

‘Well, Brian...’

At the end of my CQSW course in 1975 I wrote up a case study for my long essay. I started to write quite a respectable looking piece of work on a lad I was supervising on Borstal Licence, with some impressive linking of theory and practice, only to find that at the end of my placement the lad re-offended and was sent down again. Refusing to panic, I nonchalantly wiped away this custard pie from my face and began my summary passage arguing that I had done some good work and that the lad had made some real progress, even though the result had been the wrong one. It suddenly occurred to me that Sir Alf Ramsey had been sacked as England’s football team manager just after praising his team’s performance in the matches in which Poland eliminated them from the 1974 World Cup. Therefore in the throwaway final paragraph of my essay I pointed out:

‘Analogizing the social worker’s role with that of the football team manager, each carries statutory responsibility for the players/clients, each has the task of preparing his players/clients for action on the ‘field of play, each is skilled in the interpretation of their ‘performance’ on the field of play, yet neither has any direct influence on what actually happens to his players/clients on the field of play. The social worker is perhaps fortunate that (at present) he can claim that his work was good and that his client did well even though the material result was the wrong one, and yet that social worker will not get the sack – unlike Sir Alf Ramsey.’

This whimsical analogy has continued to give me pleasure in subsequent years. I have noticed (as have the Home Office Research Unit) that the profoundness of our interpretations of past events is only matched by our complete inability to predict the future. All football pundits (players, managers, writers and TV presenters) put the same confident authority into their match reports as we do into our social inquiries. When I’m writing a social inquiry or parole report I am tempted to echo the style of a football match report. Perhaps the result was inevitable from the beginning – ‘never had a chance... couldn’t even string a couple of good moves together ... not enough money to buy way out of trouble’. Or perhaps the defendant has been gallant but unlucky on this occasion – ‘good build-up, poor finishing ... much improved performance, but catastrophic last-minute mistake ...’. Only one thing I am really sure of – my ability to predict the next ‘result’ is about the same as that of the football pundit.

Now I find myself looking quizzically at colleagues in the Probation Service, and being reminded of various football personality ‘types’. Bobby Moore was a magnificent player, captaining England to the 1966 World Cup win, but in TV interviews he was an incoherent flop. This style has been suitably mocked over the years by the ‘sick as a parrot’ jokes and the John Cleese football interview sketch. In contrast, the journalists who write for the heavyweight newspapers express the most forceful opinions in the most pretentious language, while remaining safely out of the way of where the action really takes place – Brian Glanville is just one example of these.

Fortunately it is possible both to play well and talk sensibly about the game; the ex-Arsenal goalkeeper Bob Wilson continues to prove this every week on 'Match of the Day' but there seems to be few like him, either in football or probation, who can talk well and deliver the goods in practice.

So whenever I find myself carried away by the charisma of officers whose superb rhetoric de-skills their more incoherent colleagues (making them feel as if they've got two left feet) I remind myself that if I were picking my own team I would choose a Bobby Moore in preference to a Brian Glanville any day of the week.

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