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**Positive Magazine**

# MORE THAN A GAME

A STORY ABOUT FOOTBALL AND OTHER STUFF

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To Rosemarie Hudson,  
a publisher and unsung heroine

# Prologue

Before I begin to tell you what befell the young men who made up the Sabina Park Rangers football team, I feel I should first give you a few ideas about the place and time in which they played.

The place was a town in decline called Wolverhampton. It was principally known for the factories and foundries that, for the most part, no longer existed and the Wolves team that had won the League Championship three times during the 1950s. Besides footballers such as Billy Wright, Jimmy Mullen, Ron Flowers and, much later, Derek Dougan, one of its most well-known inhabitants was the local MP Enoch Powell. He represented the town for almost a quarter of a century and in an infamous speech he drew a nation's attention to a fading political career when he made it clear that he did not want so many black and brown people in England. Whatever the other consequences, his speech linked the name of Wolverhampton with prejudice and anti-immigrant movements for a very long time to come. No one involved with Sabina Park Rangers, who were all of a Caribbean background, could tell you what Powell had said. But they knew, if only because of the reaction in the media, that there had been no mention of an appreciation of the spirit of calypso or reggae music – and he certainly wasn't looking to embrace any of his West Indian constituents whilst proclaiming 'One love!'

This story took place in 1981. As I recall, it was a time of unreliable cars and scratchy vinyl records, of industrial strife and mass unemployment, most of which was blamed on the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who was doing a fair impression of the Wicked Witch of the North. People who had become surplus to

her requirements reacted to her government's policies throughout the land with protest, riot and rage.

To me, the early 1980s now seem a strange and backward time: there were no mobile phones, nor home computers; there were only three terrestrial stations and no satellite TV. It was a time of different labels and descriptions: Starbursts were called Opal Fruits and Snickers were Marathon bars. It was a time when Michael Jackson was still black and people of a skin tone similar to the one he was born with were called nig-nogs in British TV sit-coms – just for a laugh.

The Sabina Park Rangers players were not the sort to watch a lot of TV; they were too busy with other things. In varying degrees of intensity, it was football that was their passion. Football was so woven into some of their lives that life without it seemed unimaginable. For other members of the team, talented as they were, it was simply something for them to do, as most of them had left school without any real chance of getting a job. It was hard for anyone to find work back then, but it was even more difficult if you were black. Amongst a few other things, it was the vexation caused by the lack of job opportunities that had led to widespread rioting during the previous year.

During the riots of 1980 in nearby Birmingham, some of the people I'm going to tell you about evaded police road-blocks and joined in the mayhem. Some wanted to bounce a few 'rakstones' off the heads of policemen in revenge for the harassment that was part of their daily lives, while others saw the rioting as a rare business opportunity. A fleet of vans and small trucks carried off such a large number of electrical appliances that six months later it was still possible to buy a very cheap, brand new video recorder, washing machine, or fridge-freezer in Wolverhampton, if you knew where to go.

By then the team had been going for over a decade, and had changed its name twice, but had finally settled with

‘Sabina Park Rangers’ for over half that period. It was a name that evoked happy memories for the coach, who as a youth had watched the Jamaican national team play in Sabina Park stadium in Kingston. Horace McIntosh had ambitions for the young men who played for him; they were not particularly grand but he wanted them to expand their horizons a little further than the town’s smoky boundaries. He believed football would give them a purpose and a sense of achievement that wasn’t exactly plentiful – as he saw it – in a lot of their lives. When his team moved from a town to an area league he decided that they needed a new name, one that had a cultural reference but that was not overtly provocative to some of the white teams. In the early 1970s his players had travelled to areas where there were few or no black people and the team members were sometimes greeted as if they had just landed from outer space. Normally such trips passed without trouble, but in rougher areas home teams would often bring a gang with them if they saw their next fixture was against a side whose name included words such as ‘Afro’, ‘West Indian’, ‘Caribbean’, ‘Punjab’ or ‘Black’. The thugs were rarely up to much, they’d jeer during the match and throw stones at the minibus as the team was leaving, but there had been incidents that had escalated into more serious violence. Once, after some guys on the sidelines made monkey noises, a mass brawl broke out. It involved the spectators, all twenty-two players, substitutes and coaching staff. Two other white teams also got stuck in; they had been playing on an adjoining pitch but got involved when it became obvious that those in Horace’s team who had dabbled in boxing and the martial arts were getting the upper hand. There had been talk of setting up a black league after that, but it was eventually decided that it would be tantamount to a surrender to racists and so the team changed its name for a final time and joined another, bigger, amateur league.

I first met Horace McIntosh as a boy when my father used to take me to his house just off the Newhampton Road, which stretched from the Molinuex football ground at one end to the plusher Tettenhall area at the other. The road was lined with terraces of old, blackened, brick houses that had a few small shops and a bookies in amongst them. There was also a large clearing that accommodated a newly-built shopping precinct and a car dealer's showroom from which few of the local residents could afford to buy. From the outside, Horace's place looked like just another terraced house, but at the top of the narrow green lino-covered stairs was a front-facing bedroom that had been converted into a barber shop. On the ground floor there was a door to the left of the grimy hallway, through which I was never allowed to go. My father would hurry past it, guide me up to Horace, and tell him that there was 'no rush for the bwoy' before going downstairs again and entering the forbidden room. Years later, when I was old enough to go to the barber's by myself, I opened the door to see groups of black men seated around small tables. All of them sat with cigarettes hanging from the corners of their mouths and one eye closed against the fumes as they studied and then slapped down their dominoes. Around the perimeter of the room sat bored women: they were mostly white and bottle-blonde, usually with a can of beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. The first time I entered the gambling room one of them looked around and puckered her lips at me and the shock of it had me frozen to the spot. I had never seen women act or dress like that before and I trotted home wondering what my father would be doing in such company. In the mind of a twelve-year-old it was about as close to a den of iniquity as you could get.

Horace McIntosh had set up business in 1957 after listening to his recently arrived compatriots grumble about their inability to get a decent haircut from an English barber. In

the following twenty-four years his trade hadn't altered much: even though the seventies was the decade of the big Afro, for a lot of his younger customers it was still mostly all about a trim and a touch of Dax, or a shave and a splash of Brut. It was the shop's interior that had undergone the most changes during the time he had been cutting my hair. Over the years the walls had become covered with posters of black football players. When I first went there in the sixties there were only creased sepia-tinted photos of the Caribbean Caribbean All Stars and Jamaican sides of the fifties. The only exception to the football theme was a framed photo of the all-conquering West Indies cricket team. As time went by, the walls began to be covered with pictures of mainly South American footballers as it would be years before Jamaica's 'Reggae Boyz', or the Trinidad and Tobago Tobago side made their appearances at the World Cup finals. Up until then most of Wolverhampton's West Indian soccer fans supported Brazil – or failing that any international side that happened to be playing England. As I headed into adolescence black players were still a rarity – some said an exotic curiosity – in English soccer, as there seemed to be a common belief amongst professional managers that black men were not robust enough for the rigours of the British game. That began to change in the mid-seventies when Ron Atkinson of nearby West Bromwich Albion became the first high-profile manager to challenge the notion of race-based fragility and put three black players into his team. Photos of Regis, Batson and Cunningham were promptly added to Horace's wall to join the lonely figure of Clyde Best, a Bermudan who had once played for West Ham United. Wolves followed suit a few years later and put a couple of black players called Hazell and Berry into the first team, giving the town's black people more than a passing interest about what they were up to. Looking back from a time when nearly one in four of the superstars in the English Premier

League are black, the 1980s really do seem a very strange and backward time.

But whatever the achievements of black players at national or international levels, pride of place in Horace's shop was reserved for the Sabina Park Rangers. Next to the large mirror was a collage of yellowed newspaper cuttings detailing his team's exploits. The latest – and therefore brightest – addition was a report of Sabina Park Rangers' greatest victory to date.

I was waiting my turn when Frank Grant stilled his broom. 'White people don't want to read about black people's tings, me-a tell unno,' he said. The wooden handle tapped the small press cutting. 'Look 'pon it, to rasclart, a black team mek it to de final fe de first time an' dat's all dem write. But watch it now, if there's riot like de one in London last week black people is back on de front page, to ras.'

'To ras,' grunted Venton as his chin dropped to his chest. Horace's brow furrowed in concentration as he ran his electric razor over the back of Venton's neck. Like Horace McIntosh, Frank Grant was dark-skinned, large, pot-bellied and beginning to grey. They had arrived in Wolverhampton from Jamaica at the same time but that was where the similarities ended. Horace had a much more positive outlook on life: he had been happily married for over a quarter of a century and both his son and daughter had gone to university and got themselves good jobs. To Frank, the world was a disappointing, cruel place full of racist white people, conniving black women – all of whom had left him – and 'bad pickney' (the ungrateful fruit of his loins). To sum them up, Horace was always willing to light a candle but Frank was just as ready to cuss the darkness. And man, did he cuss. Horace put away the razor and flicked a soft brush over Venton's nape before he said, 'When we win de final, dem can't ignore it, to ras.'

'To rasclart,' muttered Venton excitedly, 'yeah if dem win dem can't hignore it!'

‘Not if,’ replied Horace, ‘when dem win.’

Frank resumed his sweeping. ‘When dem win?’ he snorted. ‘Mi ras,’ he added scornfully, ‘watch it now, if it a white team dem-a play de referee will teef dem.’

Before I carry on with this story I feel I should explain something about Jamaican cussing – most of which I picked up from Frank – and manner of speech for those who are not conversant with it. ‘Rasclart’ literally means ‘bottom wipe; though this is not to be confused with the moist and scented disposable sort that is used on the posteriors of young babies. Also, in Jamaican patois, the same word can have several different meanings depending on how it is pronounced. ‘Rasclart’ is a popular word because of its two constituent parts: ‘ras’ and ‘clart’. ‘Ras’ as in ‘Mi ras!’ is often used as an expression of astonishment or derision, with the meaning dependent on the tenor of delivery, whereas ‘to ras’ comes at the end of a sentence to underline a point, or can act as an acknowledgement of a truth uttered by another. For example: ‘The bwoy wukless’ – that is to say ‘the young man is not very good’, is strengthened by the addition of ‘to ras’. which is added should one agree with the point raised. However, Jamaican men would never say ‘You can kiss my ras!’ Rather, the phrase would be ‘Kiss mi neck-back!’ as this is a part of the anatomy that is not likely to be associated with ‘some batty-bwoy ting’ – an act of homosexuality. ‘Clart’ too has several meanings, from ‘pass me clart so me can wipe de table’, to ‘shut your clart’, to the extreme ‘Me will kill your clart!’ The adding and subtracting of the letter h is a little harder to explain, as it usually occurs without any consistency or conscious thought. For some older Jamaicans, adding aitches to words that have never possessed them is associated with speaking correctly, though this is only in the mind of the speaker and

is a sort of compensation for all those aitches that are dropped in more common speech. But for a younger, somewhat cruder generation, the adding of an aitch serves to reinforce a point. For example: ‘The ting ugly’ might be used to describe a young lady or an object that was not to a young man’s liking, but ‘The ting hugly!’ tends to convey that the person or object being described has profound problems – at least in the eye of the beholder. With that explanation out of the way, I will continue.

As Horace put a red plastic cape over my shoulders I read the headline: ‘Sabina reaches final with wonder goal’. The date of the game was 20 April 1981; the venue was a pitch on Fowler’s Park, Wolverhampton. Three and a half weeks before Ricardo Villa left the Manchester City defence mesmerised by a magical dribble and won the FA Cup final replay for Tottenham Hotspur, another, some say better, goal was scored by Mark Beckford for Sabina Park Rangers. It happened in the semifinal of the Watney’s Red Barrel Challenge Cup and, excluding the players and match officials, probably no more than a dozen people witnessed it. There were the coaches, a netball team who were cheering for SPR and a man in an overcoat and flat cap who stood on his own – he turned out to be a scout for Aston Villa.

With the score standing at one-all, there was less than a minute of normal time left to play. Sabina Park Rangers were down to ten men after Nestor Riley had reacted badly to a tackle and threatened to ‘juk’ (that is to stab) the offender’s ‘bloodclart’ (an imaginary piece of sanitary wear). Once he had left the pitch, the free kick was taken and the Rangers’ goalkeeper, Carl Hooper, heaved his massive frame into the air to catch the ball with one hand – in the way Pat Jennings of Tottenham Hotspur, Arsenal and Northern Ireland used to do. Members of the JA City netball team, who acted as unofficial cheerleaders during the

home matches, screamed their approval and drowned out Horace's command to kick the ball deep into the other half of the pitch. As he would recount on many subsequent occasions, Horace had turned away in disgust as Carl rolled the ball to his right-back Donovan Brown. As the tired opposing team plodded back into their defensive positions, Donovan played a short ball inside to Courtney Wright, who in turn passed it left to Vince 'Buckshot' Pinnock. Horace had turned around again at this point and repeated his order for the ball to be booted up the field, but it was already on its way to Ian Beckford. Ian, the youngest SPR player, was slender and nimble. He laid it back to Buckshot as a defender clattered against his heels, but he stayed on his feet and in an instant he had spun around and started his run up the wing. The ball from Buckshot was perfectly weighted and dropped onto Ian's left foot. Without a pause in his stride, he then dropped his right shoulder but moved to his left and had an opposing player kicking at fresh air as he darted towards the penalty box. Another defender fell on his backside after buying a dummy before Ian made a pass to Audley Robinson. Audley, on the edge of the box, with his back towards goal, shielded the ball with his sinewy frame as he took the pass and in one fluid movement he had flicked it up and put it overhead before getting a defender's size ten in his gut for his trouble. No foul was called as Cecil Grant, the aggressive and muscular striker, jumped highest and headed the ball back towards Ian Beckford's brother Mark, who had sprinted at least sixty yards to join the attack. He was still running and outside the area as he struck the ball. It was the perfect strike; onlookers could tell by the sound, as few of them could keep track of the ball because of its speed once it had left his boot. For one, long, awe-struck moment Mark Beckford was the only one to have registered that the ball was in the net. His hands aloft, his teammates roared and the netball girls whooped, while Horace McIntosh

hugged the person closest to him – a perplexed linesman. The final whistle blew within seconds of the restart, signalling the beginning of celebrations that went on long into the night.

As Horace cut my hair, he was still basking in that moment of victory. The truth of the story I'm about to tell would only fully emerge years later; it is a tale of a series of events that took place in the weeks before the final of the 1981 Watney's Red Barrel Challenge Cup. It is a story of work and dedication and of struggles against almost overwhelming odds. It is a story of ambition, of love and loathing, of greed and generosity, of loyalty and treachery, of small triumphs and catastrophic failures. What I'm about to recount, for the first time, is the whole, never-before-told truth about what happened to the players of Sabina Park Rangers.

On Tuesday evenings, Sabina Park Rangers' training sessions took place at the YMCA in Whitmore Reans. It wasn't really that suitable a venue as there was no football pitch, but there were showers in the changing rooms and once the netball players were done, their court was used for five-a-side sessions. Horace McIntosh continued using the YMCA facilities partly out of sentimentality, as it was the place where he'd brought his first team together over a decade before in 1970. But also it was out of practicality, as his house was less than a quarter of a mile away, a mere petrol bomb's throw (as they used to say in those days) from the nearby Dunstall Road police station. There was also another reason for him persevering with the YMCA: the shapely figures of the JA City netball players always ensured good attendance at training. The young women were acutely aware of the admiring glances they drew and were always immaculately turned out. Without exception, their legs were smooth and oiled and their pleated short skirts ensured every male who watched them play became admirers of the large rounded batty long before Jennifer Lopez brought hers to the attention of the world. They were the scented roses for Horace's team of bees who were only too ready to pollinate if they were given the chance.

As usual, the first player to arrive was Ian Beckford. He did not even bother to go home and change out of his school uniform. Such was his stamina, he would usually play a game of football with his friends in West Park before trotting half a mile to the YMCA to train and play for another hour and a half. Norman Longmore, the team captain, nearly always turned up next. He had played for Horace McIntosh's teams for nine years and at thirty-one was the

oldest player. He was a few years past his best and as he put on weight the rest of the team used to joke that he was the only one who wore a padded shirt. Yet despite his thickening waist, he remained a good passer of the ball and an all-round sportsman who was already looking forward to knocking a cricket ball around during the summer months. Yet in some ways Norman embodied why Sabina Park Rangers languished near the bottom of the league. He could still amble about the pitch and be effective in a Sunday or a town league, but against fitter, more dedicated players of an area league he was at least a yard too slow in pace. Not that he was the only player who found it difficult to compete at a higher level. Horace McIntosh put their lethargy in the league down to losing the first six games of the season. The cup run had shown what the team was capable of if properly motivated and Horace was already thinking about how he would break it to his captain and most loyal player that the cup final would be his last game for the team.

Norman Longmore had arrived in Wolverhampton at the age of nineteen, found himself a college place and eventually become a primary school teacher, which, back then, was even rarer for a black man than a career in football. His Jamaican education had left him with a puritanical streak, and throughout his training course he was constantly reminded that corporal punishment was not permitted, even if he used his own belt. Once Norman had qualified, he had returned to Jamaica and, as promised, married his childhood sweetheart Euphemia – which had led to a two-year long battle with the immigration authorities to allow her to join him in England.

Norman had rubbed horse liniment into his thick legs and put on the strip that, because of the similarity in their names, had been chosen to resemble that of Queens Park Rangers, when the massive goalkeeper Carl Hooper arrived in the changing room. Carl did not talk to Norman; then again, he did little more than grunt to anyone else. Carl

was suspicious of authority and in his view, as Norman was a teacher he was part of an establishment that had never done him any favours. All the players thought Norman talked to them as if he were still in the classroom and his big trouble was that he thought he had to know all the answers, even if no one was asking the questions. Carl had arrived in England six years before, at the age of thirteen, from the island of Grenada. While at school Carl had been thought of as backward, until it was discovered in England that in fact he was hard of hearing. But by then he had lost all trust in adults except for his maternal grandmother, whose death had made his journey to join his mother in Wolverhampton a necessary one.

‘A’right, mi spar?’ Norman said to him on his way outside. Carl had had an operation to rectify his hearing and now he was ‘selectively’ slightly deaf – particularly when talking to someone from Social Security. When there was no reply Norman convinced himself that Carl had not heard him.

By the time the whistle blew to signal the end of the netball game more than twenty guys had turned up for training, as although quite a few were not officially registered as SPR players, success as well as short skirts had proved alluring. The players made two lines. A man with a camera clasped to his chest looked nervously over his shoulder as Cecil Grant inspected the photographer’s gleaming Ford Escort RS 2000. ‘Nice car, man,’ Cecil said as he jogged past to join his teammates. The newspaperman mumbled something back in acknowledgement. He should have been more grateful: Cecil rarely talked to white people and when he did they were often the other side of a counter and he was yelling for them to stay away from any alarm and to hand over all their money. The JA City netball players hovered before changing and called out to the man to take their photo. They were never lost for a pose but when they turned around and bent over to show those lovely round batties

they produced a fearsome roar from the assembled SPR players and the photographer quickly turned around. What little colour he had drained from his face as he tried to make sense of what they were screaming at him, but by the time his frightened mind began to realise the girls were heading for the changing rooms playfully shaking their heads. Try as he might, the man from The Wolverhampton Ad News could not get the men in front of him to lift the scowls from their faces and the only one who smiled for the photo was Horace. 'A idyatt like that nah deserve a nice car,' growled Cecil. 'I would-a even paid him for that photo, to ras.'

'To ras!' spat several others in unison.

Norman Longmore led the players through the warm-up exercises as Horace chatted to the photographer and gave him the names of the players he had photographed. 'Which one's Mark Beckford, Mr McIntosh?'

'Well, now you mention it, I can't see Mark.' Horace turned and called out, 'Hey, Ian, where ya brodda?' Ian Beckford looked up and responded with a shrug of his shoulders. 'Arks Marcia when she's finished changin,' he called out. 'She sees more of him than I do.' Marcia Yuell was the captain of the netball team and it was an open secret amongst the team that she and Mark had been seeing each other for a while.

'Pity,' said the photographer, 'our sports reporter Alf Turley wanted me to take a photo of him on his own. He reckons that goal he scored has Aston Villa very interested.' Horace tried to act as if he already knew. 'Yeah, but Mark's not the only player that has interested professional teams, you know. Over the years we've had a few go fe trials an' ting.'

'But it must be a thrill to have the champions interested in one of your players.'

The lines on Horace's face deepened. On one level he was proud that the newly-crowned First

Division champions even knew of one of his players but at the same time he was also concerned that he might be about to be deprived of his best player for the cup final. 'Yeah,' he said, 'but I wouldn't call it a t'rill. There's a lotta hurdles for a young player to climb before him mek the big-time. There's a couple more if him black.'

The photographer, neither interested in nor prepared to believe Horace's stories of racism in football, glanced anxiously back to his car again. 'Alf will probably give you a call in the week and have a chat about that,' he said before he scurried back to his prized possession.

The five-a-side games were more competitive than usual. Those who had not played in the semifinal were now doing their best to stake a claim for a place in the cup final – the exception being Nestor Riley. Because he had been sent off during that famous victory he would be automatically banned from taking any further part in the cup. Jealousy as well as personal ambition put a little extra bite into his tackles and had Horace bringing the session to a premature halt. 'Right,' he said, 'nice to see so many at trainin' 'ere dis evenin. We got circuit trainin' at Aldersley Stadium on Thursday an' me want to see all-a unno there. Friday night we 'ave been invited to de Star an' Moon nightclub because we reach de final, yours truly has been hinvited to be a judge fe de beauty pageant an' you all will get a free ticket from me . . .' Horace waited for the whoops and whistles to subside before he added, '. . . after trainin' on Thursday.' His players groaned as he went on, 'De weekend after dat we 'ave a tournament in Nottingham. It a long-standin' commitment an' because it's not long before de final we gonna 'ave plenty-a substitutions. As usual, as guests of de Beeston Caribs Football Club, we will go on to de dinner an' dance. Now we 'ave reached de Watney's final all me arks heveryone is to realise wha' a great hachievement it would be fe a black team to win dis cup. Dis is more than

football, more than jus a game, it is about wha' it represents fe all-a black people in dis town. So stay fit an'outta trouble. An', please, please, dis year stay away from de Nottingham gal dem. Please!'

Norman Longmore nodded his head vigorously – he was happy to shoulder the burden of representing the cause of black people throughout the town, but the young men around him just laughed. It wasn't as though they hadn't a sense of representing their community; it was j u s t that they were more sceptical about how winning a cup might change anything. They also laughed at Horace's pleas to stay away from the fair maidens of Nottingham: several of them had already made their plans for the dance that took place after the tournament and nothing their coach could say would change that.