

90 MINUTES

Introduction by **Richard Williams** for the 2006 Merrell publication

The man in the red shirt kneels on the grass, his shadow stretching in front of him. He could be praying, or mourning. His hands are on his knees. Two white lines, one straight, the other a tightening arc, form a complex geometry with the straight edge of his arms and the curve of his body. The grass looks burnt by the late-afternoon sun. Divots scar the surface, each casting its own little shadow. This is the greatest moment of the man's life.

England have just won the World Cup for the first and, so far, the only time, and Jack Charlton has played his part as one of the eleven players who will go on to assume a unique role in the nation's life. The tall, giraffe-necked, raw-boned Jack is a familiar figure; we are used to seeing him heading a cross out of the danger area, brushing an opponent aside, cajoling his team mates. What Robert Davies does with this simple image of Jack Charlton, however, is to take us to another level of understanding.

In England's moment of triumph, Charlton's head is filled with thoughts and feelings that he will never be able to articulate. Not because of the easily caricatured verbal inarticulacy of the average professional footballer, but because these are thoughts and feelings that go beyond words. And by taking this image from a videotape of the 1966 World Cup final, isolating it and treating it in a way that enhances and emphasizes its inherent qualities, Robert Davies reveals more of what Charlton thought and felt as that day at Wembley reached its climax. There is loneliness in failure, but there is a kind of loneliness in success, too: a sudden hollowness at the moment of triumph, the expected explosion of joy frozen for a second by a realisation that the journey is over. Here is Charlton, caught in that unrepeatable instant.

To anyone who watches the game in a spirit of love and commitment, the memory of football itself (as opposed to the experience of going to a match or of dancing in the streets to celebrate the winning of a title) exists largely as a sequence of isolated moments in which individual players reached an expressive peak. The best of these are derived from our own direct experience as spectators. Many of them will inevitably come from childhood and adolescence, when incidents imprint themselves with unusual and lasting clarity. But since the things we glimpsed were not always viewed from a helpful vantage point, they can become blurred, imprecise, distorted by our own subsequent interpretation. What we saw becomes what we think we saw. Occasionally the mind also performs a natural version of the sort of operation recently discovered by film makers who use digital cameras to capture the likeness of an actor, allowing them to manipulate the image in any way they want, as if it were an animation. In the memory of a football fan, a goal seen from one angle sometimes turns itself around in the mind's eye, revealing another facet. By these means we enhance

our memories, as if turning up the brightness and the contrast on a TV screen, or replaying the incident via another camera.

Robert Davies's pictures, taken from film of the seventeen World Cup tournaments, operate in this way, as recovered and enhanced memory. Seldom of first-hand memory, of course, and inevitably sometimes of things we cannot remember for ourselves in any authentic sense. Those of us who were unable to be among the 199,854 crowd overflowing the brand-new Maracana stadium in Rio de Janeiro for the first post-war final on July 16, 1950, and who were perhaps even unborn, can nevertheless feel some special tremor of recognition as we look at Davies's interpretation of the low-angle shot of the ball that left Alcide Ghiggia's foot coming to rest in the Brazilian goal, giving Uruguay their second title and striking the home supporters dumb.

Through the use of various processes, which include blowing up a detail and heightening the contrast & colour, sometimes rephotographing them again and again in order to accentuate some salient quality that has caught his eye, and taking advantage of the colours hidden within the 625 lines of a black and white cathode-ray screen, Davies both aestheticises and anatomises his images. Throughout this collection, abstraction vies with a documentary element. In the close-up of the referee Kim Milton Nielson, for instance, we seem to glimpse a hint of uncertainty in the referee's eyes. When he pulled out a card in response to David Beckham's kick at Diego Simeone in Saint-Etienne that night in 1998, did Nielson really mean it to be the red one? For Beckham and for England, the consequences were fateful.

Some of these images can only be called painterly. The stocky outline of Diego Maradona, caught in mid-slalom through the England defence in 1986, on his way to scoring one of the most famous goals of all time, is reduced to a sketch of movement and balance that resembles one of Matisse's jazz dancers. As Gordon Banks leaps to turn away Pele's header in the sunshine of Guadalajara, Gerhard Richter comes to mind. Elsewhere, as in the portrait of Gerd Muller against a background of spectators, the streaks and daubs of colour evoke the mature impressionism of Cezanne and de Stael. In other frames, searching for a different response, Davies pushes beyond the content of the image into something that approaches pure abstraction. Even then, however, the abstraction is still freighted with narrative meaning, as we see in the netting which ripples as it is struck by a shot from the 18-year-old Michael Owen, opening the scoring for England against Argentina in 1998 and giving birth to his own legend.

By sequencing his images according to their timing within the original match rather than by their historical chronology, Davies creates in effect a single overarching game of football in which the great figures of all eras, including Just Fontaine, Vava, Pele, Eusebio, Johan Cruyff, Paolo Rossi, Michel Platini, Maradona and Zinedine Zidane come together. From the simple image of a

brown leather ball at the kick-off to the unbearable tension of a penalty shoot-out, the artist presents a kaleidoscope not just of colour, shape, shadow and density but of virtuosity, despair, exultation, pathos, strength, rage, fellowship, trickery and inspiration. And in that single red-shirted figure, kneeling on the stage as the curtain falls, a final image speaking to all the emotions that never had a name.

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