

Confessions of a footballer

Stan Bowles dribbled, drank, gambled and scored his way through seventies football without the aid of a therapist. Dominic Standish spoke to his kind of hero

Stan Bowles was my boyhood hero because he was a brilliant footballer, architect of the best Queens Park Rangers side ever. They lost the league championship by one point to Liverpool on the last day of the season in 1976. Although QPR were beaten in the quarter-final of the following year's UEFA Cup, Stan broke the record for the most goals ever scored in the competition at that time with 11 in eight matches.

Many good judges said Stan Bowles ran George Best a close second in terms of ability. Ex-England coach Terry Venables remembers his playing days at QPR with Stan: 'As far as playing alongside players, I think he is one of the finest I have ever known, and I don't say that kind of thing easily.' But Bowles was also compared with Best for other reasons: gambling, drinking, drugs, womanising and going 'missing' for important matches.

In his new autobiography, *The Original Stan the Man*, Bowles recognises that these weaknesses held back his career, particularly with the England team. But he never felt the need to declare himself a reformed character, or to set himself up as a role model, like many 'fallen' footballers seem to do today. In the seventies footballers were criticised for their antics, but they were not expected to set moral standards for the nation. What they did on the pitch seemed more important. How could Stan Bowles get away with turning up 12 minutes before an important match to tell his manager, 'You wouldn't

believe it, that fucking horse just got beat in a photo-finish!?' Answer: Bowles scored two minutes after the game had started.

I was recently reunited with Stan Bowles 10 years after our first meeting, the night before QPR lost the 1986 League Cup final. Neither of us can remember much about that night, nor want to remember much about the match the next day. We had a more memorable talk this time about the differences in football now compared to the 'Stan Bowles' era of 20 years ago.

Head-butt

There is an atmosphere of conformism being imposed on football today that somebody like Stan Bowles would have found hard to cope with: witness the trouble Mark Bosnich got into for his joke 'Nazi salute' at Spurs fans, and the frequent fining of players for gestures to the crowd. 'I think players should be able to have a joke with the crowd', says Stan. 'These days, they seem to think players are trying to cause a riot.'

Stan went further with the crowd than any player would dare today. He conducted supporters' songs after scoring and threw a bucket of water over those who jeered him. At Sunderland in 1973 his antics made the *News at Ten*. QPR travelled to Roker Park on the night Sunderland were displaying the FA Cup they had just won. Stan fancied a bet with one of his mates: 'Here you are, I bet you a tanner that the first time I get the ball I knock that thing clean off the fucking

stand!' Stan had to dribble the ball all the way across to the other side of the pitch in order to knock English football's most famous trophy up into the air. The Sunderland fans went mad and Stan took up the challenge. He scored and then got one of the Sunderland players, Micky Horswill, sent off by pretending Horswill had head-butted him. The referee had to take all the players off for their own protection, and it took 20 minutes to clear the pitch of Stan Bowles-hunters before the game could continue.

Stan is critical too of the way that the rules are being tightened regarding what players can do on the pitch: 'In the old days, there were some referees who would swear back at you if you swore at them, like Jack Taylor and Gordon Hill. I think swearing is an integral part of the game and footballers will always swear, whether you think it is right or wrong.' He can see some advantages for the ball players in the new crackdown on bad tackles—'I got kicked a lot and this would have benefited me.' But he also sees the dangers of official attempts to take the bite out of football. As he writes in his book, 'Football's a man's game, it's not bleeding synchronised swimming! There are far too many bookings, and it's only going to get worse.'

Off the pitch, many players complain that their every movement is splashed all over the media today. There are calls for protection from prying cameras and reporters, especially in what they regard



Reunited: the author with Stan Bowles

as their 'private lives'. Stan takes a different view. 'I don't agree with that. You might not want the media, but it is there. You just learn to live with it. I got on very well with the sports media. I had more problems with other journalists.'

Stan was referring to the time he walked out of the England squad's hotel just before a match with arch rivals Scotland, because he was angry at being substituted in the previous game. Instead of joining the England squad, he went to the Greyhound Derby at the old White City stadium. Somebody spotted him and telephoned the *Daily Mirror*. A photographer, Harry Prosser, and a reporter, Mike Ramsbottom, quickly turned up to pester Stan and his friends about why he had walked out on England. But it was Prosser who ended up on the front page of the *Daily Mirror* the next day looking, in Stan's words, 'like he'd been attacked by about eight rottweilers'. His book notes that 'street justice was called for and given'.

There were other times when Stan actively encouraged media interest in his exploits. On tour in Belgium, Bowles and team mate Don Shanks

were beaten up by police after a prank went wrong, and ended up spending a night in the cells. The pair turned a nice profit on the affair by selling the story to the British press for a couple of grand. Indeed mugging the media proved a good source of revenue for Stan Bowles. He invented a drug story to get £1000 out of the *Daily Star*, and sold a 'scoop' to the *Sunday People* for £500 when he announced his retirement, only to play two days later.

Two contracts

Money was important to Stan because he went through it as quickly as an opposition's defence. Many commentators bemoan the way that football has been turned into a multi-million pound corporate business. Stan has mixed feelings about the massive injection of cash at the top of the game. 'It has definitely improved the Premiership, but I worry about the younger players at smaller clubs getting ignored.' While some have even suggested that players are more cautious today due to the pressure of sponsors, Stan saw them coming. Playing for England, he was initially under contract to wear Gola boots. But when Adidas offered

him more to wear their boots, he decided to take both contracts and wear one of each, with a yellow stripe on one and three white stripes on the other.

Stan Bowles also had less strong sides to his character, especially when it came to gambling. As the old wisecrack, went, if only he could have passed a betting shop like he could pass a football....But unlike modern players such as Paul Merson, Tony Adams and Paul Gascoigne, Stan never tried to make a virtue out of weakness or present himself as some kind of martyr to the pressures of the game.

So what does Stan think of the counselling and professional care which weeping footballers receive today? 'It would not work for me. If I wanted to, I could stop myself. I don't need to be told. I'm very suspicious of these kinds of people. It's like you are paying them to put you off doing what you want to do. I think it is down to the individual.' Stan does confess to going to Gamblers Anonymous once. He was told not to hold back his emotions. So he spent the whole session laughing at other peoples' stories.

Frank Worthington, another seventies football legend both on and off the pitch, once summed up Stan Bowles' life: 'Stan has spent all of his money on gambling, booze and birds.' Stan's response was typical: 'Well, at least I didn't waste it.' Nobody can say his life has been boring. And this seems to have been reflected in the initial sales of his autobiography. It was released quietly at the same time as 'King' Kenny Dalglish published his autobiography amid a blaze of publicity. But it was *Stan the Man* that quickly topped the best-sellers list at London's Sportspages bookshop, and I strongly recommend it whether you like football or not.

Although Stan Bowles had many problems, as I left the pub where we had been talking I could not help wondering whether he might make a better role model than those footballers in the limelight today. But then I realised that I had drunk too much to drive home. Stanley, that's another fine mess you've got me into.

The Original Stan the Man: The Autobiography by Stanley Bowles is published by Paper Plane Publishing Ltd at £12.99.