

# MARK ROBSON

## DEATH ON THE RAMPARTS

Our base for the 1986 football World Cup was a fabulous hillside hotel overlooking the noisy and dusty city of Guadalajara. These were the good old days when the players and media generally stayed in the same place. We all felt part of one team. Journalists and players chatting at the poolside. We knew the no go areas and what was on and off record. There was a sense of respect and Omerta. A long way from the modern day paranoia that exists around most professional sporting teams.

I had arrived in Mexico sporting a nasty injury picked up six weeks before the tournament. I had ruptured ankle ligaments and cracked a bone playing rugby in a University Exiles Match. I came into the office the following Monday in plaster and on crutches. My Boss at the Beeb, the exceptional but bullish Joy Williams, took one look at me and said, in her own rather fruity and inimitable style, "Robson what the FUCK have you done ?" Joy, a leader in the suffragette style, could melt a wheelie bin from forty yards. I told her the story. She said, much to my horror, "If you're not off those sticks and walking in a month you're not going to the World Cup. I need a mobile reporter not some limping dickhead. How do you chase stories on crutches ?"

Christ ! My dream trip was in peril. I booked in with a physio ... another Joy ... Joy Feherty, the sister of the former Ryder Cup golfer and now American Golf journalist and broadcaster David Feherty. We had played together on the Bangor Grammar Golf team (Winning the Irish Schools Championship) I knew she was good and had a record for fast tracking injured sportsmen back into action.

First thing she told me was to get the plaster off so we could start the rehab. I protested. "The hospital said this has to stay on for a month"... Joy replied, "Do you want to go to Mexico or not ?" I had the foot to thigh plaster chain sawed off up at the Bangor A+E and we got to work. Joy made me push the ankle through a full range of motion on what she called her Saturn Ball. Do they still exist....? Think of a wooden Saturn with its rings and you'll get the idea. I have never known agony like it

pushing the swollen lump that was masquerading as my ankle joint as I balanced and rolled the red, blue and orange mess on this strange plinth. Sweat poured in Niagara like torrents. The Spanish Inquisition would have struggled to invent a better method of torture. It worked. Within a month I could walk albeit with a limp. Joy made me do a "fitness test" in the office. I joke you not. Forced to walk up and down hopping from foot to foot as she squinted and stroked her cat (careful Robbo !) Joy had the power to destroy my dream. I passed the test.

There was a golf course attached to the Guadalajara hotel. At sunrise I would get out and jog slowly and tentatively on the hillside slopes trying to get as much motion into the joint as possible. I was following my physio's plan and all was well. Memorably, at one point on the trip, I shared an ice bucket beside the pool with the great Norman Whiteside. He with his dodgy right ankle in the bucket me with my left. The nation held its breath. For Norman. Not me.

I'm a competitive type with some form of undiagnosed borderline idiot disorder. A football match between the local village team and the travelling media from newspapers, radio and TV had been organised.

Billy Bingham, the Northern Ireland manager, was to be the Boss of the media side. Bingham (helped by his calculating assistant UTV's Jackie Fullerton) persuaded me to play. Up until the injury I had been very fit and had been playing rugby regularly back in Northern Ireland as well as partaking in charity football games. They knew I could "do a job" - youth an added bonus with the game being played at the Guadalajara altitude of 1,500 metres. I couldn't resist it. I lied about the extent of my injury and disguised the limp. The only proviso was that, because I couldn't actually run, I would play a central pivotal midfield role as a fulcrum a bit like the wondrous Italian Andrea Pirlo but without the talent.

So there I was standing in the centre circle. The game kicked off. A team mate passed me the ball. What was he thinking ? The Guadalajara side was young and pumped and this crazed Mexican came in low and hard with both feet off the ground. There was a an awful crunching noise (I can hear it now) as Miquel/Pancho/Jose (delete where appropriate) made a direct hit on my gammy ankle. I waited for the pain to rise from joint to brain. And it did. It was searing, agonising but surprisingly short.

Though I was sure he'd completely mangled my half healed injury. Slowly I got up and carefully tested the joint. It was fine. In fact it felt BETTER. I was able to run about for the rest of the match feeling freedom as I cantered about in the rasping Mexican heat. Bending it like Beckham. I was simultaneously brilliant and humble. Later the Northern Ireland Physio told me that my tackler had done with one heinous tackle about six weeks worth of Saturn ball work. Basically he had ripped through the scar tissue. That was 32 years ago and, apart from floppy ligaments, I haven't had a problem since. And we won. 3-2

My mood improved significantly and I turboed up the goals I had set of chasing large scoops and petite Mexican girls. Myself and a colleague hit the town (I can't name him. OMG I wish I could) I met a fabulous girl. We stayed in contact for quite a while after the World Cup. My buddy met a girl too and we were like the four smooching conquistadors meeting up at every opportunity. Naturally we wanted the girls to come up to the hotel. Just to admire the view. Know what I mean. But there was a problem. This was Mexico and this was a World Cup. Mexico wasn't deemed to be the safest of places with gangs prevalent and violence common. Every one of the team hotels across the country was cordoned off and protected by barbed wire perimeters and significant numbers of soldiers. The only entry to our hotel was via a heavily armed and barricaded front entrance. You had to have the right security pass and local talent was definitely not permitted.

But I had a plan. While out jogging I had found an unmanned secret path that wound its way around the back of the hotel up to an amazing wide verandah that overlooked the distant City. A bumpy ride but I was sure the hire car would survive it. So I did a full recce and "Robson's Run" was on.

Under cover of darkness we slipped into the hotel grounds and drove slowly and quietly up what was basically an old jeep track. There was a bit of deep snogging going on on the verandah when I heard the first screeches of spinning wheels. I removed my tongue. Within a minute the four of us were surrounded by machine gun clad members of the Mexican Army who blazed blinding floodlights from the roofs of their landrovers. For a moment I actually thought they might kill us all. Mean Hombres the lot of them.

The top gun amongst them screamed a rush of Spanish. We were bemused and frightened. They checked our passes and with a few broken words of English gave us the Mother of saliva splattered lectures. Right in my face this bloke was. The girls understood it all - and the context - and, looking very scared, they were quickly corralled into the back of the vehicles and driven away. Before we knew it we were back to silence as the jeeps disappeared in a dusty cloud. The two of us stood there shaking. What's going to happen to the girls ?

The next day I had interviews to do. Work was now full on in the build up to the opening game with Algeria. My mate set off early to try and find out the fate of the girls. I was certain that this wasn't going to end well and struggled to function as he chased the kind of story you pray you won't have to. Late afternoon he returned and looked deeply disturbed. "It's not good news. The penalties for accessing a World Cup exclusion zone are severe. The girls are in custody. The army had handed them over to the local police. They are in court next week and face a prison sentence. There's a chance of bail. I've to go back to the police station tomorrow" Bloody F\*\*\*\*\* Hell. Those poor girls. What kind of sentence would they get ? This was basically my fault. If the BBC found out about this we would most definitely be sent home in total disgrace leaving two innocent girls to some awful fate in some claustrophobic Mexican prison. Our World Cup nirvana was turning into the Shawshank Redemption.

We tried to think clearly. Mexico, like a lot of South America, and it hasn't changed much in the intervening years, is fairly corrupt. And sometimes those in authority are the most corrupt of them all. And we knew that. "Do you think you could cut a deal" I said. This was becoming totally surreal. I was even talking the language of a cartel box set. My chum said, "How the Hell do I do that. If I suggest anything they might arrest us too. I'll try and be smart." Off he went.

The longest day passed and back he came again. "I'm not quite sure how I did it but they've agreed to release the girls without charge if we can produce a "bond" fee" Mexican for bribe. I initially felt monstrous relief but that emotion was quickly replaced by the realisation that we

would have to pay the cash. "How much" I croaked. "They want US Dollars. The currency of the corrupt. And they want 10,000 of them" I swear I almost collapsed. But there was no option. To cut a long story short I cashed in all of the expenses money provided by the BBC and then converted my travellers cheques. I contacted my bank and got them to transfer the rest of the cash I needed to a bank in Guadalajara.

The plan was for the two of us to meet at breakfast the next day and then go to the bank and then the Station with our cash in an envelope and hand over the money to the honourable police force of Guadalajara. I was so tense I felt my brain and body might explode. Northern Ireland were playing Algeria in two days time. I would be commentating for network radio. I should have been focusing on that and here I was planning a shady pay off to corrupt Latin American authority. Holy Heisenberg. This trip was breaking bad.

Sipping his coffee my "mate" looked over at me and the tiniest of smug smiles surfaced on his evil face. "GOTCHA !!!!!" he giggled. "F\*\*\*\*\* best wind up ever" I swear that killing him very slowly with my adjacent butter knife crossed my mind. Where would I put it first ? "You fell for it Robson. Fabulous" Relief and fury powered in tandem through my bloodstream. I let rip at him with a volley of colourful abuse. "So what really happened that night you insane twat ?" .... "Oh They just gave them a wee ticking off and took them home" I have never quite forgiven my broadcasting colleague. You can see now why I want to name him but he valued his reputation too much to let me reveal it. Wise man. For me it had been a chastening and chilling experience. For him ? Well he chuckled about it relentlessly for the rest of the World Cup winding me up at every opportunity. Lovely bloke.