

Prologue

The book you have just started reading is one of the most important fictions of our time. It is important because the person that it is about is very famous. His name is known by almost every person in the country. His story is very special indeed because his life was far from easy, but he managed to overcome any hurdles that came before him because he is, and has always been, single-minded. He knew what he wanted from a very young age. There was only ever one thing that he wanted to do with his life and that was to play football. There was only ever one club that he ever wanted to play for and that was Manchester United. His was a dream that was more than a fancy. He came from good stock. His father showed early promising signs of becoming a professional footballer but his career was cut short by injury before it had really begun.

You might well ask why this story isn't well known already. The truth is that there are a few skeletons in the cupboard and

telling the whole truth in a normal biography would be unfair to his family. Also there are some behind-the-scenes dealings that used to go on in football that would cause a lot of trouble if they were to come out in the open today. This would clearly cause a lot of embarrassment to the subject of this book, but it would also cause a lot of embarrassment to the football club concerned as well. Some of the shady dealings that are exposed in this book still go on today but, in fairness to the club involved, and the game as a whole, it should be noted that football is a much cleaner game now.

For these reasons, the name of the person whose life is told in this book has been changed and the names of all the clubs have also been changed. Of course, there will undoubtedly be a lot of speculation about who the person is and people will try and discover the real clubs involved. This, however, will have to remain idle speculation because the person whose life this is about and indeed my own identity will remain forever a secret.

From here on in, the name, Adam, will be used to describe my friend. Adam was my best friend at school and I'm proud to say that I was his. We were both driven by ambition that took hold of us at a very early age indeed. I look at young children now, at age six or seven, and it seems impossible, but it is true to say that Adam and I were already seriously discussing what we wanted to do in life. Like most young people I wanted to work for the police for a while, then I wanted to be a train driver and a fireman. I know that for quite a long time I wanted to be a priest. I remember talking to my own priest about it on a number of occasions and, when I was eleven, I very nearly left home to go to a college where boys study throughout their teens and then go on to train as priests. I very well may have followed that path had it not been for the fact that the college only played rugby and football was just altogether too important to me. There was no way I could have given up football. Looking back, I guess that let me know how serious my calling was. I eventually went on to choose a

career in journalism. I want to say that I have a fairly ordinary career but this book is all about the truth so I am going to suspend modesty and say that I am at the top of my profession. That's enough said about me, though, because my life's story only becomes interesting when people learn that I am Adam's best friend.

Adam went through no soul searching for his choice of career. He was certain that one day he would be a professional footballer and his overwhelming dream in life was to play for Manchester United. All of us who knew him, even as a very young boy, knew that he had a most prestigious talent and that he worked and trained harder than anyone else we knew. The problem was that we never knew how good you had to be to be a pro.

Adam's life has not been easy and the reason for this was that some people were really quite unkind to him as he was growing up. All of their names have been changed.

There was one person who stood out like a beacon in both Adam's and my life. He was our teacher from primary school. We would like to have used his real name so that we could tell the world what a brilliant teacher he was and what a wonderful inspiration he was to both of us. Unfortunately, this might give the game away as Adam has been photographed with him on a number of occasions, and once people know who he is, then the whole point of this book being written with false names would be ruined. For that reason, I will be calling the teacher John Smith. For the record though, John Smith knows who he is and Adam and I want to say that we realise that so much of our success in life has its roots back in those early days when he listened to us and took us, and our dreams, seriously. Nobody could have done more for us and we thank him from the bottom of our hearts. Even now, I see adults who make children feel foolish for having dreams. I make a point of writing in my columns that adults who do that are putting unnecessary barriers in the way of young people. Adults need to

encourage young people to have dreams. They need to help them work towards their dreams. Dreams can never be realised if they are not kept alive. Once a dream fades, it dies forever. Adam would never let his dream fade and that is why I have written his story today and it is the reason you are reading it.

You can do
anything
if you try.

Chapter One

The whole story that I am now telling you nearly didn't happen at all. On one very rare occasion when Adam and I were not playing football, we found ourselves on an adventure that nearly cost us our lives. We went on a summer holiday with Adam's mum and stepdad. The idea was that we would have a week with them and then Adam's birth father would come down and we would stop with him. We were then due to go on holiday with my parents for two weeks, so we were really as happy as we could be.

It was probably the best and worst summer of our young lives. The days started really early. We went out in the mornings and played football. Some people would say that we were training or working at our skills but really we were just playing. Sometimes you can hear the sentiment when Adam is interviewed on television. Even when he's playing with the best footballers in the world, he still describes what he does as playing. He says that if he ever feels like he's going

to work, then he'll pack it in and get a real job.

We used to do things like keeping the ball in the air between us. We got so good at it that we used to see how long we could keep it going for, rather than counting how many kicks. We used to put cones down on the ground and dribble in between them. We used to time ourselves to see if we were getting better. I was pretty good at it but, of course, Adam would win every time. We used to make it a fairer contest by putting more cones on the ground on Adam's side. Target practice was something that could keep us busy for hours and hours and hours. Adam's free kicks today are recognised by most people as being the best in the world. People are staggered to learn that he spent so many hours practising them from such an early age. I know the truth though – it was simply playing. He did have the desire to be the best footballer that he could be, and there was some inner strength that has always kept him going, but really the plain truth is that we just played football from early

in the morning until late at night because we loved it.

Adam's mum and stepdad called us in at about mid-morning but by then we had already been playing football for about three hours. We went down to the seaside to spend the rest of the day there. The idea was that Adam's dad would come to meet us and we would swap over. His mum and stepdad would then go off home and we would stay on holiday for another week with Adam's dad. It was quite a busy beach and we soon found some other kids to play with. We rigged up a little net and played kick volleyball.

The other kids couldn't understand why we were so good at it but it was the kind of thing that we did for hours every day so we had something of an advantage. We could see that people were gathering round us to watch us keep the ball up. We loved being the centre of attention. I suppose people wouldn't have taken much notice but we were still at primary school so it stood out

that our skill levels were so high. Of course, it was Adam that was really good. He made it easy for me to control the ball because he kept it under such good control. I never had to reach out or run for the ball. It always came just where I wanted it.

Adam's stepdad never really liked Adam. He was like two different people. When there was nobody else around he used to order Adam about and shout at him. He would punish him for the smallest thing. I am absolutely convinced that he treated Adam so badly because he was jealous. Adam's stepfather and his real father didn't get along. Adam's dad was really good at football and I think that's what his stepdad didn't like. He used to pretend to be proud of Adam and when other people were around he would say encouraging things, but that's where it stopped. He would never say or do anything supportive in private.

When he could see the crowd gathered around us on the beach, he shouted over to Adam and told him to stop showing off. He

said it in a kind of joking voice with a smile on his face, but I could tell he was jealous. He would have loved to have been the centre of attention himself. As the crowd was getting bigger and people were clapping more, Adam was showing off more. When a high ball came, he kind of caught it on the back of his neck and balanced it there. He had a big smile on his face. He wasn't a big head but he loved to make people happy and he did always like to show off his skills. His stepdad clearly wasn't as happy as he pretended to be and so he called to us again and told us to come over for our sandwiches.

Adam always did what he was told first time where his stepfather was concerned because he knew what the consequences would be if he didn't. Everybody gave us a big round of applause. Adam kicked the ball over to where his mum and stepdad were sitting and that's when the whole day started to go wrong. Adam's stepdad said that he had kicked sand all over the sandwiches. He hadn't. I saw exactly what happened and there was definitely no sand anywhere near

any piece of food. I didn't say anything because I knew that the angrier his stepdad became, the more trouble Adam would get into. Adam's stepdad picked up a knife and stuck it into the ball. He whispered into Adam's ear that it would be a good idea if he went and played out of his sight whilst he tried to salvage something from the picnic.

We went off and wandered down to another part of the beach. I never thought much about Adam's mum at the time but, now I look back, I think she should have stood up for him more. We didn't bother going back for lunch. We just started messing about on the beach and gradually forgot about Adam's stepdad.

It was a beautiful summer's day. We wrestled for a while, trying to pin each other's shoulders to the ground. We used to do that quite a lot when we were very young but we never hurt each other. I was stronger and bigger than Adam but I could play wrestle with him for ages without ever hurting him.

We found an old tray and played sand surfing on it. There was a steep embankment of sand and we ran up it as fast as we could. We flew down the sand on that old tray and fell over at the bottom of the slope. I remember it being very hard work but it was great fun so we just kept on doing it again and again.

There was a family nearby who were packing away for the day and we invited the kids to come and join us. They were a boy and girl just a bit older than us. We had competitions with them to see who could go the furthest or to see who could do the most spectacular dive as we came off.

It was a good afternoon. As the family were leaving, they gave us two dinghies because they were too big to fit in the car. It was like a dream come true for us. If we couldn't play football, then being around in the water seemed like a good second best.

Adam's dad turned up. We were quite a long way from him and we now had the

dinghies in tow so we just waved over to him and he waved back. We saw him sit down next to Adam's mum so we just carried on playing for a while. We dragged the dinghies out into the water and just lay back in the still water soaking up the sun. The water lapped quietly around us. It was blissfully peaceful. It was a wonderful feeling to know that Adam's dad was going to be with us for the next week.

It wasn't that we did anything different with Adam's dad; in fact, we didn't really do anything with him at all. He was a bit of an invalid. He could get around a bit, but he moved very slowly. He had metal crutches that he used if he was walking from the house to the car but he just used a stick when he was walking around the house.

If we closed our eyes for a bit, we drifted apart so we held onto each other's dinghy. There's something about water; it is more peaceful being on it than being anywhere else. We chatted about anything that came into our heads, but football usually

came into every conversation we ever had. We talked about matches that we had been in and matches that we were going to be in and always we talked about Manchester United. Man.U., Man.U., Man.U., Adam was obsessed by Man.U. He always talked about Man.U. as though they were his team. He said that he was going to play for them one day. He said it with such conviction that I believed him. Most people either ignored him or poked fun at him. That was unless they really knew him. If they really knew him, then they would know how much inner strength he had and how determined he was.

We heard his dad whistle to us from the shore. We looked over to him. He was waving at us and we waved back. I think I liked his dad nearly as much as Adam did.

We just lay back doing “chilli beans”. That’s what we said when we were taking it easy. We decided to stay in the water for a while so we didn’t have to talk to Adam’s stepdad. We knew that we would have to come and say goodbye when they were

leaving, but we decided to wait until we were called for. We just drifted around, chatting and enjoying the end to a beautiful day.

I didn't want to make Adam go back until he was ready, but I was getting hungry. We had been out playing since seven o'clock that morning and we hadn't had anything to eat. We had skipped breakfast because we were too busy playing football and we missed lunch because Adam's stepdad was throwing one of his wobbly moods, so I asked Adam if he minded going back and he was cool about it. The sun had gone down anyway. It was a warm evening but it was time to go and get something to eat.

We started to row with our hands. We lay down on our tummies and kind of half rowed and half swam. We had drifted quite far out so we had to get a move on. I got quite far in front of Adam because I was a stronger swimmer but he called me back because he was getting a bit scared. I understood because we were quite a way out. I waited for him to catch up. It did take

him quite a while to catch up so I promised that I would slow down and wait for him. We took a little breather and started again. I tried to go slowly so that I didn't get separated from him, but if I didn't go quite so fast I didn't seem to get anywhere. I took a few minutes going forward slowly, and then waited a minute or so for Adam to catch up. I did this a few times until I realised that we were actually further away now than when we had started back.

When Adam caught up with me I told him that we would have to really get a move on because the tide was taking us out to sea. It was no use, though. He had already been trying as hard as he could and he was getting nowhere. We discussed the possibility of me going on alone and raising the alarm with the coast guard so that they could come and save Adam. Adam was clearly very frightened and didn't want to be left alone so I stayed with him. We decided to have an out and out push for home. I went in front and we did the same as we did before. I would stop after about ten minutes

and then shout back to Adam to encourage him to keep up. It was hopeless, though. We were just getting more and more tired and further and further out to sea.

Adam was all but exhausted. For some strange reason I didn't feel quite as bad as him. Adam couldn't apologise enough but looking back on it now it was probably hypothermia and exhaustion that made him so tired. I remember drinking some pop on the beach but I don't think that Adam stopped for any food or drink all day and as it was such a warm day it's a wonder we didn't both pass out.

We decided to abandon Adam's dinghy so that we could both work together to make it easier to get back. This was the biggest mistake that we made. When we were both in the dinghy, it sank really low in the water. It was so low that we couldn't make it go forward at all. We watched helplessly as Adam's dinghy drifted away. Within a minute it was virtually out of sight and that's when we realised we were in real danger. Until

then we hadn't really realised how fast we were drifting out to sea. We had been reluctant to shout for help because we were embarrassed, but now all thoughts of embarrassment left us as we started shouting and screaming for help. We could still hear a murmur of voices on the beach but we couldn't make any of the voices out nor could we see whether Adam's mum and stepdad were still there.

We never panicked because we knew it could only be a matter of time before Adam's parents raised the alarm and the coast guard would come and get us. Fear does have a habit of controlling your mind, though, if you let it. The night air grew colder and the shoreline gradually became a haze of distant lights and far off fairground sounds. We could hear people laughing and shouting in the distance. It was somehow reassuring. The hunger, the thirst and the cold made us quiet. We talked about being saved rather than of dying. It was a scary time. As the night grew darker, we couldn't understand why Adam's parents hadn't raised the alarm.

Then it occurred to us that Adam's mum and stepdad could be waiting for us and so could Adam's dad. If each thought we were with the other, neither would raise the alarm. This was a disaster.

Eventually a plane flew overhead. It was a wonderful relief. We cheered and shouted and raised our hands and waved like mad, but relief turned to disappointment as the plane flew on overhead and away. It seemed a very long time that we stayed aimlessly bobbing about until we eventually noticed something sticking up out of the water. It was a fisherman's net. There was a kind of post that held it still in the water. We drifted near to it but it looked like we were going to float just by it and yet be unable to grasp it. We could see the net floating around near it so I jumped out and swam a few metres and caught hold of it. I swam back to Adam and he paddled like mad to stay in touch with me.

We held on to that post as though it were the hand of God. We knew that as long

as we held onto it, we only had to stay alive until the morning when the fishermen came to check their catch to be saved. A helicopter flew overhead and, once again, we screamed and shouted. Our spirits were raised even higher than before because the helicopter had a searchlight. It came tantalisingly close to us on a number of occasions, but, even when it appeared to shine its light directly on us, it didn't actually lower a winch for us. We found out later that, even though they had spotted us, they couldn't risk capsizing our flimsy dinghy by getting too close to it. It wasn't long before a speedboat came out to get us and we were rescued at last.

That was a life changing experience for me and I know that it was for Adam. We learnt how precious life is and we learnt not to take it for granted.

We were right about Adam's mum and stepdad. They had agreed for Adam's dad to pick us up and take us to where we had been stopping to collect our things. When he

got to the beach and saw that we had already gone, he stormed off in a huff back to his hotel. He had decided that Adam's mum should deliver us to him as a punishment for messing him about. When Adam's dad didn't turn up at his mum's caravan, she eventually went over to his hotel room to find out the reason why he hadn't turned up. That is when they raised the alarm.

To this day, Adam's parents blame each other for the whole sorry mess but I blame both of them. If they had both put Adam first, instead of their own stupid squabbles, then none of it would have happened.

They say that every cloud has a silver lining, though, and that day was the day that really cemented our friendship. We had always been best friends but from that day on we became lifelong best friends.

Practice
only works
when it is
FUN!

Chapter Two

I want you to know Adam the man, but to do this you really need to know Adam the boy. I know that many people say that when they were children they wanted to be ballerinas or professional footballers or spacemen or any number of other wonderful things but few people think this at a very early age and really mean it.

Adam had a diary and he wrote in it every week. He used to keep writing Man.U., Man.U., over and over again. I know why he did it. Other people used to tease him because he talked about Man.U. so much. I never did. I was fascinated by him and his dreams. Writing Man.U. all the time used to help him meet the need he had to keep reminding himself that he was working towards his dream.

He started his diary when he was seven but it was sometime later that he started writing in it every week. One of his earliest entries was, "*Man.U., Man.U.,*

Man.U., I just KNOW that I will play for Man.U. one day”.

He didn't share his diary with anybody except me. Now, of course, he can be proud of being so determined and single minded but at the time he knew that people would laugh at him even if they knew how good he was at football.

The real purpose of his diary was for Adam to keep a record of what he had actually done to help himself get nearer to his dream. He wrote things like, *“one day I will be selected to play for Manchester United. I will be handed the shirt (with my name on it!) by the manager and he will shake my hand. That's where I am going and this is what I have done to help myself get there.”* Then he would make a list of all the games he had played and the training he had done.

We had a game that we played for hours almost every day of our lives. We never gave it a name but it was a kind of

target practice game. Each of us took a shot at a sign that was on a wall. If we hit it, we scored a point and if we missed it, then we didn't score. It was a good game because we had to decide whether to take an early shot from near the target or to let the ball come to rest and then take a dead ball shot. I didn't find out until much later that Adam used to keep a record of his scores. If he improved upon his previous best, then he would record in his diary that he was one step nearer his dream. It makes me smile to look back on those days now but at the time the irony of it totally escaped us, because the sign that we spent all those hours trying to hit said "NO BALL GAMES".

Adam still has his diaries from those early days and we noticed one day, when we were looking through them, that from one year to the next we could count on the fingers of one hand the number of entries that didn't mention football.

It was Adam's diary that started another memorable incident from our

childhood. You may think that a boy who is a very gifted footballer would automatically become very popular at school but in Adam's case that was very far from the truth. Not only was Adam not very popular at school, he was actually quite unpopular. Quite a lot of boys didn't like him because he was so good at football and some boys, especially ones who wanted to be the best themselves, actually hated him. It wasn't unusual for Adam to experience a bit of teasing or even a bit of bullying from time to time.

A particularly cruel incident started one day with some boys who were sitting at the back of the class. They were putting their heads together with some of the girls and they were sniggering and laughing. They kept looking over at Adam so it was obvious that they were making fun of him in some way. We took no notice. It wasn't a one-off incident so we had learnt to deal with it. If we could ignore that kind of thing then we would. I shouldn't really be proud of this but I'm afraid I am; if it ever came to a fight, then nine times out of ten it would be me that

would stand in and fight in Adam's stead. The sniggering and laughing continued and we kept on ignoring it.

In the lesson that followed, the class was asked to come up with a sentence with the word "love" in it. One of the boys from the back of the class put his hand up and said, "Man.U. Oh, Man.U., I love you. I love you Man.U."

The group of kids at the back burst out laughing. At this stage, we didn't think too much about it. Later in the day, though, we walked into a classroom and someone had written on the chalkboard, "I kept the ball up for seventeen minutes today so it's obvious that I'm going to be playing for Man.U." Then they had signed it "Adam". Everybody went quiet and stared at Adam. I can only guess how hurt he was. It was obvious that somebody had got hold of his diary and had been reading it out loud to everybody in the class.

I could see Adam fighting back his tears but it was no use. His emotions got the better of him and his tears flowed freely. He wasn't showing any other signs of emotion. His face was straight but his tears took no notice of his efforts and just flooded his face. One of the girls said, "Ahhh! Is little Adam crying then?"

The humiliation and the embarrassment were too much for him. He ran from the room.

Adam ran out of school, but nobody knew this at the time. I told our Mr Smith what had happened. Mr Smith was the one great adult in our school lives. He stood out like a beacon among all the other teachers. The influence he had on our young lives was massive. He came in and, although he was really nice, he was one of those teachers that nobody messed about. He burst into the room with all guns blazing. He started fiercely telling all of the class how disappointed he was that they should stoop so low. He asked them how they would feel if

their innermost thoughts had been laid open to ridicule for everyone to laugh at. By the time he had finished, he had made them feel really guilty. I could tell that some of the kids realised how cruel they had been. I could also see that some of the kids didn't have the faintest idea of how bad Adam felt.

Mr Smith told the class that everyone who had been involved was as guilty as the person who had started it. He also told them that he was determined to find out who stole the diary and punish whoever it was. Mr Smith was one of those people that, when they said something, you just knew that they really meant it. He found out that it was a lad called Michael Jones who had stolen the diary. Michael, more than any other boy in the school, really disliked Adam. Michael was a good footballer. He was a very good footballer, to be honest, but he wasn't a patch on Adam.

Everything changes with time. I used to hate Michael when we were at school. Looking back now, I can see how hard it was

for him. Football was very important to him, but all through his school life he had to put up with Adam being so much better. In most schools, Michael would have been the best player, but in our school, everything he achieved was eclipsed by Adam's achievements. If Michael scored three goals, Adam would score six. If Michael was picked for the district team, Adam was picked for the county. Now I know how hard it must have been for him, but at the time all I could see was a jealous, cruel bully who made my best friend's life a misery.

Mr Smith did punish Michael. He made him write a letter of apology to Adam and he put him on detention. He also banned Michael from playing for the school's team. It was a few days later that Adam found out about this and did something I couldn't understand at the time. When he found out what Mr Smith had done, he asked him to allow Michael to play for the school team. It is not my intention to make Adam out to be whiter than white but that really was the way it happened. Mr Smith allowed Michael to

play for the team but Michael never found out that it was Adam who had spoken up for him.

Apart from Adam himself, I was the only person in the world that knew just how embarrassed Adam was and how much this incident had upset him. To this day, Adam impresses me most when he's not trying to impress. That small act of kindness may not have made him a saint, but I think it was a pointer to show just what a good kid he was.

Michael did write the letter of apology, but he didn't mean it. Adam and I disliked him with a passion but I think that his hatred for us in general, and for Adam in particular, ran much deeper. This was far from being the only time that Michael was vindictive to Adam, but I think this incident hurt Adam the most. I think if he had been a bit older then it wouldn't have hurt him so much. There are two reasons that make me think this: one reason is that Adam's dream of playing for Manchester United was, at this stage, still a very private one, and the other reason is that

people hadn't yet come to realise just how talented Adam was.

When this happened, Adam ran out of school. It was quite a bit later when the teachers realised that he was missing. They rang his mum, but he wasn't there, so they rang his dad and he wasn't there either. This was a cue for his mum and dad to start blaming each other and to start screaming abuse at each other. Because he had been gone so long, the school called the police. Some of the teachers went looking for him; his mum went looking for him too. His dad couldn't get around too well, so he stayed by the phone in case Adam called home.

The teachers came and questioned me. They asked me where Adam might have gone. The police came as well; they asked me the same questions but I told them nothing. As soon as the attention drifted away from me, I went to see him. I knew exactly where he would be. We had a secret den that we went to when it was too dark to play football. There were some gully ways

that ran behind the back streets of our estate and we had built a lean-to up against the back of some garage walls. It was surrounded by hedges and mounds of earth. We had put some camouflage of our own around it so that nobody knew it was there except us. People could walk just a few metres away from it and not know it was there.

We sat quietly. We didn't need to talk. After a while, I told him that it was Michael Jones that had stolen the diary. Adam wasn't surprised. I told him that the police were looking for him. He was surprised about that. I told him that it was the other kids who should feel ashamed and not he. He said that he wasn't ashamed, he just felt stupid and betrayed. We eventually went home. He knew that his stepdad would give him a hard time, but he didn't care.

I'm a bit in awe of Adam. I still hang on his every word – even today. A while ago, I heard him say in an interview that, when people face up to tough times and overcome

them, it just makes them tougher. I'm sure he wouldn't have been able to say that at the time but I'm sure that's when he learnt it.

You know
that you
have done
well when
you feel
good.