

# BLACK, CRACK & FIGHTING BACK

## THE PAUL CANOVILLE STORY



**“I was abused by my own fans simply for the colour of my skin. Bananas were thrown at me, razor blades sent in the post. Nothing would stop me living the dream as a professional footballer. But the cost almost killed me.”**

■ Words: Richard Lenton

**I**n the spring of 1994, Paul Canoville stumbled into a pawnshop in west London. In his pocket was his prize possession, a memento of his proudest achievement as a footballer – the promotion medal he’d won with Chelsea a decade previously. Minutes later, he re-emerged onto the mean streets that had seduced him since his playing days ended prematurely seven years earlier, with the princely sum of £70. He exchanged it for crack cocaine.

The story of Canoville’s descent from Stamford Bridge hero to shambling crack addict – chronicled in his stunning, award-winning autobiography, *Black and Blue* – is as addictive as the pungent fumes he sucked into his lungs for the best part of 15 years. On a flight from Gatwick to San Francisco, I read all 394 pages in one hit.

You might think that the medal-for-crack scenario described in the opening paragraph would have been Canoville’s lowest ebb, but, in a topsy-turvy life – mostly tury, it has to be said – there’s stiff competition. There was his father abandoning him when he was just two years old, a spell in Borstal for an almost comical robbery, the cruel injury that abruptly ended his football career at the tender age of 24, the death of his child and twice being diagnosed with cancer.

Then there was his debut for Chelsea on April 12 1982 – a Second Division clash with Crystal Palace at Selhurst Park. ‘How can you compare making your debut for one of the richest clubs in the land with that list of horror stories?’ you might ask. Well, Stamford Bridge wasn’t the cosmopolitan place it is today, back in the dark days of the early 80s. There were no prawn sandwiches in a stadium heavily populated by National Front skinheads...

When the 20-year-old Canoville climbed off the bench to warm up for the biggest moment in his young life, his own supporters shouted the most vile abuse imaginable at him. ‘Sit down you black cunt. You fucking wog, fuck off,’ they screamed. A chant of ‘We don’t want the nigger, we don’t want the nigger, la la la’ erupted. Then, as he was about to enter the fray, a banana landed at his feet. It might not be death, cancer or crack addiction, but it was an experience that no human being should ever have had to deal with.

“I felt physically sick”, Canoville tells us over a coffee at Spitalfields Market in London. “I was only on the pitch for three minutes, but it was the longest three minutes of my life.



PAUL

### CANOVILLE

BORN March 4, 1962

#### CLUBS

Chelsea:

11 goals in 79

appearances

Reading:

4 goals in 16

appearances

Became the first black player to play for Chelsea in April 1982

His book, *Black and Blue*, was named

Best Autobiography

in the National Sport-

ing Club’s 2009 Book

Awards

Canners flies past Watford skipper Wilf Rostron during a 3-1 defeat to the Hornets in September 1985



**“EVEN WHEN I SCORED, SOME FANS USED TO SAY, ‘NAH, IT’S STILL 0-0 – WE DON’T COUNT THE NIGGER’S GOAL’”**

**The Chelsea bench (from L-R): Norman Medhurst, manager John Neal, Paul Canoville, Colin Lee, Derek Johnstone, Tony McAndrew and Joey Jones during the Division Two match between Grimsby Town and Chelsea on May 12, 1984 at Blundell Park. Chelsea won 1-0 to secure the Division Two title.**



“The abuse was like that for the first couple of years of my Chelsea career. Even when I scored people used to say, ‘Nah, it’s still 0-0 – we don’t count the nigger’s goal.’ It was horrific.”

Canoville was a talented, but inconsistent left midfielder with pace to burn. In full flow he was electric, but he was rarely given an extended run in the side. However, there were some notable highs, like the hat-trick against Swansea in the 1983-84 campaign – the season Chelsea were promoted back to the top flight. However, his most memorable moment was undoubtedly his super sub appearance in a televised Milk Cup quarter-final tie against Sheffield Wednesday in 1985.

“I knew I was going to be on the bench yet again for that game, I just knew it,” he adds. “I was pissed off.”

“At the pre-match meal I was starving, so I just stuffed my face. I was so full I could barely move, and even when I was sat on the bench a few hours later I remember telling Keith Jones that I was struggling. I was thinking ‘I might only get ten minutes at the end’, but then Wednesday scored. Then another, then another. We were 3-0 down so I was sent on at half time.”

He didn’t take long to make an impact; all of 11 seconds in fact...

“I remember it as clear as day. It was a long ball over the top from Joey Jones, and I made a run. It came off Kerry (Dixon) and David Speedie, and then just dropped in front of their defender. I got in front of him; I’m not a finisher and I didn’t have much confidence in front of goal, but I hit it low at an angle that was difficult for the ‘keeper and it went in. And that was the start.”

Canoville’s goal prompted a stunning recovery. After trailing 3-0 the Blues romped into a 4-3 lead before a late penalty forced a replay. Canoville’s wholehearted exploits at last saw the fans’ attitudes towards him change.

However, the good times didn’t last. After manager John Neal moved upstairs at the end of the 1984-85 season, Canoville struggled to establish himself in new boss John Hollins’ side. Then, during a pre season training trip, he decked a steaming drunk team-mate who referred to him as ‘a black cunt’. The result? Canoville was talked into leaving the Bridge, despite having three years left on his contract.

He was shipped out to Reading for a paltry 50 grand, but, after a flurry of goals and assists in his first few appearances, he suffered a dislocated knee, torn cartilage and a rupture to his cruciate ligament in a tackle with Sunderland’s Dave Swindlehurst.

After a failed comeback towards the end of the 1986-87 season, Canoville was forced to call it a day. With little cash behind him, he tried his hand at DJing, hooking up with a group of Hackney DJ’s called GQ, who played rare groove and R&B tunes at venues in and around Shoreditch. However, as he became more immersed in the party scene, his life soon began slipping off the rails.

“One night I was playing at a wine bar down in Vauxhall. In the toilets a geezer I knew offered me a spliff. I drew on it a couple of times, but it didn’t taste like marijuana. It was crack. I went mental,” he adds.

“I went back into the main room to play some music, sweating on what was going to happen. But the big hit I expected never came. Instead, it was just a kind of mellow sensation. It made me feel confident, lively, on top of everything. It lulled me in and made sure I went back for more.”

That debut hit was to be the first of many. At first it was just at weekends, then the odd time during the week, but it soon began to consume his whole existence. He borrowed money from friends and on credit cards, moved from girlfriend to girlfriend, friend’s sofa to friend’s sofa, and stole money to feed his habit. He even flogged his cherished record collection in order to buy more crack.

“My self esteem just got lower and lower. Crack abuse makes you anxious, irritable then depressed and feeling worthless,” he says.

“And rather than leaving the crack alone when I was skint as I had done previously, I ended up looking for money to feed the habit.”

**“HE WAS DEAD. I COULDN’T COPE. I TOOK £80 OUT OF TRACEY’S PURSE, WENT TO BUY SOME CRACK AND GOT WASTED”**

And it wasn’t only an unhealthy drug habit he had to feed. Amid all the post football, crack-fuelled madness, Canoville also managed to father 11 children by 10 different women. However, child number 10, Tye – who was born five days before Christmas 1995 – provided the next chapter of heartbreak in his crazy life. Tye was born with a serious heart defect, and died just a few days later.

“I held him, heard the last breath come out of his mouth and he was gone. I couldn’t cope. I left him lying there in hospital. I took £80 out of Tracey’s (his partner’s) purse, went off to buy some crack and got totally wasted.”

The following year, 1996, was spent in and out of rehab as he tried to kick the addiction. However, despite being clean for lengthy periods, he was soon drawn back to the pipe. That same year, Paul was diagnosed with lymphoma – a cancer that attacks the glands. After extensive chemotherapy, he battled back from the brink, but, once he was given the all clear, he returned to his bad old ways.

In 2004, Paul was admitted into a rehab centre in Norwich in a desperate attempt to tame the psychological craving for the drug. It proved to be his salvation, cleansing his body and opening his mind. After more than 15 years at the mercy of crack, Paul had finally beaten his addiction. However, there was still one more fight left to win.

“I was living in Bexhill as part of my rehabilitation, and I was jogging on the seafront as normal when I felt this familiar, searing pain in my groin. I knew straight away the cancer had returned,” he adds.

“Over time tumours become more resistant to chemotherapy, so I was given an even stronger dose than before. That meant even more sickness, even more feeling like death.”

However, it was at this new low in his life that Paul made a life-changing decision. He decided that he wanted to work with kids and encourage them to choose a different path to the one that he had trodden.

“I needed something positive to give me a lift. I started thinking about the future. Immediately, working with kids came to me. ‘You think you got issues, kids? I got the set!’”

Paul left hospital in March 2005, clear of the two big C’s that had dominated the last few years of his life. He began working voluntarily with kids, before finding work as an assistant teacher at St Matthew’s Primary School in Westminster.

“I totally enjoy going into school, which I used to hate. I’ve always got on with kids. I don’t know why, but when I talk they always listen.”

“I was so nervous applying for the job. These people are teachers; they’ve been through further education. I didn’t do exams. I didn’t want to go to school. But they’ve accepted me. I love it.”

Earlier this year Canoville launched Senkaa, a business which starts up youth projects to tackle gun and knife crime. He has also rejoined the Chelsea family, and regularly turns out for the legends’ team.

“Chelsea’s a totally different club now than when I played for them. The amount of black players the club has had is something to behold as well, and I’m proud to think that I was the first.”

But what of the racists who made his life a misery?

“At the Barcelona game (Champions League semi final in May), this fella came up to me and said, ‘Hey, Canners.’ We shook hands, then he said, ‘Paul, I want to apologise. I was one of those guys who racially abused you. I never meant it. I’m not a racist. I was just swept along with the crowd.’

“I didn’t know what to say. For a man to come up and apologise in that way was a big thing for him – big enough for me to accept his apology. If the apology had happened nearer the time of the event, then I would have been more angry, but I was calmer because of the passing of time. Sooner or later someone probably had to take the grief that I did. I’ve made it through, and looking back I’m proud to have worn a Chelsea shirt.”



Canners with two fans at the Supporters Club Christmas party in 1984