

The Science Behind the Football Boot – part 3

Audience member: “Can I ask a question?”

Ger Gilroy: “Yes, absolutely.”

Audience member: “Could you explain a little about what happened, how did you get out of the car park and onto the pitch in Middlesbrough?”

Craig Johnston: “Well, again it was a defining moment. John Neal had been at the club, I don’t know, six months. And when he got there he said, ‘Who’s the idiot in the car park?’ And they said, ‘Ah that’s the Aussie bloke, the kangaroo, or Roo for short.’ And he said, ‘Well is he any good?’ And they said, ‘No, he’s crap.’ So still, after a year and a half, I was still the boot cleaner. And he said, ‘OK, fair enough,’ so I spent another couple of months there.

“And then one day, it was towards Christmas, and of course all the people in the digs go home for Christmas, the Irish go home, the Scots go home and blah blah blah. And basically I couldn’t go home because I couldn’t afford it still. And the team was short for a reserve game. It was Whitby, Whitby Town away. And they were going to forfeit the match to Whitby because they didn’t have enough players. And they said, ‘Well, what about the kangaroo?’

“And the funny thing is, and I was talking to the kids before about dribbling, kicking, passing, shooting. And I thought, ‘A currency in football...’, again my own conclusion, ‘...is about goals. I have to be able to score.’ So, I’d set up this elaborate routine where I’d chip the ball onto the crossbar, and because it was cement, as it bounced back I would volley at one of the crosses. And then it would come off and then I would control it. And then I would shoot. So I had a chip, a volley and a cross. So I had done this for months. And remember when you’re kids, everyone goes, ‘It’s Johnny Giles on the ball, beats one, beats two, chips, aw, shot, aw, crossbar, aw, brilliant. This guy’s unbelievable.’ Well, I would pretend that I was Georgie Best or Billy Bremner or Johnny Giles.

“So anyway, I played in this game and they didn’t know what my name was. So at number seven on the reserve team sheet, I’ve got it at home, was ‘The Roo’, short for kangaroo. They still didn’t know my name. Anyway, we beat them three nil. I scored a volley, a chip and a shot.”

Audience member: “It often seems to be the case that what separates the really top player is speed of thought, speed of action, but speed of thought particularly. Were you conscious of that or did you have it innately yourself?”

Johnston: "I couldn't agree with you more. Some players actually think ahead of the game. Kevin Keegan once said it's eight tenths in your mind, and it is. It's all about speed of thought. And the speed of thought now, compared with my day, is much quicker.

"To be honest with you, I did look at it in quite a scientific way when I played. And I would have copious, copious amounts of coffee, up to twenty cups of coffee before a game because I had read in a journal that to have a mind like that actually helps you because if you're trying to kick the ball correctly and figure out what part of the foot to what part of the ball, and then somebody over here is trying to put his studs into your leg and up your backside, you've got to have a quick mind, otherwise you'll get hurt. So it's even small things like that that you have to think through.

"Again, there was a guy called George Whardol and he used to bring ballerina teachers in to teach certain players how to be more nimble on their foot and to think about, 'I know what I have to do next,' but to think about it before they do it. And football is all about muscle memory and the neurological pathways. I said that Beckham had a vision, 'There's the goal, here's the ball.' And there's a neurological pathway that says, 'I've got to connect that with that.' And the more you do it, the more that pathway gets cleared. And that's why you say, 'Practice makes perfect.' Beyond that you say, 'Perfect practice makes perfect.'

"For me football is all about speed of mind. And when you get these footballers that think in 3D, Glenn Hoddle was one of them, David Beckham certainly, I know he's got his detractors, right, but he thinks in 3D. Some people think in 2D, footballers. I personally thought in 1D, you know, one dimension; you know I'd get the job done. But these other players have a spatial mind. And this is what I'm actually quite fascinated by.

"And just on that while I'm talking about the mind, players like Beckham go into a purple patch or a sweet spot zone in their own mind and everything becomes extremely clam. And it happened to me on very few occasions, but one of them was the FA Cup against Everton, where we won the double in 1986. And the second goal, you know, we quite often talk about it.

"Everton was such a good team then. And the week before we'd won the league at Chelsea. And there's only two teams this century that had won the double. The double is League Championship and FA Cup in the same year. We were just about to do it. And the score was 1-1. And then the ball came to me at the edge of the box and it sat up and I swear, I absolutely swear, all of a sudden it went into slow motion. And I thought, 'Hang on a second. Here's the ball. There's the goal. Keeper's off his line. There's the cop end, full of fifty thousand screaming Liverpool supporters, even though I couldn't hear them, it went quiet. And you know how you can almost push the button pause on a video recorder? And it was like, really, really weird.

"And I remember I was thinking to myself, 'You mean all I have to do for World Cup, FA Cup glory, is put the sweet spot here [inside of his foot] on the sweet spot there [the ball], like I've done fifty million times in the car park, then I'll be remembered for ever more, by all Liverpool fans, by my parents watching on television?' And it was that ridiculously slow. And I thought, 'Well, yes, I better get on with it then.' And I just went like that [kicks] and just in slow motion it went in.

"The moment it went past the keeper into the back of the net the place erupted, the noise came back and players were everywhere, all over me, 'You've done it. You've done it.' I said, 'I've done it. I've done it. I've done it.' And then I was screaming and shouting at the top of my voice, 'I've done it. I've done it.' But what I was really saying, the players couldn't understand it, what I was saying, 'I've done it,' I didn't really mean scoring the goal. I meant I've come the full arc, you know? Again that's why it was emotional. That was the, 'I've done it.' And Ronnie Whelan, God bless him, every time I see him he says to me, 'I've done it. I've done it.'"

Gilroy: "That's a bit cruel from Ronnie Whelan."

Johnston: "He's a cruel man."

Audience member: "Just wondering if you were to recommend a career to young people here would it be professional soccer or engineering?"

Johnston: "I'd actually say do both, because you can. Professional football is a very, very tough world. But you know what? Everything's a tough world out there. Business is a tough world. Getting inventions up is a tough world. Just getting up in the morning and going to work these days is a tough world. Maybe I'm getting old but... everything's tough. Everything's tough. You need perseverance. That's the thing I would say. Everybody will tell you you can't do something but inside if you can feel something, 'Yes, I can,' then ultimately you will. And you know what? If you don't, at least you're a happy person because you tried your hardest.

"And let me tell you, I have seen so many footballers who have so much ability and talent, a gift from God, actually get washed aside and pushed aside because they think life's too easy and they're not prepared to work at it. Then I've seen so many footballers that were just in the middle, try so hard and become great footballers because they wanted it so badly. And I'm in the Jack Charlton category, who was lucky I had such a powerful engine and I could run all day. And I had the brains to actually create some systems and processes for myself so that I could get better on a daily basis.

"And you're right Ger, there's a link with everything. When it was really going bad and I'd lost all of my money on the Super Boot, I pulled on the car park experience and said, 'No, hang on a second, I've been here before when everybody said 'You're mad. You're crazy'.' And I think this day and age, life is tougher

than we had it. I think we had it in a very, you know, it's very black and white and grey actually when we were growing up. But now, there's so many messages for kids, I think you have to have a real firm commitment to succeed in anything."

Audience member: "Thank you for the talk. I never knew anything about you until this week when I listened to the radio the other morning and I thought you were fantastic, so this has been a great pleasure for me to come here this evening. Loads of questions in my head so I hope number one that you may have written the book, I'm not sure, but if you haven't..."

Gilroy: "'Walk Alone' circa 1988."

Johnston: "Yes. Yes. Funnily enough, I did write a book. I've never read it, but I wrote it, because, you know, because it's a good story and it's a real and true story."

Audience member: "And your sister's accident or whatever happened that time when you were aged twenty-seven, was that a... obviously you gave up your soccer career, if you hadn't would you have continued to play on?"

Johnston: "Yes, certainly. Certainly. Fay never really recovered but we thought she would have, so my only regret is that Fay never recovered. But at the time the only thing that all of us in the family were thinking about was 'How do we get her better?' And the pressure was too much on my parents and after thirteen years - remember I was only supposed to go for the Christmas holidays - so after thirteen years and five League Championships, and FA Cup and European Cup, when your sister's on a life support machine, you can't go then and face a game of football or training with the same frame of mind. You've got to help. And I thought, and we all thought that Fay would get better and recover, and I might be able to come back to football. But Fay didn't recover and I didn't come back to football."

Audience member: "Sorry to hog this, just one last little question but did Jack Charlton ever acknowledge your success?"

Johnston: "You know what? Remember I told you about the 'Crippled Aussie kid, now FA Cup hero'? The quote from Jack Charlton was 'I always knew the kangaroo would make it.' So I saw him once when he was the manager of Newcastle, because funnily enough Bruce Springsteen was actually singing up there at Newcastle. So I ran into him and told him of my displeasure of the way he spoke to me as a youngster. And he said, 'Yes, but you were crap.' And I said, 'Yes, I know, I know, I know. But it was just the way you said it.' And he said, 'Well, you needed a kick up the arse man.'

"All right then, and funnily enough, his son, John Charlton, became a friend of mine. He was living in Australia. I've seen him several times since and in fact when Ireland was in the World Cup in 1990 in Italy

and 1994 in America, I hung out with John quite a bit and got to know Jack a bit better and I just think he's a wonderful, inspirational coach. And I never said he was wrong with what he said, it was just the way he said it to a young kid was wrong and he'd get put in jail now for talking like that to anybody. But he's a clever man, and didn't he do well for you guys? So, all's well that ends well."

Gilroy: "Who's got the next question?"

Audience member: "Hello Craig. Can I just ask you about your thoughts on the metatarsal injuries that are prevalent today in soccer? What do you think about the present day boot, including your own? Does it need strengthening to protect, or what do you think?"

Johnston: "Well, I've got very strong views on this. Every time there's a competition of international importance, be it the European Championships or the World Cup, either Beckham or Rooney gets a major, major bone broken in their foot, and it's usually the metatarsal, as you've correctly identified. And always, the boot manufacturers come out and say, 'It's nothing to do with the boots.' And always I say, 'Rubbish! It's directly to do with the boots.' I mean, whose fault is it? The pie seller in the crowd? The centre forward that was nowhere near him?"

"It's the physics and the power that goes through both of the people, through their body, and now has come to a stage, and the misthought in the process is what you've said. People think that there's not enough protection in the boot. There's actually too much protection in the boot. And there's nowhere... like in our days boots were made of kangaroo leather or a synthetic, now they're made of stuff that doesn't give and the studs are too long and when they engage in the pitch, the pitches are too well maintained and also have a weave in them, so there's no release for the stud. So what you've got is these studs penetrating like that [claw shape directly downwards], you've got the metatarsal on top like that [at an angle on top of the studs], and when he goes to take his foot out of the turf, and turn the other direction, it doesn't give and the grip's too good. Because for fifteen years we've been trying to get better grip so that the players don't fall over, so something's got to give, and it's that bone.

"Hello! It's the football boots. The studs are too long. And has anyone ever figured out that it's always coming up to a big event? And you know why that is? It's because players have been playing on muddy pitches in the winter with long studs, and come the summer, right, the grounds dry up more and the studs are sticking more, so they should have a smaller stud on. So I've said many times, it's only a matter of time before a player actually sues a boot manufacturer for a badly designed product. And I will stand by that."