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THE THIRD OXFORD LECTURE

“From Reith to wreath”

THE GREAT DAYS OF SPORT ON BBC TV. AND HOW THEY ENDED.

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June 21 1937. That was the day the incipient BBC television service sent its cameras to Wimbledon and sent flickering black-and-white images to an audience that may have been in the hundreds or dozens – and entirely in the south-east of England.

There had been great excitement in advance, certainly in Britain’s top-selling paper, the *Daily Express*. This was on the front page the previous Thursday.

Television Triumphs in Wimbledon Try-out

“The BBC’s new untried television transmission van achieved unprecedented success while standing in Wimbledon tennis ground car park yesterday afternoon....

The tests succeeded beyond most people’s hopes. Men could be seen walking about the car park and the courts. Cigarette smoke was visible. An Alsatian dog was seen running about. When actual plays begins, I am told, viewers will be able to see the ball¹.”

Well, not exactly. There were some difficulties on the day, partly because of interference from electrical equipment in a hospital near the Alexandra Palace transmitter. But, the *Express* assured its readers, the pictures were clear enough if you lived on a hill near Woking².

The television critic in *The Listener*, the BBC's in-house intellectual magazine, put the best interpretation it could on it all.

"As in the news films, it has seldom been possible to watch the progress of the ball itself. But the strokes and the movements on the court have all been so clearly visible that the absence of the ball has hardly seemed to trouble the viewers³."

The ball! Oh, that old thing!

But the experiment was officially deemed a success. And two months later, at the annual festival of British broadcasting industry, Radiolympia, the cameras were set up in London Zoo, so visitors to the show could observe the chimpanzees⁴. Those of us who remember the Wimbledon career of, say, John McEnroe might think this was an appropriate follow-up.

Television was then a novelty, a frippery. The "televisors" cost 40 or 50 guineas – well over £2000 today – and were bought by the kind of people, if they lived in the south-east, who bought ipads on Day One. In just 15 years, since the sale of wireless sets took off, Britain had become what was called a "listening-in" country, but it wasn't yet ready to become a "seeing-in" country.

And that wouldn't really change over the next 15 years. There was, of course, a slight distraction. There's a wonderful old Tom Lehrer song that goes:

*Once all the Germans were warlike and mean,
But that couldn't happen again.
We taught them a lesson in 1918
And they've hardly bothered us since then.*

Anyway, it helps one understand how remote the television future was in 1937 when you realise that among the other novelties at Radiolympia that year were battery-operated wirelesses, not transistors but cumbersome great things, essential because huge chunks of rural England didn't yet have electricity. The valley where I live in Herefordshire didn't get on the mains until 1964.

The BBC's early TV transmissions were actually ahead of those in America. But that lead was not to last. The Americans were able to develop their TV service during the war, when British TV was suspended, and there was not much money around in Britain in the immediate aftermath. And one obvious consequence of the BBC monopoly was the lack of a commercial imperative to innovate.

But the great, indeed continuing, triumph of the BBC is that it would find its own artistic reasons to keep moving forward. In 1938 it showed a string of events such as the Boat Race, the England-Scotland football at Wembley and the Cup Final. By 1939 television had its own dedicated commentators instead of just taking the radio feed. When TV – as it wasn't yet called – resumed in 1946, sport was a major feature of the schedules. And thus we had the real start of the ongoing relationship between television and sport. A marriage indeed. Though one that was to produce a great deal of crockery-throwing.

The initial bone of contention was of course about money, but only indirectly. It wasn't about the value of the rights. It was about the issue of "re-diffusion". The governing bodies of sports did not much care what sport was shown on the tiny little novelty sets to an audience that was still barely into five figures. They did mind it being picked up by pirates and shown in cinemas.

The late 1940s were the greatest years in history for live sport. Huge crowds watched football matches, top ones, bottom ones, whatever. Even county cricket grounds were packed. Still there were differing views on whether television was primarily a publicity boon or a competing attraction.

It certainly was becoming a competitor of a kind. In 1949, the *Manchester Evening Chronicle* found a man who had installed eight tip-up seats in his drawing room to create a mini-cinema. "Putting an aerial outside your house," it said, "was a guarantee of a social life⁵." An interesting contrast, incidentally, with the early days of Sky when a dish was regarded as a mark of Cain. But that's next week's lecture.

That year, 1949, there was an attempt by some sporting administrators to impose a general ban on televising sport. It didn't hold, although in 1952 the newish tradition of showing the Cup Final was broken for the first time, and the match went off-screen. But in 1953 the BBC and FA kissed, made up and agreed a fee of £1000. And so the nation, or part of it, was able to see one of the most famous of all football matches – the Matthews final, when the great Stanley Matthews led Blackpool back from 3-1 down to a 4-3 win on a day of spring sunshine in the presence of Her Majesty. A day, said *The Times*, when "the game of football, the game of the people, was crowned with all felicity in this year of Coronation and national rejoicing⁶." And a month later, the Queen was crowned, with the TV cameras present. That was the day, in folk memory, when the nation watched TV together, and the television age truly began.

The number of TV licences doubled in two years, from two million to four million. The Coronation was the catalyst. But I would suggest that the Matthews final had something to do with it too.

It is reasonable to have a great man theory in the media as it is in history. British newspapers developed the way they did because of a handful of important men: Delane, CP Scott, Northcliffe, Beaverbrook, Cudlipp, Murdoch. British broadcasting would have been vastly different had John Reith not applied for a job to the infant BBC. And we can apply the same theory to sport on TV.

Peter Dimmock joined the BBC after the RAF, where he had been a pilot instructor. In 1946 he was lying on the pavement outside the studios with the headphones on to cue in the announcer Jasmine Bligh, and welcome back viewers "after the short interruption" – that was World War Two.

Dimmock had wanted to be a journalist but an American friend told him TV was the medium of the future, rather as Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate* was advised to get into plastics. He got the job because there was something of an RAF mafia at the BBC who liked having other RAF men around. For good reason: they understood about connecting wotsits to thingummybobs. And they worked long hours without complaining.

In 1950 Dimmock was joined by a slightly younger man – an ex-Para – called Paul Fox, brought in from Pathé News as a lowly scriptwriter for the Television Newsreel. Dimmock was already a major figure in the BBC, having been both producer and director of the Coronation coverage. In 1954 Fox went to Dimmock and suggested a weekly sports magazine programme. Within a month it was on the air. "You could do that, because the chain of command was so short," Fox explained. It began at 7.30 on a Thursday nights, after the Newsreel and before amateur wrestling and Animal, Vegetable, Mineral. Fox as editor, Dimmock as presenter.

In week 2 they had what Fox described as "a piece of fantastic luck". There was a tip-off that it might be worth coming to Oxford, for a routine athletics meeting at Iffley Road, because something extraordinary might be about to happen in the mile. It was good advice. The *Daily Express* was there too. The announcement of the result, the *Express* reported, "was made with no more emotion than a porter announcing the next train to Crewe":

"The result of event No. 9: First No. 41, RG Bannister... formerly of Exeter and Merton Colleges, with a time that is a new meeting and track record and which, subject

to ratification, will be a new English native, a British national, a British all-comers, European, British Empire and world record. The time was three minutes 59.4 seconds⁷."

I'm not sure anyone heard the 59.4 seconds. The point was that the Everest of athletics, the four-minute mile had been conquered – and by an English native and British national at that.

The *Express* account was written by Desmond Hackett, the most famous sports writer of the era, of whom more later. But Sportsview was there too and they got Bannister back to London and into the studio in time for the programme – even though he insisted on going home to Harrow first to change into his suit and tie. They couldn't show the film because at that stage it was still impossible to process it in time. It was shown the following night. "Brilliant, breathless pictures," said the *Express* TV reporter when they did get on the air. "By skilful use of telescopic lenses, the TV audience throughout Britain had a better view of the race even than the two men who ran with Bannister⁸."

"Sportsview never looked back," said Fox. It ran for the next ten years and, even before I was reminded by seeing the clip we showed two weeks ago, I could still remember Peter Dimmock's smile and his little moustache. He looked about 90 to my young eyes, but he wasn't because he's just into his nineties now, very much with us and with it, and my friend Martin Kelner was able to interview him last year. Dimmock disappeared from the screen in the 1960s but he was a far more significant figure than his relatively brief on-screen career suggests.

By 1954 TV audiences regularly numbered in the millions. But the BBC's mastery of this vast market was to be short-lived. Somewhat uncharacteristically, the cautious and consensual Tory government of the early 1950s, presided over by the aging Churchill, was determined to introduce commercial television. *Bien-pensant* opinion was horrified about the introduction of American excesses to the placid British broadcasting scene of the 1950s and, in the end, ITV's remit was hedged about with all kinds of restrictions.

Nonetheless, from the moment of its launch in the London area in 1955, ITV met a need, or demand, that the BBC had only intermittently chosen to address. Consistently, in those early years of two-channel competition the split in audience was something like 3-1 in favour of ITV. To my generation, the advertising jingles and slogans conjure up our youth more effectively than anything else on television:

"You'll wonder where the yellow went, when you brush your teeth with Pepsodent."

"Omo washes not only clean, not only white but briiiiiight"

*"One Thousand and One cleans a big big carpet
For less than half a crown! For less than half a crown."*

"Take a tip, take a Bristol. For a real cigarette, it's a Bristol."

**You're never alone with a Strand".*

And *"Trill makes budgies bounce with health"*, an advert that went on to say "Budgies get a fatal disease which shortens their life" – part of my education because that was how I learned the definition of "tautology".

Sunday Night at the London Palladium, hosted by a youngster named Bruce Forsyth, was watched, once ITV had gone national, by close to half the population. But in sport it didn't happen. The split, in broad terms, would often be the reverse: 3-1 in favour of the BBC if both sides were showing the same match. Often more. In the 35-odd years between the start of commercial TV and the arrival of satellite, ITV Sport was, most of the time, little more than an irritant to the mighty BBC. A buzzing wasp rather than a rampaging lion.

It is possible to come up with various explanations for this phenomenon, and different people emphasise different aspects. The issue of the so-called listed events is a major part of the history of TV sport. But two things may not be obvious. These restrictions are not exclusively British: just about every developed nation on earth has a similar method of ensuring major sporting occasions are available to most of the population. And it isn't new.

During the debate on the Act that set up ITV, a minister described this as "the most difficult problem in the Bill". In order to placate Tory backbenchers terrified at public response to the loss of Wimbledon or indeed Test matches to a non-national service, there were reserve powers to prevent this happening. It was never invoked because BBC and ITV agreed on ten sporting events to which neither side could have exclusive rights⁹. And that sealed ITV's fate. Once the initial novelty of Pepsodent and Omo wore off, viewers did not want their sports watching interrupted by adverts even though ITV, unlike its US equivalents, was restrained enough not to want to interrupt a football match.

As time went on, the BBC acquired other advantages. Later TV sets had a default position that brought BBC1 up first. And in 1964, the third channel, BBC2, arrived, giving the BBC infinitely greater flexibility in scheduling.

ITV was also hobbled by its devolved structure: more than a dozen regional franchises emerged which were able to show more or less what they wanted. And they had commitments to advertisers. When a controller told Jonathan Martin, for many years the BBC's head of sport, that they had to leave a big sporting event to switch to the News, he could roar back: "This IS the effing News" and prevail. That was almost impossible on the other side. "You had to negotiate with the independent fiefdoms," explained the former ITV executive David Elstein, "So you got incoherence and a lack of commitment, and flakiness¹⁰."

ITV's Head of Sport John Bromley was a legend among his peers for his charm, and his expenses. But he was like a grand admiral of a rusted hulk. Institutionally, ITV Sport seemed to have a zero attention span. As late as 2005 – long into the Sky era – it paid big money and bought the rights to the Boat Race to irritate the BBC and generate a day's headlines. Then it forgot why on earth it had wanted it. The BBC bought it back last year, reportedly for approximately zilch.

The upshot of it all was that ITV Sport began to acquire a reputation for being accident-prone: it couldn't be trusted. Dimmock recalls that one year they poached the show jumping from BBC and went off the air just as Harry Llewellyn was coming to the crucial jump. They secured the 1967 Gillette Cup cricket final which had a sensational finish. They missed it. Even last year, they were still at it, showing adverts instead of goals in both the World Cup and the FA Cup. One bookmaker offered odds about when it might happen next.

In the early days there was another factor. Long after he vanished from the screen, Dimmock remained BBC's Head of Outside Broadcasts and he was known as a master of negotiation, tight-fisted as hell but deploying a mixture of charm and persistence more associated with Latin lovers. Paul Fox gives Dimmock the credit for getting the cameras into the Abbey for the Coronation.

"The Queen was against because she was worried about the heat from the lights," Fox said. "The court said she's got enough to do without worrying about TV. The Duke of Norfolk, who, as Earl Marshal, was in charge of the ceremony, was against. Churchill was against.

“Peter arranged a trial run and showed that the lights really wouldn’t be that intrusive. Then he went to the loo and found himself next to the Duke. ‘Come on, Bernard. Say yes.’ And finally he did¹¹.

Dimmock had one even tougher opponent: Mirabel Topham, owner of Aintree, home of the Grand National, the one major sporting event that totally eluded television throughout the 1950s. She would not give in. “Ma Topham,” Dimmock sighed, recollecting in the tranquillity of old age.

“My grey hairs, a lot of those came from that...she was an extraordinary woman, extraordinary woman.....I spent hours and hours negotiating with her. Eventually, *eventually*, I got her to agree¹².” The first TV National was 1960.

The symbol of the BBC imperium was Grandstand, started in 1958, with its mixture of sports culminating in the football results coming over the teleprinter. It far outshone the ITV equivalent, World of Sport. One TV man thought World of Sport’s essential lack of seriousness was symbolised by the kipper tie worn by the host, Dickie Davies.

The programme would start competitively enough and, as the years went by, ITV’s horse racing coverage would come to outshine the BBC’s, especially when it moved to Channel Four in the mid-1980s. But World of Sport just dribbled away at teatime into professional wrestling, beloved by my father and millions of ladies of a certain age. But, since the fights were fixed, hardly a sport.

If there was any doubt about BBC Sport’s dominance, it was maintained by the intense professionalism of the men who ran it, notably Fox, and the fearsome Bryan “Ginger” Cowgill, both of whom rose to senior positions well beyond sport. The same applied to the on-screen performers, especially David Coleman, who by the 1960s had become the face and voice of the BBC at the major events. Coleman was a notoriously demanding colleague who expected those around him to match his standards.

But every sport the BBC covered had instantly recognisable voices associated with it: Richie Benaud on cricket; Bill MacLaren on rugby union; Eddie Waring, far more famous than anyone who actually played rugby league; golf’s Henry Longhurst, with a voice like pink gin; Manic Murray Walker on motor racing; peerless Peter O’Sullivan calling the horses. And Dan Maskell (“Ooh, I say. What a peach of a volley!) whose voice embodied Wimbledon as much as strawberries and cream.

As the Church of England declined, Britain worshipped Christmas, the National Health Service and the BBC. We grumbled about the last two but we recognised that they were reasons to live here that made up for the vile weather and the general sense of decay. And TV sport was something we did better than anyone else.

When I first went to Australia, to cover the 1982 Commonwealth Games, and heard their star commentator Norman May gibbering away, rarely bothering to mention a non-Australian, I knew it was true. Britain had the least worst television in the world. As far as sport was concerned, it was already official. In 1977, the Annan Committee, investigating TV and radio on behalf of the government, declared: "The coverage of sport ... is one of the success stories of broadcasting".

In many ways it seemed an unchanging world, like an Edwardian summer. To many of us, the sporting year represented something as immutable as the ecclesiastical year. And the BBC played a calendrical role in recording the sporting seasons.

From the rugby internationals amid the mud or frost of winter, to the matchplay golf at Wentworth, with the leaves tumbling on to the fairways. And all the joys of cricket and Wimbledon and Ascot and everything in between.

The years themselves each appeared the same, except for the heightened drama of the even-numbered years when there would be either a World Cup or an Olympics. For a sports lover, it seemed in many ways an extension of that mythical childhood: a long, glorious eternal summer.

But the world does not stand still. Ever.

Under the BBC's aegis, sport did increase its reach and grasp. Thanks to BBC2, there could be many more hours a day. In 1967, colour TV came to Britain, starting in Wimbledon fortnight. And the first personality of the new era was a red-headed ballboy who the Wimbledon authorities, with a fine sense of occasion, kept assigning to Centre Court.

The technology became less rickety though it remained, by today's standards, primitive: satellite time was not infinite; for many years, the BBC didn't have the resources to cover more than the last six holes of the Open golf. And we did without. The Football League's implacable opposition to pre-war radio continued into the TV age. *Match of the Day*, showing Saturday night highlights, arrived in 1964 on BBC2 with a start so low-key as to be almost invisible. Hardly anyone had a set able to receive

BBC2, so the audience for the first programme, Liverpool v Arsenal, was estimated at 20,000, compared to 40,000 who were actually at Anfield¹³.

There were downsides. The BBC's grandeur was matched by self-regard. Sport was headquartered in Kensington House, away from the rest of the organisation, and was seen by some senior executives as a mighty stronghold run by warlords too powerful to tame. Time makes such empires vulnerable. "It was a harsh school," said one sports reporter from a newer generation. "And everyone seemed to have been there for ever."

It was not merely getting old. It was also, like sport itself – and this has, I fear, been reflected in the cast of characters so far – overwhelmingly, overbearingly, male.

But for a long time the situation suited pretty much everyone who mattered. I certainly don't remember bothering that the BBC couldn't show every hole of the golf; we enjoyed what they did show. ITV would occasionally stage a rape-and-pillage raid on their sporting portfolio, like primitive tribesmen plundering a nearby village that had more cattle. But ITV were not necessarily that bothered either. After all, a commercial TV franchise was, in Lord Thomson's words, a licence to print money.

ITV's interests and the BBC's were not necessarily that distinct. Both, understandably, wanted to keep the cost of rights down. Sky executives would later not just use the word "duopoly" but also "cartel".

From 1982, it was not exactly a duopoly. Channel 4 came on the scene and, under the leadership of its own head of sport, Adrian Metcalfe, imaginatively followed its remit to be different by picking up the sports the big two had ignored: American football, sumo and even the arcane Indian sport of kabaddi, an elaborate version of hopscotch.

But when Channel 4 did try to break through into major sports, they found themselves regarded as interlopers. During Michael Grade's decade as controller, he decided to try and steal the Open Golf, a longstanding fixture of the BBC schedule. This was around the time an Australian friend first said to me that the BBC's golf coverage had become dated which, I remember, greatly affronted me, as though he'd just insulted my Labrador.

I think now he was on to something. So did Grade, who was encouraged by the American sports entrepreneur, Mark McCormack, the most powerful figure in golf and

much else besides – a fact recognised by the BBC, who indulged him by using him at the Open as a commentator.

Grade was due to make his presentation to the committee of the Royal & Ancient Golf Club at Brown's Hotel in London. He had offered a huge increase on the existing BBC figure, promised to cover junior golf and sponsor golfing scholarships and guaranteed to show highlights in peak-time rather than around midnight. His classic account appeared in his autobiography, and he swears every word is true.

"I went along to Brown's Hotel, buoyed by a phone call I'd had from Mark McCormack assuring me that the deal was in the bag. He'd been at the BBC presentation and reported that our bid topped theirs by £5 million. It was a shoo-in. I strolled confidently into the room.

"Confronting me were twenty or thirty dour, dull grey men, identically dressed in blue blazers, grey slacks and R and A ties: the *crème de la crème* of British golf. It was a wet Monday evening at the Glasgow Empire ... row upon row of sullen citizens defying a performer to interest or entertain them. And I was there to pay these royal and ancient gentlemen a fortune, for God's sake. I died the death.

"I opened with a gentle joke that went down about as well as the church choir singing 'Sheep May Safely Graze' at the butcher's funeral. They made it obvious they didn't like me, they didn't want to be subjected to this ordeal in which they had to sit quietly and listen to someone else's voice. Mark McCormack got so exasperated that at one point he stood up and started berating them which, while I appreciated his support, didn't help my case. He misread the mood completely. The issue wasn't about money, and therefore not something Mark would understand.

"Mike Bonallack, the secretary of the R&A, rang me later in the day to tell me that the BBC had won the contract. **As I said to him, if I'd known that the lowest bidder would win, I'd have offered nothing¹⁴.**"

But, increasingly, the Royal & Ancient was a relic, as the name implies. McCormack was a Cleveland attorney and wannabe golfer who in 1960 founded the International Management Group with Arnold Palmer, the first great golf star of the TV

era, as his first client. Soon the world's great sportsmen and women would all beat a path to his door, content to let IMG take up to a quarter of their income, knowing the pot would be exponentially bigger with IMG's help than without. McCormack was also, as the Channel 4 story shows, highly adept at running with the hare and hunting with the hounds.

First, he got the performers themselves to understand that they were not chattels, but had skills and an image that was highly marketable and exploitable. Then the people who ran the sports began to understand that this also applied to their product too.

This process happened much, much quicker in the US than in Britain. In 1965 the average major league baseball player was being paid \$14,000 a year, close to \$100,000 in today's terms. The average salary passed the \$1m mark in 1992. By 2010 that figure had risen above \$3.3m¹⁵. This process was punctuated by a series of bitter industrial disputes in which the players habitually emerged triumphant.

In the mid-1980s, the cricketer Nick Pocock, then the captain of Hampshire, told the story of how he had met a baseball player who asked him how much he earned. "£4,000" said Pocock. "And how many games do you play?" So Pocock counted up all the different forms of cricket and said "About 41, 42".

So the baseball player did some sums: 40 times 4,000, and converted pounds to dollars and said "Hmmm, that's not so bad." "No," said Pocock, "you don't understand. That's four thousand *a year*¹⁶."

The case of football was even more startling, given the much greater popularity of the game. Footballers were paid a maximum of only £20 a week until 1961 and, although that figure rose quickly once the limit was lifted, the game was to endure some very evil times in the decades ahead. The brief Channel 4-induced craze for gridiron in the mid 80s coincided with the descent of English football into a pit of despair.

The most vibrant personality in British sport by far was the cricketer Ian Botham, a rampager on and off the field. The leading English footballer was the rather dull Bryan Robson. The great footballing characters were the more bombastic managers, like Brian Clough and Tommy Docherty.

Attending matches was made repulsive by hooliganism and the 1980s were bookmarked by tragedies: the 1985 Bradford City fire (56 dead); the 1985 Heysel riot (39

dead) and the 1989 Hillsborough disaster (96 dead). After Heysel, when a wall collapsed following aggression by Liverpool supporters at the European Cup final, English clubs were banned from European competitions. BBC and ITV became so disillusioned by football that, for the first half of the 1985-86 season, it disappeared from the screens completely.

Hard now to remember that Margaret Thatcher spent the declining years of her tenure in Downing Street not just imposing a poll tax but trying to force through a law that would have made it illegal to attend a football match without an identity card.

There were times in the 1980s when football's pre-eminence seemed severely endangered. In 1982, Notts County, then in the old First Division, i.e. the top division, were drawing crowds that fell below 7,000; a *Guardian* reporter discovered that up the road the local ice hockey team, the Nottingham Panthers, were not just filling their 2,800-seat capacity stadium, but that people were queuing for almost five hours before every match to be sure of getting a ticket.

Ice hockey – a game with almost no tradition in Britain – had discovered what football had not. That spectators wanted a comfortable and safe sporting experience away from the threat of violence that was perpetually there on the football grounds of the 1980s. They wanted a day that was female-friendly and family-friendly. They obviously didn't mind violence on the field – sports don't get much more brutal than ice hockey. But they didn't want their wives and kids threatened.

The reporter saw this as a harbinger of football's demise. "Beneath our feet," he wrote, "the entire fabric of British sport is starting to tremble and shift¹⁷." He was over-excited. Or rather I was, since I was that reporter. There was indeed going to be an earthquake. Of a very different kind.

Things were already changing in the US. The ABC network, under the aegis of McCormack's contemporary, Roone Arledge, was developing a new style of presenting sport as entertainment, putting it into primetime – especially with his pioneering Monday Night Football show – i.e. American football – packaged as entertainment. As his star presenter, Howard Cosell, put it: "There is no damn way you can go up against Liz Taylor and Doris Day in prime time TV and present sports as just sports¹⁸."

All that was perceived over here as typical American excess, though the Football League – in desperation – finally allowed a few live matches to be televised in 1985. In Britain, the signs of the world to come were subtler, even subterranean.

Take the fate of Desmond Hackett. We last heard of him back in Iffley Road in 1954. Through the 1960s, when it was impossible to ignore the *Daily Express*, he was the very embodiment of the Fleet Street sports reporter. He was a showman, and his trademark was his brown bowler hat.

He promised to kick his bowler down Fleet Street if Arsenal won a European game. In 1967 he promised to walk barefoot home from Wembley if Chelsea won the FA Cup. Since the promise was made after the third round, and Chelsea reached the final, the fun kept going for months. He said he would clean the windows of boxer Jack Bodell's Derbyshire bungalow if Bodell beat Joe Bugner. And he did. If Hackett was right, fine. If he was wrong, so much the better. "Vaudeville in print," one colleague called it.

Along with the showmanship, he had a fine imagination. Press box colleagues marvelled at Hackett's account of the Battle of Berne – the violent match between Hungary and Brazil at the 1954 World Cup – and how the shirt was ripped from his back. Especially as they knew he hadn't left the safety of the press box. I'm still not 100% certain he was really present when he wrote that graphic account of Bannister at Iffley Road.

I interviewed Des in a pub in Clapham in 1989, three years before he died. He was a nice old boy, not at all rich, living in a small flat. The *Express* had paid him humongous expenses but not much of a pensionable salary. But he'd had a great life, and repented none of it. "You'd get an idea," he explained, "and you'd draw the truth towards it." When I mentioned the Battle of Berne story, he said: "Well, if you see it happen, it detracts from the story."

The thing was, he added: "I have never looked back and said I hurt anyone's feelings. It's my main claim to fame." His contemporaries all agreed on that: Des never did any harm. But at that time, in 1989, good nature was not an obvious qualification for a sports writer. By then the *Express* was irrelevant, and the paper that held sway was Kelvin Mackenzie's vindictive, tearaway *Sun* which had just headlined a story about the England manager Bobby Robson IN THE NAME OF GOD, GO. "Stupid, isn't it?" said Des. "It's still a bloody game¹⁹."

Television did for Desmond Hackett. The more people could see for themselves, the more they realised they realised he was talking through his brown bowler. He was forced into early retirement. The nastier methods of The Sun held sway.

Having used **IN THE NAME OF GOD, GO** the previous year, *The Sun* headlines on the England team's performances at the 1990 World Cup in Italy included:

PATHETIC! ARROGANT! SMUG!

WORLD CUP WALLIES

YOU'RE BONKERS BOBBY

WE'RE A CARBUNCLE ON THE FACE OF SOCCER

PATHETIC BORING RUBBISH²⁰

England reached the semi-finals of the 1990 World Cup, and went out to Germany only on penalties. Many good judges believe that, had England won the shootout, they would definitely have beaten Argentina in the final. Bobby Robson's reputation grew with the years. He was knighted in 2002 and died in 2009, garlanded with universal praise for his football knowledge and his humanity.

Though *The Sun* could hurt, cruelly, its bullets were not necessarily fatal. And that semi-final gave a stark warning on the limited power of all newspapers. It was the night when Paul Gascoigne, England's most vibrant player, was booked for a second time and thus knew that, even if England did qualify, he could not play in the final. And he cried, a detail caught in close-up by the TV cameras. Those of us watching the game in the stadium failed to see it.

1990 was the first summer after the Berlin Wall fell: a time of remarkable optimism for the world. For me too. I was young-ish, in love and about to be married. Though I was covering the World Cup, I managed to engineer things so that I could commute between the interesting things happening at home and those happening in Italy. There was a huge disconnect between the two.

All the football experts actually attending the World Cup thought it was the most boring, least skilful, most defensive tournament of all time. Across the world, audiences were captivated: 80% of Czechoslovaks were said to be watching their country's games even though that country would soon cease to exist; half of Singapore was said to be sitting up all night; there was a riot in Calcutta when the electricity failed during the match; and whenever Cameroun scored – which was pretty regularly until England knocked them out in the quarter-finals – the roar could be heard across every city in Africa²¹.

Never was the power of football to unite the world more clearly demonstrated. And the power of the two great channels who dominated British television. I was at my home in London for the quarter-final and I remember vividly the silence on the street when I went to put the dustbin out at half-time. Football was back. BBC and ITV both basked in the ratings.

No one was taking that much notice of the satellite dishes starting to sprout on south-facing walls, mostly in the dingier corners of English cities. An earthquake was indeed imminent. And it had nothing to do with bloody ice hockey.

¹ *Daily Express*, 17 June 1937

² *Daily Express*, 22 June 1937

³ *The Listener*, 20 June 1937

⁴ *The Times*, 26 August 1937

⁵ Quoted in *Queuing for Beginners* Joe Moran (2007) p 224

⁶ *The Times*, 4 May 1953

⁷ *Daily Express*, 7 May 1954

⁸ *Daily Express*, 8 May 1954

⁹ Initially the English and Scottish FA Cup finals, the Grand National, Derby, England Tests, the Boat Race, Wimbledon, soccer World Cup finals, Olympics and Commonwealth Games. *Games and Sets* Steven Barnett (1990) p 31

¹⁰ Interview with ME 2010

¹¹ Interview with ME 2010

¹² Interview with Martin Kelner, 2010

¹³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/tv_and_radio/match_of_the_day/879960.stm

¹⁴ *It Seemed Like A Good Idea at the Time* Michael Grade (1999) p 379 and interview with ME, 2010

¹⁵ <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/haupert.mlb> (Economic History Association) and http://www.baseball-almanac.com/charts/salary/major_league_salaries.shtml

¹⁶ Private information

¹⁷ *The Guardian*, 17 February 1982

¹⁸ See *Television: An International History* ed Anthony Smith 2nd ed 1998 Chapter 6 by Steven Barnett

¹⁹ *The Guardian*, 7 March 1989

²⁰ See *Tickle the Public* Matthew Engel (1996) p 296

²¹ *Sportspages Almanac 1991* ed Matthew Engel and Ian Morrison p 7