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Foreword

BY PETER REID

David White and I go back a long, long way. I first became aware of him when I played for Everton in the mid-to-late 1980s, when I couldn't help but notice the presence of this powerful and pacey teenage winger, who posed a constant threat to his opponents. I really admired David's direct way of playing, epitomized by an extraordinary ability to gain half a yard on a defender before unleashing a perfectly weighted cross into the box. It was clear that this was a footballer with a great deal of raw, natural talent, and something told me that he'd go far in the game.

Whitie was still fairly young when I arrived at Manchester City as a thirty-four-year-old in 1990, but it was obvious that he had huge potential as a top-flight professional. He'd experienced a meteoric rise through the club's ranks, a product of City's fantastic youth team policy (spearheaded by Tony Book), which had reared similarly talented home-grown players like Andy Hinchcliffe, Steve Redmond and Ian Brightwell. David was undoubtedly one of Manchester City's shining lights – as a lifelong Blue himself, his love for the team and the shirt was plain to see – and I know that our manager at the time, the great Howard Kendall, thought the world of him.

I recall travelling down to Villa Park on 23 April 1991, and that night witnessing one of the most superb performances I'd ever seen from a forward. By then I'd replaced Howard in the hot seat, becoming City's player-manager, and occasionally I'd switch David from the right to the centre, to mix things up a bit. I'd opted to put Whitie up front in a striking position and he was simply unbelievable, verging on unstoppable. Our

number 7's finish was truly brilliant, his four-goal tally helping us to a 5-1 victory and forcing a lot of people in the football world to sit up and take notice. They'd all been aware of Whitie's famous turn of speed, but his accuracy in front of the goal that night, against a very good Aston Villa side, was just beautiful to watch.

I found David a delightful person to work with. He had an extremely dry sense of humour – always useful at City – and was a charming, polite and well-rounded individual, the sort of lad you'd have been happy for your daughter to bring home. He came from a lovely family, too; I was lucky to meet his dad, Stewart, on a number of occasions and it was clear to see how much he adored his hugely talented son, as well as the club that had nurtured him over the years.

After he bid farewell to Manchester City, I continued to track Whitie's career, although it was sad to see his ankle injury blighting his progress at Leeds United and Sheffield United. This was, unfortunately, the main contributory factor towards his somewhat premature retirement from the game.

More recently, of course, David has attracted recognition for altogether different reasons. He, among other brave ex-professionals, has shown great courage in coming forward to publicly reveal his childhood trauma, and he has my utmost respect for doing so. It must have been hard enough to make the grade as a top professional footballer without shouldering the burden of such emotional heartache, and the fact that David somehow summoned the strength to continue playing top-level football – even gaining international honours – shows a remarkable depth of character. I applaud David for his honesty and candour – including the writing of this book – and hope that his openness will help to raise awareness of vitally important child protection and safeguarding issues.

Not only is David White a tremendous person, he is one of the finest footballers that I ever had the pleasure of playing alongside and managing. He brought so much joy to thousands of supporters during his career – particularly those of the sky-blue variety – and I'd like to wish him nothing but the best for the future.

PROLOGUE

Sheffield, 1998

Light rain was falling when I sauntered out of the Shirecliffe training ground. I stopped for a moment to switch over the strap of my kitbag to my left shoulder, reducing the burden on my troublesome right ankle which, this particular afternoon, was causing me to wince with every step.

As per usual, a couple of United fans were lingering outside the main entrance, sporting their red-and-white-striped scarves.

‘All right, David?’ they grinned, offering me their autograph books.

‘Hiya, lads,’ I replied, obliging with my usual loopy scrawl.

‘Saw you jogging around the pitch before, mate. Reckon you’ll be back in the squad soon?’

Ah, the big question.

‘You never know,’ I smiled, unconvincingly.

I didn’t want to tell them that, the way things were going, I’d be lucky to get first-team football at Hereford United, let alone Sheffield United. Despite countless operations, my ankle wasn’t getting any better, and my game was suffering as a result. The lightning pace and the pinpoint crosses that had been my hallmarks at Manchester City and, for a time, at Leeds United, had been blunted. My confidence on the pitch – I now dreaded kicking a football, such was my fear of the pain – had been dented. Sometimes it was hard to believe that, just five years earlier, I’d turned out for England. Times had indeed changed.

‘D’you mind if we have a quick photograph, David?’

‘Sure.’

I posed for the snap, shook the lads’ hands and headed over to the players’ car park. As I did so, my phone rang. I lowered my kitbag onto the gravel and reached for the Nokia vibrating inside my tracksuit pocket. *Unknown number*. My finger hovered over the red button for a second, but then I felt a sudden impulse to answer it.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi there,’ said the voice at the end of the line. ‘Is that David White?’

‘Yes, it is ... who’s speaking?’

‘Sorry to bother you, but I’m calling from Cheshire Police. We’re investigating a former football coach of yours, Barry Bennell, and we’re just wondering if we can ask you a few questions ...’

The world, for a moment, stopped turning.