if you prefer, and the buoyant Buddies run down the remaining minutes on the clock to raise a revenue of three points. Buddies two, Well pooh.

Going For Gold: This is not the level of football that the words 'Premier League' would tend to suggest. Take nothing away from St Mirren, they have enjoyed a great start to the season. A St Mirren supporter, like my Buddie Alex, would gladly give out ten gold stars. But Alex does not have the box of gold stars. I have and I am now picking out five of them.

Fanfare: The St Mirren fans are in party mode. 'When the Saints go marching in' is their calling card (even if they are at home). While 'Que sera sera' demonstrates their aptitude for foreign languages. There's not much emerging from the Motherwell supporters. Not even a smattering of German.

Music To My Ears: The Thin White Duke is in command at Love Street. We are treated to both 'Heroes' and 'Starman' by David Bowie. So why don't they play 'The Laughing Gnome'? Or that one from Labyrinth? 'Dance Magic Dance' was it?

Mike Check: The Love Street MC issues a pre-match health and safety reminder to the crowd. 'Ladies and gentlemen, we would like to remind you that St Mirren Park is a no-smoking zone, apart from the home section of the North Bank.' Cue: an almighty roar from the North Bank as cigarettes are lit and raised aloft in celebration of the right to puff away, while the players puff about on the pitch. Scottish football. It's bad for your health.

EPISODE
MISSION POSSIBLE 4
(A NEW HOPE)

OBJECTIVE:
*To go to Cliftonhill and
watch Albion Rovers.
Now we're talking.*

SCENARIO: Albion Rovers are playing Stenhousemuir. Wait for it ... in the CIS Insurance Cup first round! The word belter was invented for games such as this. Never mind all that Champions League nonsense.

DATE: Tuesday, August 8, 2006. Well what else is there to do on a Tuesday night? What? 'Anything but watch Albion Rovers? Goodness me. You need to get out more often.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION: Albion Rovers can be discovered in Coatbridge which is in North Lanarkshire. Coatbridge is not 10 miles from Glasgow. Perhaps you are detecting a trend. At this early stage of my ground hunting, I have little inclination to venture too far from Glasgow. I will worry about Dingwall and Stranraer later. They're not my problem, even if later on they might become my problem. But, for now, let's press on. There is not a minute to lose, and we don't want to be losing any of this momentum we have gained.

CULTURAL NOTES: If you are planning on coming to Coatbridge, you should be aware of top local visitor attraction Summerlee Heritage Park. If you want heritage, then this is the place.

ALBION ROVERS PROFILE

KICKED OFF: 1882. Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture debuts in Moscow and is soon ringing around the football grounds of Scotland.

TRUE COLOURS: Yellow and red (like Melchester Rovers) is a rather fetching combination.

BADGE OF HONOUR: Two swords crossing a rose, suggesting an element of romance mixed with a hint of danger.

NAME CALLING: The Wee Rovers. The great thing about Albion Rovers, I find, is that they never get ideas above their station. A lot of other clubs would do well to remember that. The Wee Rovers. Paragons of humility. And sometimes humiliated on the football field.

MORTAL ENEMY: Was Airdrieonians. Until they ceased to exist. I suppose Airdrie United are the same thing (aren't they?).

AREN'T WE BRILLIANT?: Albion Rovers were not so wee when they finished runners-up in the Scottish Cup in 1920. They mauled Rangers in the semi-finals and lost to Kilmarnock in the final. Idiots. Since then the Coatbridge collective have been decent enough to conquer the Second Division on a couple of occasions. Who knows what will happen in the future? Psychics.

MISSION LOGISTICS

ALIGHT AT: Make sure you get off the train at Coatdyke. Not Coatbridge Central. Not Coatbridge Sunnyside. And definitely not Coatbridge Darkside, which is where Anakin Skywalker got off, and

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