

MARK ROBSON

MEGA STAR HUNTING

It all started at the Belfast International Airport. June 1986 and here was the over excited puppy that was Mark Robson. Quivering at the check in queue for leg one of the long haul to Mexico for the 1986 Football World Cup. I was 25 and this would be my first major tournament for the BBC. The perennial joker and one line Grand Master Jackie Fullerton, then of Ulster Television, joined the queue behind me. The self appointed legend - and he was probably right - scanned my jam packed over sized suitcase. Always on the ball Jackie said, "I see you've brought your cliches - but obviously not all of them"

We were off. My brief was to cover the Northern Ireland team as a reporter but also to commentate on all of Northern Ireland's matches for Radio Two (the embryo of Radio Five Live) with the great man of football commentary Peter Jones. A true craftsman. He was the man who painfully, emotionally but brilliantly described the unfolding tragedies of Hillsborough and Heysel.

Northern Ireland had been drawn in a group with Algeria, Spain and Brazil. Mighty tough. We stopped off in Dallas Airport for the final leg to Guadalajara, Northern Ireland's base for the tournament. So I went for a dander through the terminal and, of course, I had my tape recorder over my shoulder. You just never knew. That's the way we were trained. The rest of the BBC crew were quietly sipping iced Gin and Tonics in an airport bar. I was browsing around and noticed a man sitting on his own, legs stretched out in front of him, wearing sunglasses and quietly reading a newspaper. I had a double take. Then a virtual heart attack and simultaneously felt the sweat beginning to pump from a million pores. I was sure that man was Pele. The most famous footballer in the World and, critically, Brazilian. I'm assuming these were the days before his unfortunate erectile dysfunction because he looked ok to me.

I simply had to go for it. What aspiring young broadcast journalist could miss this kind of opportunity. But I was terrified. I would basically be cold calling Pele and disturbing his rare oasis. But it had to be done. So I walked over silently trembling. "Hi. I'm Mark Robson from the BBC. Are you Pele ?" He slowly pushed his sunglasses onto the end of his nose, "Yes" For one throat tightening moment I thought I might pass out. Would this end with Pele doing mouth to mouth ? I mumbled, "Would there be any chance of an interview ? What with Brazil being in Northern Ireland's group, so they are". Pele replied. "No problem. Sit down" Bloody Hell ! Then followed what I can only describe as pure gold dust for a cub reporter on his first global engagement. Pele talked about how magnificent the Brazil team would have been if only George Best had been born on Copacabana Beach. Pele told me about how perfectly he and George would have gelled together on the pitch. "A footballing soul mate" was how Pele described Best. I hadn't even got to Mexico and here I was with a mega scoop. We chatted for a while after the interview. What a guy. Incredibly friendly and patient. I thanked him profusely and wandered, in a daze, back to the bar to join my colleagues.

"Where have you been Robbo ?" said our Producer Brian Dempster. One of my early mentors. His slightly glazed eyes gave away the consumption of what I guessed was G+T number three. "I was over there interviewing Pele" Nobody said a word but inside they were all screaming "Holy Shit" Now the race was on. This was way before the days of the internet and instant feeds back to the UK. The ONLY way to get this uncut diamond back to Belfast was via a Dallas TV station and a booked satellite feed. It was a long stop over and we had five hours to our connecting flight. Dempster magically turned sober. No mobile phones either in those days. Brian queued for a booth and eventually began making frantic calls then came back grabbed the tape and set off in a taxi into the centre of Dallas. Brian, a seriously superb Producer on all levels, had found a TV station and secured an (expensive) satellite feed. He watched the interview head "down the line" back to the BBC in Belfast. Job done. The adrenalin rush was long and sustained.

We boarded the flight to Guadalajara all of us getting on at the front of the plane. The entire BBC network crew was with us but we were all in economy. We had to file past Business Class. I was walking down the aisle and immediately behind me was Des Lynam followed by John Motson. Very famous men of broadcasting but men I didn't know personally and they certainly didn't know me. And there was Pele. Sitting at the window reading that newspaper. He looked up and spotted me - raised a friendly hand - and said "Mark !" I looked back and responded with a nonchalant "Pele". I think it was the single most memorable second of my entire career. I couldn't resist a super quick glimpse over my shoulder and the look on the faces of Lynam and Motson will never be forgotten.

Meanwhile back in Belfast the Pele interview reached the sports desk and, of course, the newsroom wanted it too. They would broadcast it across all of the radio and TV platforms as soon as possible. A copy was sent to London because "Network" wanted it as well. The whole thing was to be shown on "Scene Around Six" the local evening TV news programme. But of course this was a radio interview. In these situations it was simple. You put a still photo of the interviewee on the screen and then ran the sound from the tape. Of course you also had to identify the guy being interviewed with a graphic. Very easy. A strapline with brief identification details. In those days you wrote these details out and hand delivered them on a piece of paper to the graphics department who would then prepare them for the evening show. Unfortunately the guy in graphics that day knew nothing about sport and presumed that there had been a spelling mistake. No problem. He corrected it. Good work. My by now (in my head) globally resonating interview went out on the evening news. Three minutes of it. And across the bottom of the screen was the strapline. "EXCLUSIVE: Mark Robson from Dallas with Brazilian legend PETE"