

A Funny Old Game

With the football season upon us once again, **Nick Atkinson** has often pondered a question about football fans in Malaysia and after a meet with sports journalist and football pundit, Bob Holmes, thinks he may have the beginnings of an answer.

It was in early 2010 that a newspaper article caught my attention. The opening line began with 'I find it strange that many Malaysians are ardent fans and fanatics of some of the football clubs in England.'

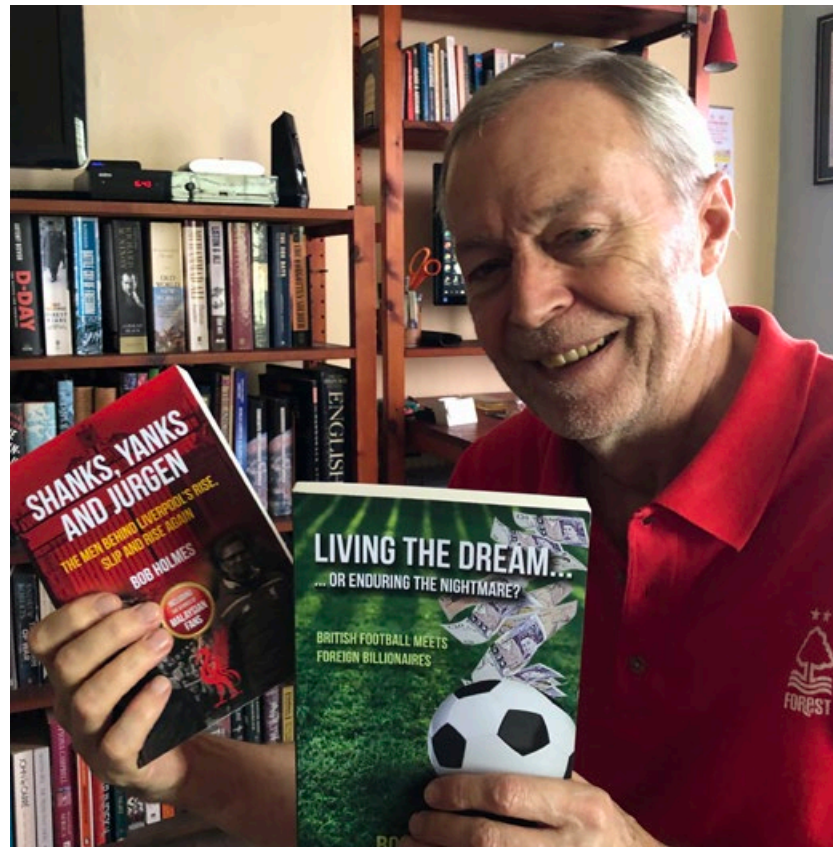
I have been here for 13 years now and I remember asking my brother, a 21-year veteran, "Why is it that I am watching more football and having more conversations about it here in Malaysia, than I ever did back in the UK?"

He couldn't answer that then, and I honestly hadn't thought about it for a long time until I recently had a chat with sports journalist and football pundit, Bob Holmes, when we met to talk about his latest addition to the bookstores.

Bob began by telling me that after a 'gap decade' of seeing the world and 10 years living in London, he developed itchy feet and a hankering for warmer climes. A press junket to Malaysia did the job and so much more besides.

Sponsored by Tourism Malaysia and Proton, he and a group of hacks were provided with a Proton Saga to drive around the country, hotel accommodation, and meals. The car didn't breakdown and he wasn't expecting to also meet his future wife!

Jane was one of the lovely ladies organising the trip, and a long-distance affair got longer when she was transferred to Sydney. They got married there and stayed on for 3 years where Bob freelanced for the Sun-Herald, and wrote a book on cricket legends called, 'My Greatest Game'. When Tourism Malaysia



brought Jane and Bob back to KL, he got a job writing for The Sun.

He says, "The mid-nineties were mixed years for a football fan in Malaysia. Epic corruption was rampant in the local game, and a wider coverage of the English Premier League (EPL) kept football fans happy, and as I soon discovered, a knowledgeable and passionate audience were watching it. This enabled me to write a column on it which I did for 23 years!"

He believes that this passion was developed through increased media coverage and a possible dissatisfaction with the local set up; and it only

got bigger. More often than not, the back pages were mostly about English football.

Older fans told him how they used to listen to the BBC World Service and wait for the Malay Mail to come out at midday with the overnight results. Shoot magazine was an eagerly anticipated bible and there were weekly highlights presented by the likes of Hugh Johns and Brian Moore. The FA Cup final was an annual live treat, and it didn't matter who was playing, they never missed it.

He added, "They were mere morsels compared to today's smorgasbord but

enough to cultivate a deep interest in the game, and spawn allegiances that have been passed down generations."

Such interest persuaded business station BFM to have a football show on which he has been a regular guest for 10 years now, and it was in his rare quiet moments that he penned his first book in Malaysia; a book on the crackpot owners of English clubs which he honestly believed would sell here.

He was mistaken as he soon realised that multi-club books don't do well with one-eyed fans and there are only two clubs that Malaysians seemed to want to read about - Liverpool and Manchester United. Even a 20,000-word chapter on their own club wasn't enough to persuade people to buy this fascinating read. These people are extreme fans of football and it has been said that "You can't change your team. They are with you for life. You can change your partner, your job, your appearance, even your name, but you can never change your team."

That's why his new book on Liverpool should do better. He does admit to being a Forest fan though, with Cloughie also a hero of his, but he does own up when he says, "I've always been an unashamed Shankly groupie."

Shankly was in his pomp when Bob was at an impressionable age and he owes his first piece in journalism indirectly to him.

Bob told me, "I was wandering the world with a desire to write and regaled an expat sports editor in a bar in the Stanley Hotel, in Nairobi, with enough Shankly stories for him to let me preview the 1974 FA Cup final between Liverpool and Newcastle. I still have the cutting and the rest is history."

The new book traces Shankly back to his roots - in the abject poverty of a Scottish mining village; one of 10 children, down the pit at 14, during the Great Depression. He said, "Football was the only escape and

now seemed an opportune time to introduce more recent generations to Shankly, and to what he did for their club - after all, he was, essentially, its founding father."

With hard work, humour and evangelic zeal, Shankly established the 'The Liverpool Way' of doing things. The book salutes his success and effect on the red half of the city with football becoming a religion on Merseyside, and then almost weeps at his premature retirement and death. It might also appeal to those who are not of a Liverpool - or even a football - persuasion.

The book covers the contrast of how today's game is made, and how Shanks would have viewed it with the shenanigans of its Instagram players, and zillionaire owners. At the end of the day, they all still wear boots and kick a ball around on a pitch with the same markings and of the same size.

Bob adds that, "Shankly would have hated many aspects of the modern game, although he would have found much to admire about today's Liverpool!"

There is also the comparison with Liverpool's current manager, Jurgen Klopp; a man born in another country 54 years later, yet shares a similar left-of centre political standpoint, a strong belief in teamwork and a loyal respect for the fans.

There are a couple of enlightening chapters on Malaysian Liverpool fans' own experiences, and pride of place goes to the great man's grandson who can also tell a good tale.

Bob finished by saying, "Shankly was, and always will be an idol of mine and I have immense respect for a great man who once said, 'Some people think football is a matter of life and death. I assure you, it's much more serious than that.'"

Pick up a copy of *Shanks, Yanks & Jurgen* at all major book stores. ■

