

An Interview with George Best

Suddenly grown men sigh.

They can't help it. They're watching a video compilation of the sporting life and social adventures of George Best. On the screen, the swift and beautiful twenty-year-old George is creating, out of next to nothing, the second of two goals he scored in a 1966 European Cup game against the invincible Benfica in front of 75,000 of their own fans.

What happens next is so brilliant and so fresh that the people watching the video can hardly control themselves. Its seven seconds of natural magic. Best blinds a troop of Benfica defenders with lightness of touch, slips right through them as if they were air, then strokes the ball past the goalkeeper. You might have seen this goal a hundred times before, but watching it still makes it come alive again.

A few minutes later, the chunky and dishevelled forty-five year old George Best is amusing the invited audience with tales of how amazing he was. He remembers that second goal against Benfica so vividly it's as if it hadn't happened yet, as if it was just a fantasy, a goal he was imagining he could score.

'If I'd have score a third,' he cheerfully brags, 'then I would have walked off the pitch.'

Manchester United beat Benfica 5-1 that night. Best flew back into London after the game with a new nickname, El Beatle, and the kind of fame that would both make and spoil his life. He arrived back in London as a successful living display of fashionable long hair and boutique clothes, boasting the cracking confidence that saw him easily manipulated as a star feature of the overheated Sixties. On the front page of the Daily Mirror the day after he arrived there was a photograph taken from behind of someone wearing a flamboyant sombrero and a flash leather coat. 'WHO IS THIS?' demanded the headline.

'It was me!' says Best. Even now, he seems a little alarmed. 'I remember thinking at the time – the front page and the back page of the national newspaper. I don't think it had happened before and it hasn't happened much since. That's when I knew it was starting to become a monster. I was put in a goldfish bowl. It's been like that ever since. For twenty five years....'

'A beer please,' I say but the man behind the bar at the San Lorenzo looks at me as if I have just insulted his mother and skinned his pet cat. It seems if you are a first-time visitor to this exclusive Knightsbridge bar, you must announce your presence, or the name of the person you are meeting. It's not a place where you can just walk off the street and ask for a beer, please.

A few moments later I am with George Best and I have no problem getting a beer.

'The privileges of being George Best,' he decides as our drinks arrive 'far outweigh the disadvantages, by a long way. It's given me access to a fantastic world and I get on well with famous people. They've gone through what I've gone through so I don't have to explain to them what it's all about, that sometimes I just can't help some of the things I do. Ordinary people....' Best stutters as he says this, but he can't find a better way to say it '...can have no idea of the pressure there can be.'

'I don't have sour grapes about anything,' he tells me 'I've had a great life. I've still got a great life. I've got no reason to be sour about anything. I think if there

is any self-pity, it's purely from the footballing side, because I didn't want it to end the way it did. I wanted it to carry on longer than it did. Sure, I can feel sorry for myself. A lot of things have gone wrong for me, and I did stop playing football at the highest level when I was only twenty-six. You know, I used to kid myself when I finished at Manchester United, say to myself that it didn't matter. But it did. I'd done something I'd loved doing, at the very highest level possible, with the greatest players in the world. Who wouldn't miss that?'

'Did the United years pass very quickly?' I ask.

'Oh God, yeah....It seems like two minutes, thinking about it. And when I think what I packed into those two minutes, its amazing. If someone had written a script about what happened to me between the ages of fifteen and twenty-six, no one would believe it. Impossible. A fairy story. But it happened. It all happened. From day one – leaving home in Belfast, and then it was non-stop.'

Best arrived in Manchester United an undersized teenager with an accent that no one could understand. He ran back home after just a day of sickness and confusion in the new big city.

'It was really lucky that my dad sent me straight back to Manchester after I ran away, and that Sir Matt Busby took me back. I mean, I ran away from the top club in the country! It was madness. I could have ended up staying in Belfast, playing Irish League football, having a regular job. I would have been a caged animal. Those years at Manchester United did give enough freedom to be myself.'

'And have you spent the rest of your life recovering?'

'Maybe so.....' He slips the question through my legs. 'But really at the end of the day I think I've handled it, considering what I've been through. I mean, separate things have gone wrong, but not the whole thing. To survive has been a kind of success. There's been the early finish....the bankruptcy...the gambling.....divorce.....my mother's death...prison.....alcoholism.... I could have quite easily gone right down the tube....'

'What's the single decision you would most like to change?' I ask him

'The easy answer is leaving Manchester United. I should have stuck around while they rebuilt the team. If it had been any other manager than Tommy Docherty, I would have. But actually, the answer is – I took a penalty against Chelsea in 1971 and Peter Bonetti, the bastard, he saved it! I wish I'd sent it the other way.'

Best's drunk appearance on Wogan confirmed his image as a broken legend spending his life midway through a nervous breakdown but perversely this added to his bandy charm.

'They gave some wine to relax me before the show,' he says. 'I was relaxed alright – I was bloody pissed! The nice thing is – they want me back.' Best later tells me that even though he didn't leave the house for three days after the show, when he did, 'People were lovely to me. They came up to me and shook my hand. It's something about the British – they're suspicious of someone doing well, but they love to see you make a fool of yourself.'

He jokes that it was Sir Matt Busby who turned him to drink, getting him to drink a pint of Guinness a day to help him put on weight, and then one pint became ten, and then it became lager, vodka, whisky..... He knows that this is a wicked thing to say, because he loves Busby, and often mentions how proud he was when Busby told him that Manchester United couldn't have won the European Cup without him.

But Best is at the farthest limits of his logic when it comes to talking about drink. He can power through five glasses of champagne as he describes the physical and mental punishment that he has brought on himself through alcohol, the missed

opportunities, the loss of work, the shame, the pain, the self-torture, the dire necessity. He is astounded that he's come through what he has, but he still drinks. It's as if through the torture he believes it can lead him to paradise.

'Is the drink killing you?' I ask 'Have you been told that you have only so much time to live?'

'Yes,' he says 'But I look at it stupidly. I think – so what? It's like, whose life is it anyway? The way I do it is I drink until I go to sleep and when I wake up, if I want some more I'll have some, and if I don't, I won't. And sometimes I don't. It's a disease, and it makes me feel better.'

'Why do you drink?'

'I enjoy it,' he says 'And you know in the end, what makes me happy is the thought that today I've got enough money in my pocket to buy myself a steak and a glass of champagne. I just want to do what I want to do.' At this he grins, switching on that charm of his making me reach for my beer in a wish to join him. But I know I would never be able to match him drink for drink. Like any true champion, Best has the ability to make everything look a lot easier than it really is.