

An Argentine in Yorkshire and a South African in Rosewell

It was former Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson who once famously proclaimed 'Football? Bloody hell!' I attended my first Hearts match in 1968 and there have been numerous changes to the game, both on and off the field, since then. However, one thing which hasn't changed is the propensity for football to astound and astonish its aficionados.

This summer's World Cup in Brazil was a tremendous spectacle, one of the best ever. Yet, when Germany defeated Argentina in the final the BBC's commentator Guy Mowbray – one of the better ones – spoke of the Argentine manager Alejandro Sabella and mentioned he 'was previously of Sheffield United'. I have to say that took me by surprise and, sure enough, the defeated manager who took the appearance of a brooding Marlon Brando in the classic film *The Godfather*, did indeed play for Sheffield United in the late 1970s before moving to Leeds United in 1980. Few people would have thought back then, that the man whose teammates included Scots Arthur Graham, Eddie Gray and Derek Parlane, would have been managing his country in a World Cup final little more than 30 years later.

Here's another tale of the footballing unexpected. Jock Stein was initially resented as a player at Celtic because he was a Protestant – and his father, a Rangers fan, never wished him well when he played against Celtic. This story is told in former BBC football commentator Archie Macpherson's excellent biography of the great man. Stein actually supported Rangers as a lad but he didn't hesitate at signing for Celtic when he returned from a spell in Welsh football. Sadly, there were those at Celtic Park in the early 1950s who wished the big man had remained in Wales. It's hard to believe that the man who led Celtic to European Cup glory in 1967, thereby becoming the first British club to lift the trophy, would have experienced

such feelings of resentment but religious beliefs, sadly, were a major part of how your life was shaped if you lived in the west of Scotland. Stein, to his credit, refused to let such bigoted views prevent him from achieving his ambition of becoming one of the greatest football managers that ever lived.

There were two other nuggets of gold during the close season which had one asking 'what was that?' Most startling was the news story that former South African internationalist striker Benni McCarthy had returned to football – by playing for Whitehill Welfare! It was one of those stories which had one checking the date to see if it was April 1st. But it was true. McCarthy, who won the Uefa Champions League with FC Porto under the tutelage of Jose Mourinho, and who also played for Blackburn Rovers, West Ham United, Ajax of Amsterdam and Celta Vigo, retired from football in June 2013. However, he is engaged to the sister of a Whitehill Welfare player and he was persuaded to make a guest appearance for the Midlothian side who play in the Lowland League in a pre-season friendly against SPFL Premiership newcomers Hamilton Academical. Although the great man opened the scoring he couldn't prevent his temporary team avoid a 5-3 defeat. But it's a story that may well feature in football pub quizzes for years to come!

A story which emerged from the pre-season friendlies was one which caused considerable amusement to Hearts supporters. City neighbours Hibernian, now accompanying Hearts in the SPFL Championship, played SPFL League One side Dunfermline Athletic in a friendly game at East End Park in July. The game was a rather tedious goalless draw which left many unfortunate Hibeers with a sour taste in the mouth. The highlight, if you can call it that, of the game appeared to be when Hibs defender Callum Booth struck a less than accurate clearance – which struck a passing seagull! The seagull was unharmed and there were claims that the bird actually dived, although these are unsubstantiated. But its days as a winger are believed to

be over...

A player who once plied his trade in Yorkshire leading his country out at the World Cup final in Brazil; a Champions League winner and South African internationalist who once played in a world cup finals for his country turning out for a game in darkest Rosewell; and a Hibs player threatening the safety of a seagull with an attempted clearance. Who said summer was the silly season?!