

SECRET DIARY OF AN INSIDER

DAY 1

It's 9.57am, the seatbelt signs have been off for all of ten minutes, and I'm blowing the froth off my first beer with the Liverpool boys. Already the anecdotes are flowing. "Did you hear about Dave (Jason McAteer) last week?" says Michael Thomas. "He's in this bar, and the barmaid's American, so Dave says: 'Where are you from?' She goes, 'Pennsylvania.' So Dave's flashed his teeth and done a Dracula impression! 'That's Transylvania you twat!'" she says.

Mark Walters takes great pleasure in telling me his theory for avoiding jet-lag. "What you do is avoid eating on the flight - that's how your body catches up. It's proven." In that case, pass me your chicken, Wally...

As soon as the plane doors open, the Caribbean heat hits me like a Ricky Hatton body shot. Jeans + black shirt + suit jacket = sweaty and overdressed.

An hour later we arrive at the plush Calabash Hotel. Fifty yards away is the beach - and a bar. Well, it'd be rude not to wouldn't it...?

I dive into the sea with Rob Jones and Mark Wright, and we're soon chatting about their England experiences. "Euro 96 still rankles," says Mark, as we breast-stroke our way out to a yacht in the distance. "I was Terry's (Venables) first choice - Tony Adams wasn't going to play. Then I got injured. I'm still gutted; it would have been a perfect swansong and got me to 50 caps."

That evening, at a cocktail party at the Calabash, Walters is still banging on about his jet-lag theory... "I'll see you in the gym at 7am," he says, "and I bet I'm full of beans."



Bruce Grobbelaar is sat on a fold up chair in the corner of a makeshift dressing room at Grenada's national stadium, a thick white towel clutched tight to his head. He appears to be deep in meditative thoughts as we prepare for battle. Twenty-five years ago, as a wide-eyed nine-year old boy who dreamt of footballing superstardom, I sat, mesmerized, in front of my gran's black and white TV as Bruce spaghetti-legged his way inside the minds of Roma's psyched out stars to secure European Cup glory for the Reds in one of the most famous penalty shoot-outs of all time. A quarter of a century later, here I am staring at the Zimbabwean's naked torso - save for the towel. Talk about surreal...

With 45 minutes to go until kick-off, there's a tangible buzz in the room. Mark Walters and Michael Thomas tap their feet to hip-hop beats, Paul Walsh's aging muscles are massaged back to life by a behemoth of a man with hands the size of a small country, while Jason McAteer and Gary Gillespie giggle like naughty school kids as they strap on their boots.

in the distance, so he's took aim and 'bang!' Got him. It's come down right, but it's still flapping, so he had to put it out of its misery. He cocked the gun, but, just as he was about to pull the trigger, the dog ran across him and he shot its paw clean off! There was blood everywhere, so he's carried it home and pretended that he didn't know what had happened - the kids were devastated. A few days later, after he told all of his pals what had happened, his mate came round the house and starting saying to his kids, 'So what do you think about your dad shooting your dog then kids?!' They hate him now."

'I'M AS NERVOUS AS A SMALL NUN AT A PENGUIN SHOOT AS I CONTEMPLATE LIFE AS A LIVERPOOL LEGEND...'

John's falling about laughing, and even my own tension is easing. For the last 10 minutes, as I scanned the famous faces around the room, I've been thinking, 'Be careful what you wish for, Lenton...' Now I'm excited again. In fact, except for those last nervy 10 minutes, I've been oozing excitement ever since Jason Roberts invited me to his home country for a week to join the Liverpool Legends on tour. The lads - Bruce Grobbelaar, Rob Jones, Mark Wright, Gary Gillespie, Phil Thompson, Phil Babb, Mark Walters, Michael Thomas, Jason McAteer, John Durnin and Paul Walsh - are here to raise money for Roberts' Foundation, a charity set up in 2007 to give young people the chance to play sport and take part in cultural activities in the UK and Grenada. Jason's pumped thousands of pounds and hours and hours of his time into the project, which is changing the lives of hundreds of kids, particularly in Grenada - a third world country where the surroundings are beautiful, but where poverty is rife.

In an age when the stock of Premier League footballers is about as high as that of an MP with a penchant for multiple properties and swimming pools, and whose arithmetic is apparently at the level of a four-year-old's,

So what am I doing here? Well, somehow I've blagged myself a game... Yes, really. But more about my blagging skills later; right now I'm contemplating life as a Liverpool legend, and I'm as nervous as a small nun at a penguin shoot...

I take a few deep breaths and sit down to think about the game. For me, this will be the pinnacle of a very average 'career' in football. Ten former Liverpool players - nine of whom were full internationals - plus me. As many as 3,000 people could see me make a right mug of myself here today... As I take a sip of water, I overhear Phil Babb - Spice Boy turned Football Punk Editor-at-Large - talking to John Durnin.

"Have you heard the latest one about Dave (Jason McAteer)? He bought his kids this dog, a lovely Labrador - the kids think the world of it. Anyway, he goes shooting the other day to get himself some pheasant - as you do - so he took the dog along. He sees this bird



When Blackburn striker Jason Roberts invited us to join the Liverpool Legends on a fundraising tour of Grenada in aid of his Foundation, we shouted: 'YES PLEASE!!!' Then John Barnes didn't show up, and a place in the squad to face Grenada All-Stars was suddenly up for grabs...

Words RICHARD LENTON Photography SAM GREEN

CARIBBEAN DREAM



DAY 2

Maybe there was something in Wally's jet-lag theory after all. I've been bolt upright since 4am... I stumble off to the gym but there's no sign of Wally.

I spot McAteer in the restaurant. "Wally was last seen on a nightclub dancefloor with Paul Walsh at silly o'clock," he says. Maybe it's another part of his jet-lag avoidance theory... After breakfast, the Grenadian media arrive at the hotel en masse for a press conference to publicise the game. There's huge anticipation about the fixture.

That afternoon we head for La Source - another top drawer hotel. Yet more complimentary drinks are flowing...

An aged wannabe WAG is milling around, applying sun cream to the boys' reddening bodies, dishing out massages and striking provocative poses. It's embarrassing. I thought the lads would have attracted better looking groupies than this...

At tea time, after consuming a bottle of white wine and a handful of rum punches by the pool, I remember that the Grenada All Stars are playing a trial match, and I'd promised to have a run-out... I jump in a car with Cyrille Regis and stumble around for 15 minutes on a pot-holed pitch before heading back to the sanctuary of the bar at La Source. The lads are in good spirits, but there's one man yet to arrive - the gaffer, Phil Thompson.

"He'll be here in about two hours lads (he'd caught a flight a day late and was due any minute). I've just seen the tip of his nose come through reception!" says McAteer.



WG Grace shows he's learnt a few ball tricks since joining Heaven CC. Durnin bags the second goal (far right), while someone lets the FP Editor get his grubby mitts on the cup (far right bottom)



'DEVON SMITH OR RICHARD LENTON? INTERNATIONAL SPORTSMAN OR WASHED UP HACK WHO'S SO SLOW HE'S OFTEN ACCUSED OF HAVING A WASHING MACHINE STRAPPED TO HIS BACK WHEN HE RUNS...'

it's heart-warming to hear of such deeds. And, in managing to coax a Liverpool team packed with household names to the island in order to raise money for the charity, he's also giving Grenadian kids the opportunity to see in the flesh players who have performed at the very top level.

It's no exaggeration when I say that he's making dreams come true - not least my own. Fact is, I came here merely as a journo. But, when John Barnes pulled out of the trip at the last minute in order to take the Tranmere manager's job, a place in the Legends' starting XI was suddenly up for grabs. Thank God I brought my Puma Kings! Although quite how I was going to blag my way into the frame was another matter... I

wanted to impress the gaffer, Phil Thompson, at every given opportunity. Several beers were bought for him as we lounged around the beach bars of Grenada in the days before the game; I even joined in a coaching session for a school team in St. George's that Thomo and the lads were overseeing. It was like being a teenage trialist all over again. But sometimes there's a fine line between keen and desperate - ask any girl I've dated in the past decade for proof.

Despite my hard work on the training pitch, Thomo had decided to draft in a handful of ringers to bolster his thin (in numbers anyway...) squad.

His recruits included a former Wycombe Wanderers defender, and Devon Smith, the

West Indies cricketer and a fellow midfielder. What chance did I have of leapfrogging him into the shirt Barnes had vacated? Devon Smith or Richard Lenton? International sportsman and Grenadian hero with pace to burn, or washed up wannabe player turned hack, who's so slow that he's often accused of having a washing machine strapped to his back when he runs?

Phil hands out the shirts to the starting XI. I hover with intent, but nothing comes my way. I'm gutted. But then a lifeline... "Where do you play Rich?" says the man who won just about every honour in the game during a stand-out career. "Anywhere across the midfield, preferably in the centre," I reply. "Fucking centre? He thinks he's a playmaker.

He'll demand the number 10 shirt in a minute," says Gillespie, laughing.

"Start on the right, Rich. Talk to Jase, tuck in, don't go haring around," adds Thomo. I'm in... A surge of adrenaline flows through me. I feel ten feet tall. 'Right place, yes, but make it the right time,' I tell myself...

We trot down the steps to warm up in the plush, all-seater national stadium. The surface is carpet-like, but, alas, the Windies are playing a Test match here against Bangladesh in a few weeks' time so our match has been switched to the dilapidated concrete stadium next door.

We gather in the tunnel, handshakes are exchanged. "You look nervous son. And you should be with your touch..." says Football Punk's Editor-at-Large. Thanks for the kind words, Babsie...

We march into the stadium, where 2,000 fans have gathered to cheer on the All Stars, who are led by Jason and his uncle - the



DAY 3

Rob Jones is on the treadmill, laughing to himself. A worse for wear Bruce Grobbelaar is being interviewed live on Grenada's equivalent of GMTV, with Jason McAteer and Cyrille Regis. His opening gambit of, "Can I just say what an honour it is to be sat alongside this fine player, Brendan Batson!" has tickled Jonesy.

At breakfast, everyone's talking about McAteer, who's been busy making secret phone calls. I thought he had another woman on the go, but it transpires that he's just been appointed assistant manager of Tranmere.

"I'm back in," he says. "The game's missed me too much!" Immediately the lads set up a sweep stake. "I'll give him six months tops," says Babsie.

We head to the beach, but it quickly turns into the McAteer And Walsh Show. When Walshie goes for a lengthy swim, McAteer says: "Where's he going - back to Southampton? I'd laugh my fucking head off if he gets eaten by a shark!"

Over lunch, after a kids coaching session that I'd joined in on, Thomo says: "Are you playing for us tomorrow, Richard?" "If I'm needed Phil," I say, attempting to feign indifference. "Well I've seen you play now," he adds. I'm priming myself for a compliment... "Yes...I thought you were shit!" Durnin's pissing himself. "You were chewing on that one for a bit!" he says. Yes, I was...

At a cocktail party at The Rex later, a gorgeous Grenadian girl stops me. "Excuse me, are you Jamie Redknapp?" she asks. It more than makes up for Thomo's jibe...

former West Brom hero, Cyrille Regis.

We'd been warned that the pitch isn't up to much. Panama were due to play the Grenada national team here a couple of days previously, but turned their noses up in horror at the playing surface and scuttled off home. I now understood why. It's worse than most Sunday morning park pitches; uneven, badly waterlogged after the tropical rainstorm of earlier in the day, and patches of grass are like dustbins - there's one in every yard. In one of many media appearances the previous day, Bruce told the Grenadian public that the Liverpool lads would play on anything in order to help Jason and his Foundation raise funds, but the boys aren't relishing this - especially after three days on the rum punch...

We line up to face the fans and dignitaries brought on to meet the players. "And now it's time for the national anthems; first, Liverpool," shouts the announcer over the tannoy. I'm expecting 'God Save The Queen', but instead we're treated to a Caribbean version of 'You'll Never Walk Alone'. It's a joyously unexpected moment and I can't help but smile.

We win the toss and kick-off. I'm desperate for an early touch to calm the nerves. I scream at Durnin for the ball; he gives it, and it sticks. I play a simple ball back for McAteer. This pro football malarky's easy enough...

The pitch is wide, and, against an opponent who thinks it's a crime to track back and defend, I'm being gifted the freedom of Grenada. I play a one-two with Rob Jones,

'THE BOYS AREN'T RELISHING THIS - ESPECIALLY AFTER THREE DAYS OF GETTING STUCK INTO THE RUM PUNCH...'

DAY 4



I wake up to a tropical rainstorm. It's hammering down, and remains incessant until early afternoon. There appears to be no hope of the game going ahead, but miraculously we get word that the pitch is playable.

As we lounge about waiting for the rain to subside, everyone's listening to Thomo taking us down memory lane. "Sometimes we'd come into training hung over, and when the coaches were on the other pitch, we'd play 'walking football' where running was banned! Terry McDermott would instigate it, and the coaches would scream blue murder at us."

I also become privy to the 'nob game', which was played during a warm down when players were walking in a line with their hands behind their backs... On one occasion John Aldridge was tipped off that a certain teammate's appendage was about to be placed in the vicinity of his palms, and a crushing technique first brought to prominence by Vinnie Jones on Gazza came into play, prompting screams from said teammate...

At lunchtime, Bruce relives his time in Hell's Kitchen, flambeing omelettes with West Indian rum. I'll pass on that one...

Then it's off to the game, and my half an hour of glory. I'd love to talk you through it again, but it's been well documented already. Then, straight after our 6-1 victory, we head for a post-match party at Jason Roberts' mother's pad for a slap up Caribbean BBQ. Lovely food. Lovely people. Then it's off to Bananas for a boogie.

then dart down the wing to meet McAteer's diagonal ball before slinging a cross into the box. Walters heads wide, but the confidence is surging through me.

Then the breakthrough. McAteer beats the offside trap, latches onto a long ball and slots home. 1-0 to the Reds.

Moments later Grobbelaar slings it out to me on the right. Walters comes short, I lay it into him and run off to receive his well-timed return pass before clipping a ball over the top for Durnin, who's peeled off his man. He rounds the keeper to make it 2-0. An assist; I feel like a proper player. I take in the crowd's reaction. People are looking at me as they applaud. This is what I dreamt of all those years ago when Grobbelaar and Gillespie were lifting the European Cup in Rome.

A few minutes later Walsh receives the ball in the right channel and I charge forward again. He lays it into my path; this is my chance. I take it first time on my left foot... But side-foot it miles over the bar. Bollocks.

By now I'm drenched in sweat, and I'm blowing like an old nag who's ready for the knacker's yard. I've not stopped running for

'BY NOW I'M DRENCHED IN SWEAT AND BLOWING LIKE AN OLD NAG WHO'S READY FOR THE KNACKER'S YARD...'

half an hour and it feels as though every drop of oxygen has been squeezed out of the atmosphere. Thomo makes a compassionate substitution. "Well played son," he says. "Better than expected..."

As I'm recovering on a bench by the side of the pitch, a handful of Grenada fans wander over and ask me to sign their footballs and shirts. "I'm not actually a Liverpool player..." I begin. Sod it, when will I ever get this chance again? "Where do you want me to sign kids?" I say. I'm in football utopia.

As I'm signing away, Roberts pulls one back for the All-Stars after Mark Wright's attempted clearance smacks him in the mush before bouncing kindly for him to score. It was Wright's only mistake. Half an hour later he rolled back the years with a perfectly timed tackle on Roberts that was reminiscent of Bobby Moore in his pomp. These fellas have still got the desire to win. "Why come all this way to lose?" says Wright afterwards. "We want to win as much as ever." And win we do; 6-1. McAteer's at the hub of everything, but Durnin's hat-trick is the big difference.

As I spray champagne Babsie's way, we celebrate with an impromptu rendition of You'll Never Walk Alone in front of the smiling fans. I'm literally reliving my own childhood fantasies when a young kid approaches, and inadvertently reminds me why we're really here... "Thanks for coming to Grenada," he says. "You play good, but Jason Roberts is my hero. Thanks to him, I get to play football now." The boy is from a remote village at the northern tip of the island. Until Jason launched his Foundation, he'd only been able to kick a rag tag home-made ball around the streets of Saint Patrick.



The hard graft continues... John Durnin hides the team suncream (above), the lads suck everything in (bottom middle), a Grenadian shows us how to limbo, while Bruce Grobbelaar and Jason Roberts show us how not to play cricket...



DAY 5



My head feels as though it's been trash compacted; they don't make rum punches like these back in Blighty... Come to think of it, I don't think they make rum punches full stop. I wouldn't fancy asking for one in my old local in Doncaster...

I stagger to the beach where I find a handful of worse for wear players nursing hangovers. There's only one man who's full of the joys of spring - Grobbelaar, who's chatting to a handful of British holidaymakers about his exploits in the Rhodesian Army. His stamina is staggering.

I perk up considerably that afternoon as we're treated to a full blown Caribbean beach party - chicken and rice, beach cricket and, you guessed it, copious amounts of rum punch.

We manage to break off from rum punching and limbo dancing for an auction of Liverpool memorabilia in aid of the Foundation. Thomo's brought signed, customized boots worn by Reds' heroes Pepe Reina and Steven Gerrard all the way from Liverpool, along with a handful of signed shirts, which in total raise around six grand for the Foundation.



Despite its picturesque landscape, with its stunning mountains and waterfalls and tropical climate, Grenada still faces the reality of being a third world country. Therefore, Jason's influence on the island has been enormous; he's touched lives all over the country, not least that of this particular starry-eyed kid.

"It's all about giving something back," Jason tells me at the post-match party at his mum's house. "Football's given me so much, over and above being a professional footballer - the discipline, the fitness, the self belief and working as a team. I'm glad I'm giving others that opportunity.

"Kids here want to get out and play football, but there's not the structure they need. We're trying to give kids coaching and an opportunity to play. We want them to enjoy themselves and learn life skills."

His passion for football and his homeland is obvious. However, as a full time Premier League professional, Jason has understandably handed over responsibility for the day-to-day running of the Foundation to his uncle, Otis - a former professional who plied his trade in Belgium and Hong Kong - and Gary Mulcahey, who previously ran the community department at Fulham Football Club for 16 years. "It's the Football in the Community schemes back in England that helped inspire us," Jason continues.

"I saw that they were changing people's lives, that sport shows kids another way, a better way to earn respect."

I turn to grab another chicken wing, then ask the fella serving drinks for another beer. It's Cyrille Regis on corkscrew duty. The Cyrille Regis. Can I use the word 'surreal' again?

As well as an array of football, sporting and cultural initiatives, Jason has also installed internet cafes on the island in an effort to make the wide world more accessible. But could his efforts eventually lead to a Grenadian following in his footsteps all the way to the Premier League?

"We have some great natural athletes who've never had the opportunities I've had.

They're talented, but don't have a system in place to develop," he adds.

After the wonderful hospitality at Mrs Roberts' place runs its course, it's off to Banana's nightclub, Grenada's hottest twilight attraction, where reggae is king of the speakers and rum punch is poured by the gallon. The highlight is a dance-off between Rob Jones and McAteer, who both get the death stare from the campest crooner on the island, who's devastated at having his thunder stolen. The duo cut some serious shapes - they're like the Rock Steady Crew in their heyday; clips of which will surely be appearing on youtube in the very near future... Just don't ask me how they got there.

Being witness to a dance-off between two former internationals who I spent a decade watching with admiration on telly, just about sums up the week I've had. Normally, when Cyrille Regis is serving you beer, Phil Thompson is handing you your debut and scantily clad beauties are mistaking you for Jamie Redknapp, you know you've had a good night's sleep. But this time it wasn't a dream, it was a paradoxical reality. See you again next year?

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DAY 6



I'd heard several bits of anecdotal evidence about how disabled people were treated on the island; some horrific. The theory seems to be: leave them in the corner and maybe they'll go away. I was therefore fascinated to see a Jason Roberts Foundation coaching session for kids at the local special school, Hopkin House...

As coach Gary Mulcahey takes his first steps out of the bus and onto the training pitch, his celebrity status becomes obvious. Kids are running towards him from all directions, hollering out his name. Thomo, Michael Thomas, John Durnin, Wally and I quickly get involved, kicking the ball around with the kids. The pleasure they derive from even the simplest of things which we very much take for granted will leave a lasting impression. Michael Thomas hands out a batch of signed photos from his Liverpool days. The kids are now in awe of the man, although they're finding it difficult to believe that this rather chunky 41-year-old before them is the same lithe athlete who's cutting a lean, mean figure on the pitch. However, it's Gary who takes centre stage. During his time at Fulham, he ran teams for deaf kids and created the first ever side for children with Down Syndrome. He's determined to continue working with disabled kids in Grenada. "Unfortunately the island just doesn't really know how to deal with special needs kids," he says. "But we're determined to give everyone a chance. A lot of people in the UK and Grenada thought that our purpose of setting up the Foundation was to scout for players for the Premier League, but that's not the case at all. That would just be the icing on the cake." When Andy Cole unveiled the portable floodlights in St George's earlier this year, more than 2,000 people turned up, bringing barbecues, beers and music, transforming the evening into a full scale party.

"It was an amazing evening," adds Gary. "It just epitomizes what a big deal it is to get basic things like lighting in a country which is essentially very poor, and where many kids haven't even got boots or footballs." What do you do after jumping off such an emotional rollercoaster ride as the coaching session at Hopkin House? Head to the beach, grab a crate of lager and jump on a powerboat with Babsie, Rob Jones, Mark Wright, John Durnin and the boys, that's what... And what an incredible experience, thrashing through the Caribbean Sea at full throttle while desperately trying to hang on to your bottle of Carib. Having the wind in your hair isn't the most flattering of looks when you've started to recede though (you've more than started - News Ed). I look like a cross between Mel Gibson in Lethal Weapon and Terry Nutkins. That night it's back out on the booze for another social engagement. By now you'd think that nightly cocktail parties would have become old hat and that we'd take it easy. Wrong...



DAY 7

Last night was messier than a movie star's divorce, so I'm nursing a murderous hangover, and I'm facing a mammoth coach ride through the winding countryside of Grenada this morning... As we take our seats, Bruce shouts back, "We've got plenty of beers for the journey boys," as a couple of crates of Carib, the local lager, are thrown onto the bus. I'm feeling even more queasy as Bruce flicks the top off his first beer of the day at 11.55am... I'm trying desperately hard not to be sick, but my stomach churns even further when I look round and see Gary Gillespie and Mark Wright comparing scars. "My medial ligament went in a tackle with Steve Foster on the plastic at Luton," says Gary. "I didn't expect him to slide in on that surface but he did. I remember laying my leg flat in hospital and it would just flop sideways because of the torn ligament." Pass me the sickbag... We finally arrive at Phil and Annie Clift's - an English couple who run the picturesque Petite Anse hotel and restaurant on the north coast. Annie, a qualified nurse, is also heavily involved in raising money for a charity for orphans - many of whom have been abused. She paid for some of them to travel to watch the Liverpool Legends game. It's a humbling experience. www.petiteanse.com After lunch we oversee a coaching session in Saint Patrick - Devon Smith country. It's obviously a poor area; the kids here wouldn't have had the opportunity to play football had it not been for the Foundation. As the youngsters play enthusiastically, a handful of goats wander aimlessly across the pitch. No-one bats an eyelid. On the way home I stop off to check out a youth training session under the new floodlights in St George's. Without them, the kids wouldn't be able to play at this time of the day. It typifies in a nutshell the importance of the Foundation and why Roberts is regarded as a genuine hero on these shores.



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