

**Tony Pawson** (ed.), *The Observer Book on Soccer. An anthology of the best soccer writing.*, **Unwin Hyman Ltd, London, 1989. Illus., pp. 294. £12.95**

Soccer is played and watched throughout the world by more people than all other football codes, baseball and cricket put together. Yet while whole library shelves can be filled with serious books on cricket and baseball, similar space devoted to soccer is comparatively modest. Perhaps it has something to do with soccer being 'the simplest game', more likely it is because soccer's appeal is popular, the bulk of its adherents barely literate, while the followers of cricket -are of the wealthier classes, and baseball is restricted by and large to the United States, which can sustain itself on its own vast but parochial market. There are indications in recent years that this situation may be about to change, and Tony Pawson's selection of writing from the British Sunday paper, the *Observer*, is one indication of this.

Soccer has had its intellectual aficionados, mostly outside the United Kingdom, in people like Henri de Montherlant and Jean

Giraudoux, but before the 1960s most books dealing with soccer were run of the mill affairs. Terence Delaney (*The Footballer's Fireside Book*, 1961), Brian Glanville (*The Footballer's Companion*, 1962) and Ian Archer and Trevor Royle (*We'll Support You Ever More*, 1976), compiled collections of documents involving various aspects of the game, historical, fictional and pieces by some of the best journalists which dig deeper than the match reports and prognostications that are the life blood of the sports dailies and which are not meant to last much longer than they take to read. Glanville himself has written several novels, some about soccer, but they are of incidental interest based on his wide association with the game rather than great works of literature. Tony Pawson's pillaging of the archives of the *Observer* adds a worthy volume to the growing body of more serious works on soccer by non-academics. In his earlier days an amateur player of some note - he played for Pegasus at Wembley before 100,000 spectators in the early 1950s - Pawson has written some very good histories as well as contributing to the *Observer* for nearly four decades. As a result his introductory comments give added interest to his selections at the same time as they hold the book together.

Significantly this collection of articles from the *Observer* has very little on the period prior to the 1960s, despite the fact that the *Observer* was around when the first FA Cup Final was played in 1872. In those days rowing could be given a full page, but soccer was lucky to get a short notice. As a 'serious' paper soccer was passed over until the 1950s, and when interest in the game then picked up even the *Observer* shared the rest of the British public's disinterest in the world game. It gave scant attention to the World Cup competitions played in Brazil in 1950 and Switzerland in 1958. When Pawson was allowed to go to Sweden in 1958, to record the magic of Pelé and the other young men from Brazil and elsewhere, it was on condition that his fee and expenses did not exceed £50 for his three weeks stay in what was hardly one of the cheapest countries in Europe.

From this time on, however, soccer began to take its due place in the sporting columns of the *Observer*, and alongside the young Glanville could be found the names of John Rafferty and John Arlott, long standing journalists of distinction; Danny Blanchflower, still a brilliant footballer for his club and his native Ireland, thorn in the flesh of directors and supporter of players' rights, setting out to prove that he could write as well as play; and from the early 1960s the incomparable Hugh McIlvanney, a devoted critic, was making his vivid and pungent contributions to the game. As a weekly the *Observer* welcomed writers rather than reporters, and with its small financial return compared to what the tabloids could offer, a haven for those whose prime interest was not in making a fortune. Among other notable writers attracted to its ranks was Julie Welch, one of the few women who succumbed to the charms of soccer, and whose passion she shared with another contributor to this book, Ronald Atkin, whom she married.

The first selections deal with the 'two faces' of football, inevitably chronicling the tragedies of recent years along with the other side of the glory game; the next with 'the Cup', whose romance cannot be equalled in any other sport; a fittingly thin third chapter on the 'world and international scene'; a fourth on football's 'characters', and a final chapter on 'the supporting cast', the most interesting aspect of which is the role played by the *Observer* in the fight against the maximum wage and the retain and transfer system from the late 1950s.

Readers will dip into this anthology for their own particular pleasures, but for me two of the best pieces are the obituaries of Bill Shankly and Jock Stein by Hugh McIlvanney. Here we have a great writer, restraining his penchant for striking metaphor, recalling his association with two of soccer's immortals who shared his love of the people's game: men for whom money was secondary, for whom winning was vital, but the manner of the victory even more so. And men who never forgot where they came from, and to whom the professional game owes everything: the fans.

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