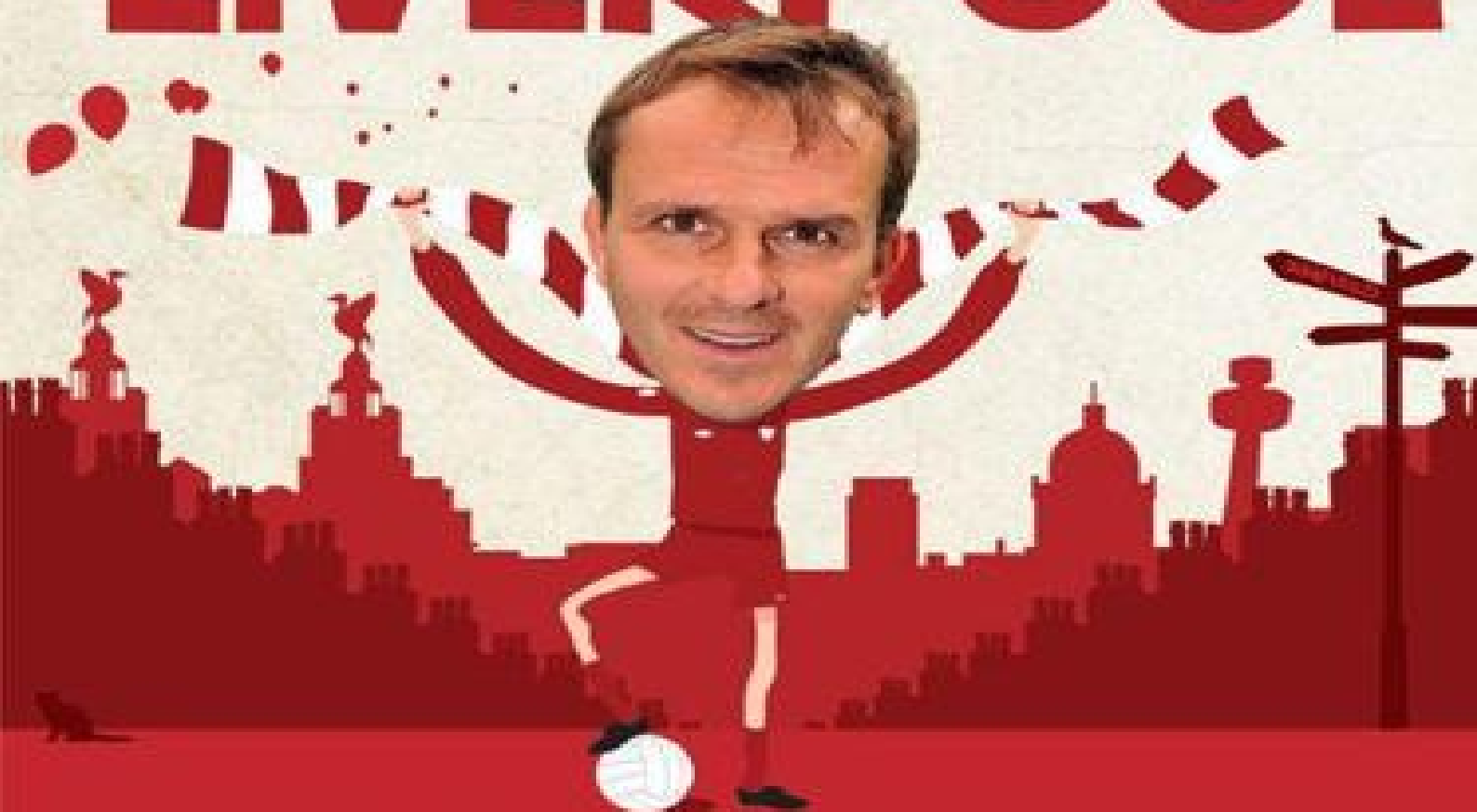


"Before Didi came along, all we had in common with the Germans were dodgy moustaches and weird hair styles." JOHN BISHOP

THE
DIDI MAN:
MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH
LIVERPOOL



DIETMAR HAMANN

**"Trackie-splitting tales from Kaiser, the Mark I German Scouser.
I'm chokka!" JAMIE CARRAGHER**

THE DIDI MAN: MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH LIVERPOOL

with
Malcolm McClean

headline

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First published as an Ebook by Headline Publishing Group in 2012

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

eISBN: 9780755362820

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

An Hachette UK Company

338 Euston Road

London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk

www.hachette.co.uk

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Dietmar “Didi” Hamann is a complete one-off. The foreigner with a Scouse accent. The German who now plays cricket for his local village team. The overseas footballer turned anglophile who fell deep in love with the city of Liverpool, its people and its eponymous football club.

The classy midfielder had a long and distinguished playing career, but it was his seven seasons at Anfield that marked him out forever as a true Liverpool legend. His cult status was secured when he came off the bench at half-time during the Champions League final in Istanbul to inspire his team to a dramatic come-back and spectacular European glory.

The Didi Man is Hamann’s warm, personal and highly entertaining story of his time on Merseyside playing for a football club which will always have a very special place in his heart.

Born in Waldsassen in Germany in 1973, Dietmar Hamann played football for Wacker Munich, Bayern Munich, Newcastle United, Liverpool, Manchester City and Milton Keynes Dons.

In club football, Hamann is much decorated, having won two Bundesliga titles, the German FA Cup, two League Cups, two UEFA Cups, two FA Cups, two League Cups and a Champions League winners' medal. At international level, he won 59 caps for his native Germany and has a 2002 World Cup runners-up medal for his efforts. In 2010 Hamann became player/coach at Milton Keynes Dons and in 2011 he joined Leicester City as a first team coach. His first spell in football management came at Stockport County.

Malcolm McClean helped Didi put his story on the page. Malcolm is the founder of The School of Curiosity, The It's a Goal Foundation and Bearhunt.



FOREWORD BY JOHN BISHOP



Whenever I have read a foreword in someone's book it's always clear to me that it has been written by a friend of the author. It's always full of praise for the author's endeavours that have led to the publication of the book in order to whet the reader's appetite for what is to come. I am not going to do that for two reasons. One, I am not Didi Hamann's friend; and two, I spent years watching Didi play and if the foreword of a book is like the literary equivalent of a prematch warmup, I have decided to act as Didi did in every game I saw him warm up for, by putting in no effort whatsoever.

Every Liverpool supporter will recall the feeling of anticipation before the game – taking your seat, talking about possible formations, tactics, game plans and scenarios that we might see in the course of the next ninety minutes. Then looking at the players warming up in the same way you would look at racehorses before a race, trying to see the telltale signs of who was best prepared for what was to come. Then you would see Didi Hamann looking like someone in a shoe shop with his wife. His face seeming to suggest that he knew he had to be there but he would rather be in the pub or on the couch with a cup of tea.

Other players would be bending and stretching, pulling this way and that so that the muscles in their finely tuned bodies were ready to burst into action. I've only ever seen Didi touch his toes once and that was when we played Fulham in the 2003/04 season when he bent over to tie his bootlaces.

The reality was that Didi came alive when the whistle blew and he had the ability to make anything something brilliant look easy. It always seemed to be that the bigger the game the more he took it to his stride and he would often leave the field looking like he had in fact wandered around a shoe shop rather than playing at the highest level of the greatest game in the world. All that Didi needed to do was to convert his World Cup runners-up medal to a winners' medal, pick up a EURO and a Premier League title and he would have then won every single trophy you can win in Germany, England and the world. Three medals away from a full set for a man who looked like he drove a van to work.

I think I need to clarify my earlier comment about Didi not being my friend. I do like the man, I like him a lot, and I have been lucky enough to spend time with him socially. Anyone who has done so will tell you that it is so enjoyable that you find yourself thinking that every stereotype you have about Germans is wrong. He is not in the least bit efficient, I have never met anyone who forgets what he is meant to be doing so often. He is a million miles from being stylish, and often looks like an eighty-year-old who insists on dressing himself even though nothing matches. He's funny too. Very, very funny. Perhaps the reason he has stayed so long in England is that he simply does not belong in Germany any more. How many inefficient, badly dressed, funny Germans do you know?

No. The reason I said he is not my friend is because you do not keep secrets from friends (unless you are John Terry but that is another story), but I have always kept a secret from Didi, and that is that he changed my life and I owe much of what I am today to him. Not just him obviously, there have been loads of people who have influenced my life, but I am a comedian today due in no small part to the events of 25 May 2005.

In 2005, as Liverpool were progressing through the Champions League and stand-up comedy was just a sideline for me, I had a proper job. One day I was called into my boss's office and was told that my job depended upon me attending a meeting on 25 May. This was the same day that the final was to be played in Istanbul. The problem was that the meeting was to be in Seattle on the west coast of America, and it was physically impossible to be in both places at once.

Even after the momentous semi-final win against Chelsea, when I danced on the Kop and celebrated with my mates, I knew that I could not go to the final. It had been made clear to me that if I did not go to Seattle I would not have a job, so I reluctantly gave my ticket to one of my mates and boarded the plane for America.

Once in the States it became apparent that the meeting was not such a big deal and though I could not get to Istanbul, provided I caught all the right connections I could get home to watch the match at my own house.

Nineteen hours later I came through the door with ten minutes to spare before kick-off. All of my mates who had gone to Istanbul had sent their wives and kids to our house. I was the only man in the room. Little girls were all doing cartwheels in front of the telly. I'm thinking, 'What the hell am I doing here? I should be in Istanbul.'

At half-time we were 3-0 down and were being battered. Like every fan who had not made it to Istanbul I was filled with the mixed emotions of sadness and relief. It was like finding out that your wife has had sex with your best mate and she's told you that he was rubbish and only had a little willy.

Half-time and Didi came on and took control. Fifteen minutes later it was 3-3 and there was a chance that this would be the greatest comeback of all time.

And then it hit me. I should be in Istanbul. The only reason I was sitting here on the couch was purely because I had a job and somebody else was telling me what to do. Then Didi, with a broken bone in his foot, scored the first penalty in the shoot-out and took us on to win the Champions League.

That was like finding out that your wife had sex with your best mate, told you he was rubbish, that he had a small willy and then seeing him get run over by a bus. I was sad, relieved and then deliriously happy.

But I wasn't there. I was sitting in the living room jet-lagged, listening to my mates phoning me up from Istanbul to say what an amazing night they were having. At that moment I decided that I would never ever again be told what to do for the sake of a job.

One week later I handed in my notice and said, 'That's it. Come hell or high water I am going to try and make it as a comedian. Then I'll be able to go to any final I want to.'

Didi had a direct effect on me doing the job that I'm doing now. How strange it's worked out. I'm doing OK. If it hadn't worked out that way I would have been knocking on Didi's door asking him to pay my mortgage.

He wasn't the only one who played a part in that momentous night. But every football supporter knows that when Didi came on to the pitch he took control and did the things that we knew he could do. Things that changed the game.

For my money he won us the Champions League. That will always be remembered and that's why he will always have such a special relationship with Liverpool supporters.

Prior to Didi coming to Liverpool the only thing that Scousers and Germans had in common was their propensity to grow dodgy moustaches and adopt weird hairstyles. But Didi is a cultural ambassador. He is the only German Scouser in the history of mankind and will forever be known by Liverpool supporters as our own 'Kaiser'. But for me he will always be remembered as the reason why I'm a comedian today.

Funny that.



INTRODUCTION

A LOVE LETTER TO A LIVER BIRD



From the moment I stepped into Liverpool I felt this strange feeling begin to wash over me. I was excited by the sights and the sounds and welcomed by the people. I was part of a very special time in the history of Liverpool Football Club, which is something that will stay with me for the rest of my life. As the years went by, Liverpool became a part of me, and I very much hope that I became a part of Liverpool.

It was, is and I believe always will be a magnificent love affair. A passionate, flaming and enduring love affair with an amazing football club, a unique city and a remarkable people. Somewhere deep in these Bavarian bones there will always be a piece of The Pool.

Scientists reckon that when you fall in love funny things start to happen in your brain. Chemicals go berserk and the way you see the world changes. When you look at the object of your desire, blemishes become beauty spots, grating accents sound like poetry and irritating habits become charming idiosyncrasies.

They say that this kind of blind love is a type of madness. The parts of the brain that get excited when you are in love are the same areas that scientists have seen to be affected in patients suffering from mental illness.

Yet when you fall 'madly' in love with someone or something nothing can shake your resolve. These days as I wax lyrical about my incredible Scouse adventure, I'll catch people laughing at the way I see the world. For the love-struck see the world differently. On a fine day I find the drive into Liverpool as scintillating as others might find a drive into Milan. Liverpool: the sights, the sing-songy guttural accent, the sense of place, the happy-go-lucky comedic outlook, the shabbychic of the historical neighbourhoods, the iconic buildings, the cultural inheritance, the Harajuku-style fashion sense and, to borrow a line from The Beatles, there's just 'Something in the way she moves'.

If you are suppressing a snigger at this moment then you won't be the first person to do that. Maybe you haven't come under the spell of the liver bird and all that she stands for in the way that I have.

You can laugh if you want to. I am truly, madly, deeply under her spell and that's how I want it to stay. Always.

This whole book is really my love letter to the liver bird – the mythical symbol that represents the mysterious spirit that has captured my imagination and left an indelible mark on who and what I am. It tells the story of how I came to feel a part of a place that I now regard as my spiritual home, and how it's stayed with me on my travels through Bolton, Manchester and Stockport. I've also included some stories of the days before I became a Scouser, because I'm also a German you know.

It's a love story really, a heart-on-the-sleeve expression of the feelings I have for Liverpool. That may seem like a funny thing for a footballer to put down in black and white. Especially one who was born into a nation more noted for its cold, calculated efficiency than its romance. You might even say it's a bit mad.

But like I said, blind love is a kind of madness. Walk on.



CHAPTER ONE

THE GEOGRAPHY TEACHER

‘In which calamitous clobber transforms Herr Didi into Didi-Lar’



It started with a suit. Or rather, a collection of garments that to the untrained eye of a German exile in the north-eastern corner of England seemed to be the essence of style and sophistication.

I like Newcastle. It was 1999 and I was a Newcastle United player. Yet you would have to say that in the fashion stakes it really isn't a Milan or a Paris. In that respect I'd go as far as to say it is not even a Liverpool. In fact the semi-naked Geordie in sub-zero temperatures says it all.

Though I can have no complaints with the tailors of Newcastle. I can't blame them for the way I looked when I went down to sign for Liverpool. I thought that I was being bold and cavalier as I picked out the jacket that I would wear. I wanted to look smart and professional. I wanted to come over as the essence of German efficiency, reliability and solidity. But I wanted to do it with style. I imagined myself as a kind of walking-talking-footballing BMW.

A rather sensible brown jacket, the type favoured by solid English gentlemen, caught my eye. 'Yes,' I thought. Distinguished, elegant, professional and not too flash.

Then I noticed a nice pair of brown slacks with a sharp crease down the front. I liked something about that sharp crease. It was definitely the sharpness of the crease that did it for me. It sort of smacked of efficiency. Those slacks looked just the thing to go with the jacket. So I announced that I would take them.

For most men shopping can be hard, and I'm one of those men, but once you have bought one thing, then another, it gradually becomes easier. I found myself warming to the task. I became a little more nonchalant as I began to see a theme developing, and the white shirt with the brown check pattern proved irresistible.

The salesman must have thought that this was his lucky day, because just as I was about to pay I saw what I thought would be exactly the right accessory for the checked shirt. It was a violent red and white striped brown tie.

I remember hanging these items in the wardrobe and was proud of my afternoon's work. I surveyed them: the sturdy cut of the jacket; the sharp creases in the trousers, I definitely liked those creases and the contrasting geometry of the stripes and the checks. Perhaps a little self-congratulatory smile spread across my face as I imagined looking up towards the cameras, pen in hand, head slightly tilted, looking as sharp as I had ever looked. They may not know too much about me in Liverpool, I thought to myself, but I was sure that they would be in no doubt that I looked like a professional.

I closed the wardrobe door and waited.

Even with my agent working on a move away from Newcastle United, all of the hype that often goes on around transfers wasn't there. I'd made it clear in the middle of the season that I wanted to leave Newcastle. I was out with an injury and they seemed pretty calm about the idea of allowing me to leave at the end of the season. However, when I came back into the team after Christmas I got into great form and they became gradually more resistant towards the idea of me leaving.

Gerard Houllier at Liverpool had picked up that I might be available but waited until the season

had finished before making enquiries. I began to get updates on how things were progressing as I started negotiations with Newcastle. He would ring every two or three days to reassure me, 'Didi, just be patient, you are going to come to Liverpool.'

I definitely liked the idea, but as far as a move was concerned, the season had come to a close and nothing had happened. The summer came and went and still nothing had been finalised. Some players might have gone and kicked the manager's door down demanding a move. That's not really my style.

I took a more low-key approach. When preseason training started I simply did not turn up. Amazingly, not one of the powers that be at Newcastle said anything. There were no calls asking where I was, no threats of fines, nothing. So I just carried on with my low-key approach. It was a little like the way rabbits are when they get startled. They just sit perfectly still and hope that you just melt away into the background. There was no high drama and no rows. I just sat still and waited to see what would happen.

I said nothing. They said nothing. I thought, 'This nothingness must mean something.' It was then that I thought that I should hit the shops. If I was to sign for Liverpool I wanted to look like a proper Liverpool player.

About two weeks into preseason (I still had not checked in with Newcastle), I got the triumphant call from Houllier. I was to be his seventh close-season signing following on from Titi Camarero, Stephane Henchoz, Sami Hyppia, Erik Meijer, Vladimir Smicer and Sander Westerveld.

Although this was an incredibly exciting moment for me, I tried to remain calm. A couple of days after Houllier's call, I walked over to the wardrobe and removed the plastic covers from the new purchases. In my eyes I had done myself proud and I thought that the whole outfit worked well together, with just the right combination of the clothes matching and contrasting. One last check in the mirror and I set off for Liverpool to sign the papers. 'Didi,' I thought, 'if BMW were in the business of making people with brown hessian upholstery, they would surely have made you.'

I laugh now when I look at the photo of me signing the contract. At the time I thought that I looked like the dog's bollocks.

The *Liverpool Echo* later described me as 'wearing the kind of brown outfit that parents force on their six-year-olds to wear in the mid 1970s'. My teammates later told me that they had all pissed themselves laughing, believing that Houllier, a former educator himself, had signed a geography teacher.

Yet I think it was the outfit that did it. I think that was what began my love affair with all things Liverpool. Had I turned up full of Pierre Cardin panache, I might have been welcomed into the bonhomie of the French contingent that Houllier was assembling. Had I gone for a style more flamboyant than mud-brown, brown check, brown stripes and materials of a more silky texture than sackcloth, maybe the African lads would have been the people who gravitated towards me.

I think it was something about the oddness of my appearance that caught the comic imaginations of that particular brand of dry humour that is uniquely Scouse. It was the homegrown lads that I bonded with early on and still remain great friends with today. Michael Owen, Steven Gerrard, Robbie Fowler and Jamie Carragher immediately took to me and I found that the Scouse way of looking at the world began to seep deep into my pores as if through some form of osmosis.

Maybe my slightly eccentric look gave them a target for their banter. In among these stylish and self-conscious young pros I must have looked like Bavaria's answer to Benny Hill. Even Michael Owen, who is as polite and respectful as you imagine him to be, felt bold enough to join in the fun. I reckoned I looked like John Cleese and nicknamed me 'Basil Fawlty'. I'm tall and wiry and actually do have the knack of getting myself into slightly bizarre situations all of the time. Having only been

England for a year I didn't really get the joke at the time, but the lads liked it so that was OK. Sammie Lee shortened 'Basil' to 'Baz', so for a while 'Baz' became my name. I thought 'Well, I've been called a lot worse things than Baz', so I was happy with it.

I don't know quite how to describe it, but I immediately felt at home in Liverpool. It was instantaneous. I knew that I was born in Germany, I knew that I was German and I was proud to continue to play for my country. Yet something was seeping through me. It was almost as though there was an element of me that felt English. It began to emerge and grow as it was nourished by the day-to-day banter of the Scouse contingent in the squad, who seemed to regard me as one of their own.

We golfed together a lot. Michael Owen and Robbie Fowler were really keen on horse racing, as was I, and so with our football, golf and racing we were together practically all of the time. It's hardly surprising that for me there was never a language barrier. I was surrounded by the guttural sounds of the Scouse accent constantly and people have said that I sound more Scouse than German.

It started with my calamitous clobber and turned into a glorious love affair – but I still reckon the sharp creases in those slacks were the business.



In a way it's strange that I should feel so positive towards Liverpool as the history of Scouse–German relations is not so great. The city was targeted by the Luftwaffe in the Second World War and Scouse comedian Stan Boardman has made a career out of poking fun at what he calls the 'Geeeeermens'. As a result of this an almost inevitable question for any German on Merseyside is 'Was it you that bombed our chippy?'

So before we start, I didn't bomb your chippy or for that matter anyone else's chippy. I might have eaten my fair share of your kebabs and done my bit to keep Liverpool's independent breweries afloat in business. Come to think of it, I also supported a number of your bookmakers, but chippies and bookies were all way before my time.

Stan's been stereotyping Germans since before even Brad Friedel was born. So much so, you almost feel like asking him, 'Was it you that made a career out of stereotyping other nations?' It's a bit like German tourists turning up on Merseyside and asking random strangers, 'Can vee haf tea yor yellow zubmarine?'

Yet stereotyping happens. It's just a part of life. If you belong to any nation, tribe or group you are inevitably going to come in for some form of stereotyping, yet surely, none more so than the German and the Scousers. We have to be the most stereotyped of all stereotypes. The most generalised of all generalisations. Europe's most famous fall guys. It's something that we have in common. We are misunderstood, made fun of and people resent it when we are successful.

Maybe that was another thing. Maybe that's what bound me together with the Scouse contingent. Despite our relative geographical positions, we have the same burden to bear. People like to poke fun at us and the more successful we are the more irritating it is for them. Germans and Scousers have to grow up with thick skins. Maybe deep inside we share this siege mentality of us against the world. It has nothing to do with the colour of our skin and all to do with the thickness of our skin. Without any effort at all I was being transformed from Herr Didi to Didi-Lar, the Mark I German Scouser.

What is a German Scouser anyway? Someone who always gets the best sunbed but leaves the shell suit on all day? Someone who will beat you on penalties and then steal your football? Someone

who...? Or maybe I'd better calm down, because that's stereotyping two groups that bear the brunt more than their fair share of banter. It's worse than stereotyping, because stereotyping two groups stereotyping in stereo, and I wouldn't want to do that.

As I started to feel more and more at home in Liverpool I began to widen my horizons and take the whole of the English culture. It's the English way of life that really appeals to me. Things that you may take for granted, are things that I see with an outsider's spectacles on. I'm still a loyal German, make no mistake, but over the years I have become a total Anglophile. I think it is true that I speak with something of a Scouse accent, so maybe you should try reading this as if you are a cross between John Bishop and Boris Becker, and you will be there or thereabouts. These days I even dream in English. Can you imagine that? Seeing myself take the first penalty in the Champions League final wearing plus fours and a deerstalker?

Then there is cricket. Your quaint little English game has become a major passion in my life. I just love the whole thing – the setting, the beer, the eccentric rules, the numbers. I'm a big numbers man but more about that later. I've even played cricket a few times for the second XI at my local cricket club in Alderley Edge. I'm hoping that now my football-playing days are behind me I'll be hearing the sound of leather on willow more regularly. Perhaps it's better that I don't report my successes on the cricket field to date. My batting performances so far have been hampered with spectators shouting 'duck'. I obligingly bend down and then my innings seems to be over. I'll get the hang of it eventually. I'm told that the club chairman was furious the day I went out for my very first innings. Not because I was dismissed for a duck, but because I had the audacity to enter the crease wearing golf shoes. Apparently this is not the done thing. I guess he was too far away to appreciate the sharp crease in my trousers. To coin an English phrase, 'Things will get worse before they get better'.

My Anglophile tendencies really came to the fore when I was recently given the opportunity to choose from an array of books on all sorts of subjects. I'm a big sports fan of course but tend not to read sports books – though I may read this one. I instantly saw the book that I wanted to read. It was *Churchill Defiant: Fighting On 1945–1955*. A strange choice for a German you might think. A bit like Jamie Carragher having a copy of *Mein Kampf* sticking out of his duffel-coat pocket. Carra's probably checking his pockets right now thinking he's got the remains of a Chinese takeaway in there.

I'm a tremendous admirer of Churchill – that's the statesman and orator who led your lot through the Second World War and won a Nobel Prize for literature, not the nodding dog who is trying to sell you car insurance. Just reading about him fills me with an even deeper sense of connection with England and Englishness.

This idea that a German should fall for the old enemy seems unfeasible. I've been called a paradox. At first I thought it was some kind of detergent, but as a footballer you get called names all the time. At least you can print 'paradox'.

I suppose it's a useful word to sum up my life so far. It's been full of contradictions. I've always been something of a smoker and a pretty decent drinker yet I've had an amazing career through a time when footballers reached athletic peaks never before seen in the game. I think I'm reasonably intelligent and level-headed when it comes to thinking about the game and how it should be played yet I came within a millimetre of destroying everything I had ever achieved because I couldn't apply my focus and determination to my off-field behaviour when my life hit a difficult patch. To underscore the topsy-turvy nature of the world according to Didi, you have to say that a cricket-playing German Anglophile is about as likely as Stan Boardman coming up with a new routine.

Can you imagine Stan Boardman not mentioning the 'Geeermens'? Now that would be a paradox.



So my journey to Englishness all began in Newcastle and even that had a Liverpool connection. Kenny Dalglish was getting ready to start his third season with the Geordies. Having got them into the Champions League in 1997 and taken them to the FA Cup final in 1998 it looked like The Toon were going in the right direction.

I'd been at the World Cup in France during the summer of 1998 and by our standards it was not a good one. We crashed out of the quarter-finals, losing 3–0 to Croatia in Lyon.

Earlier that year I'd signed a lucrative five-year deal at Bayern Munich and the smart money would have been on me staying there for the rest of my career. In fact, when I signed the deal I had every intention of seeing it out, yet a few months into it I started to get these feelings of dissatisfaction. They were certainly looking after me well. I had great facilities, I was in a team of internationals and I was well paid.

Yet I didn't feel properly valued. I was an experienced international but I still felt that they saw me as the kid who had come through the ranks. I wanted to be a trusted, responsible and senior member of the squad, but I never felt that I was going to be seen in this light. So, by the time the World Cup came around I was ready to listen to offers from overseas. I fancied either the Premier League or Italy.

Kenny Dalglish came in with a bid of £5.5 million and that was enough for Bayern to agree to let me go. I headed for Newcastle knowing virtually nothing about the place and without even having spoken to Kenny Dalglish. I went with nothing but my schoolboy English, probably not much more than 200 words. It was just enough words to order a pint and engage in some clumsy banter with the barmaid. Today it seems it is sufficient to manage the England football team. That's inflation, I suppose ... or maybe deflation, because that's the feeling we all get every time England tumble out of a tournament.

Newcastle United seem to take a perverse pride in making bizarre decisions and in recent years this has almost become a defining characteristic for the club. The removal of Kenny Dalglish just two games into the new season has to rank as one of their most bizarre. He hadn't even lost a game. Granted we started with two draws, but there was a lot of the season still to go at. There must have been some behind-the-scenes issues going on, but because I hadn't spoken to Kenny before I joined the club I had no idea whether the relationships were stable or otherwise. They turned out to be otherwise.

I never got the chance to see much of Kenny's managerial style at close quarters. He turned out to be the foreplay for the man who coined the phrase 'sexy football'. Before I knew it Kenny was out and Ruud Gullit was in. For me, Gullit's instinct for a soundbite was better than his instincts as a manager. We never clashed, but all that I really remember of him is that he was very quiet. He didn't say very much at all. If this was the way to get sexy football I can only imagine that the bedroom of the Gullit household is a quiet place to be.

I felt that I did all right for Newcastle and even though I got injured very early on in the season I tried to make the best of it. I was helped to settle in by a shell-suited, permheaded Scouser who would take me out for a pint. Terry McDermott had been a coach under Kenny Dalglish and stayed in the area even after Kenny was sacked. Terry and I were often joined by Alan Shearer at our local pub as we acclimatised to this strange new culture. Those who say that Al is 'Britain's most boring pundit' should go out for a pint with him, or stick a pint in front of him on *Match of the Day*. I always found

Al to be a great laugh and very good company.

When I was out for a time with injury I did tell Newcastle United that I would like to move on and they were fine about it. They seemed to have no concerns at all, and the indications were that they would not stand in my way. When I got back into the team I really started to click and we had a great FA Cup run, reaching the final. I played the first half of what turned out to be a very one-sided affair with Manchester United running out easy 2–0 winners. There was press speculation that I had fallen-out with Gullit at half-time and that he substituted me as a result. There was no truth in that whatsoever. I had really taken a hard knock on my hip bone and was struggling with it so we both knew that it was the right decision for me to come off when I did.

I got a bit of a hard time from the Geordie press and the fans when it became known that I wanted to move away, especially as I began to hit a level of form that was doing me justice and adding to the overall team performance. There seemed to be a feeling that I was agitating for a move. I wasn't; I had just made it clear that I would like to move on, that's different. I even had my car smashed up by fans who were not very happy with me. But I was quite open with Newcastle. I told them I wanted to go and they seemed fine until I came back from injury and started playing well. This didn't stop the press from claiming that I had threatened to go on strike if I didn't get a move. That was all hype, I was absolutely straight with Newcastle.

I really wanted to be a part of great things again and I couldn't see them happening at St James' Park and I was honest about saying that too. As I was growing up in Germany we didn't get a lot of football on TV and very little of the coverage involved English teams. If there was an English game on television it invariably involved Liverpool. I already had a soft spot for The Reds, so when I heard that Houllier was interested I was delighted. I knew right away that I wanted to go there.

It was a long and protracted wait for the move to Merseyside, but I had a really special feeling about it as I awaited confirmation that the deal had been done. It was more than the feeling that I had had when I moved from Bayern Munich to Newcastle. It was something quite different. It was something of a higher order of anticipation and excitement. There was a feeling that I was about to make a journey which, though it was less than 200 miles, seemed somehow a journey into another world.

It felt almost as if it was a 'calling'. As if there was something calling me to my spiritual home. It was the sweet silver song of the lark.

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