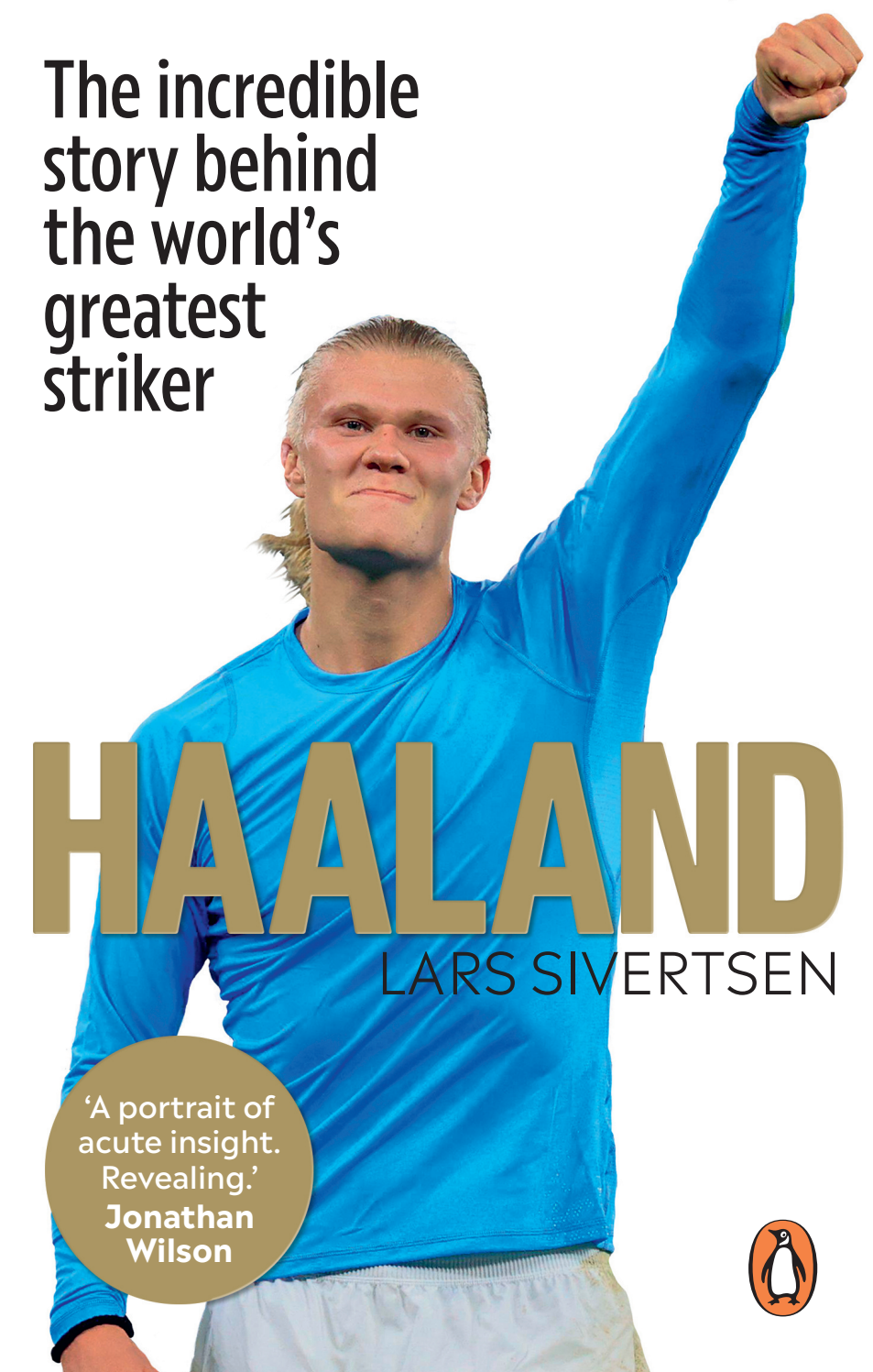
The incredible story behind the world's greatest striker



HAALAND

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'A portrait of acute insight. Revealing.'
Jonathan Wilson

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The incredible story behind the world's greatest striker

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Ebury Spotlight, an imprint of Ebury Publishing
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA

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global.penguinrandomhouse.com



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First published by Ebury Spotlight in 2023
This paperback edition published in 2024

www.penguin.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781529913118

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House
Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68



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PROLOGUE

There's nothing in the world quite like Borussia Dortmund's home ground, the Signal Iduna Park. On a matchday, around 80,000 people will file through the turnstiles and onto stands that seem somehow both vast and compact at the same time. On all four sides, the stadium roof is sloped so that the noise generated by the fans is sent straight back down, rather than escaping up towards the sky. And what noise. There are football grounds where the crowd come to be entertained, but in this place the fans come to make themselves heard. Dortmund's legendary south stand, a giant single terrace with a capacity of around 25,000, is one of the great wonders of the football world. Nicknamed the 'Yellow Wall', it is not so much a crowd of people as a heaving mass of scarves, limbs and souls. And it's loud, very loud.

Perhaps a young footballer, someone not quite used to being in the middle of all of this, could be forgiven for being cowed by it all – or if not, then at least affected in some kind of way. But on Tuesday, 18 February 2020, as the camera panned across the Borussia Dortmund players ahead of their Champions League knockout game with Paris Saint-Germain, 19-year-old Erling Haaland was smiling. Not the confident, cocky, arrogant smile of a star relishing the spotlight, but a boyish, uncontained grin. If anything, it looked like young Erling was doing his best to suppress a fit of the giggles. The hopes and dreams of every Dortmund fan in the stadium –

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and many more of them outside of it – may well have been resting on his deceptively young shoulders, but Erling Haaland was having a great time.

And why not? Erling Haaland had, after all, quite a lot to be smiling about. In early 2020, at the age of 19, he was already one of the most talked-about footballers in the world, and this was his breakthrough season. Just over a year earlier he had left Molde FK in Norway and moved abroad for the first time in his life, joining RB Salzburg in Austria in January 2019. In his first six months at the Austrian club, his playing time was limited, but when Israeli striker Munas Dabbur left for Sevilla in the summer Haaland became first choice. He repaid that faith by scoring 11 goals in his first seven league games. When the time came for his Champions League debut, he promptly scored a hat-trick. By the end of September 2019 it was already clear that Erling Haaland wouldn't be staying in Austria for very long. There was much intrigue surrounding his next move. Some felt a transfer from RB Salzburg to its German sister club, RB Leipzig, made sense. Ole Gunnar Solskjær, Haaland's former boss at Molde, was now the manager of Manchester United and was taking a keen interest. In Serie A, Juventus was lurking. But the decision, in the end, was to move to Borussia Dortmund.

Dortmund and the Ruhr valley is an area that was once defined by mining, heavy industry, breweries and football. But after decades of industrial decline, the mines and heavy industry have mostly been consigned to history, while the breweries have either been closed down or bought up by faceless conglomerates. All of which has left football as the final thing giving the city of Dortmund an identity. Uli Hesse, a German author and journalist, wrote in September 2011, in the second issue of football magazine *The Blizzard*, that

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> Many places are referred to as football cities, but the term is rarely as fitting as it is in Dortmund, because almost everyone who was born or lives here cares deeply about Borussia and defines himself or herself to a large degree through the fortunes of the football team.

Dortmund fans have also learned the hard way that even having a successful football club is not something that can be taken for granted. In the 1990s Dortmund was determined to catch up with serial champions Bayern Munich, and started spending big money to bring stars and success to the city. In the short term it worked, as Dortmund won the Bundesliga in 1994/5 and 1995/6. They also won the Champions League in 1996/7, before winning the Bundesliga again in 2001/2. But the success had been achieved by spending more money than the club was bringing in, and their debts were starting to mount. When the club's performances on the pitch dipped and the team failed to qualify for European competition in 2004, the financial house of cards started tumbling down. Dortmund nearly went bankrupt, just three years after winning the league. It was clear that the club had to be rebuilt and run in a way that was totally different to what had come before. Dortmund, a club with a massive fan base and a huge cultural footprint, had to adopt the methods and strategies of an underdog.

The club was eventually reborn under the leadership of Jürgen Klopp, a charismatic leader and a man who understood how the passion of the Dortmund fans could be weaponised. Under Klopp, Dortmund filled its squad with young players, players who had the hunger and energy to execute Klopp's aggressive pressing style. Having become all too familiar with the perils of trying to out-spend its rivals, Dortmund based its football on out-running and out-fighting them

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instead. 'Dortmund are constantly chasing something at a million miles per hour, whether it's the ball, the opposition, space or the goal, and they rarely allow themselves a breather,' Raphael Honigstein wrote in the *Guardian* in April 2012. And under Klopp, Dortmund returned to the summit of German football, winning the Bundesliga in 2010/11 and 2011/12. The club nearly won the Champions League again in 2012/13 but was, gallingly, beaten in the final by Bayern Munich.

Since then Dortmund has remained a constant presence near the top of the Bundesliga, but the title has continued to elude the club. It has also been unable to return to the final stages of the Champions League, getting no further than the quarter-finals in the nine seasons since the club's win in 2013. The German club has come a long way since flirting with bankruptcy in 2005, and can now spend some serious money, but it still lags far behind the sheer spending power of Bayern Munich and the other financial elites around Europe. Accepting that it can't afford to sign ready-made superstars, Dortmund has instead implemented a model of signing the superstars of tomorrow. After all, it was a pivot to youth that brought Dortmund its last two league titles. And this is where Erling Haaland comes into the picture. The club has built a reputation as a finishing school for superstars, a place for young players to make the step from being world-class talents to world-class players. And Dortmund – though a big club with a big fan base – has shown that it's prepared to put its faith in young players and make them central pillars of the team. For Haaland, it was the perfect next step.

Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) is a very different kind of football club. Since being bought by Qatar in 2011, PSG has been merrily throwing vast sums of money at the transfer market, collecting superstars like they were Panini stickers. The club's squad has at times looked more like a guest list than a football team. Domestically the

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team has had success, but it continues to fall short in the Champions League and has been consistently criticised for being less than the sum of its very shiny parts. Even though Paris and its suburbs are possibly the greatest hotbed of young football talent in the world, PSG seems utterly disinterested in developing young players. You are, after all, never more than a few months away from the next transfer window. Dortmund's local rival is Schalke; its competitive rival is Bayern Munich. But if it is possible for a club to have a spiritual and philosophical rival then it may well be Paris Saint-Germain.

So when Dortmund took on PSG in the knockout stages of the Champions League, the game was heavily laden with subtext. For Dortmund, there is always a question of whether the club's policy of building a team around youth can ever be enough when coming up against star-studded European elites. And it's hard to think of a club further removed from Dortmund's values than PSG. Were any of these things on Erling Haaland's mind as he took to the field that Tuesday evening, under the lights, in front of the cameras, backed by some of the loudest fans in Europe? Well, no. Almost certainly not.

Most professional footballers are good at blocking out the noise, but Erling Haaland is exceptional at it. 'He doesn't care,' Erik Botheim, a close friend and youth teammate, explained to Norwegian newspaper *VG* in January 2020. 'This is the thing. He is mentally strong, and mostly he's just enjoying himself. He doesn't care.' What Botheim means by not caring is of course that Haaland is not distracted or affected by the noise and the pressure surrounding a young superstar. But when it comes to improving his game, Haaland is obsessed. Obsessed with the obvious things, like fine-tuning his remarkable physique or working on his finishing. But he is also obsessed with looking for things off the pitch that can help him become a better footballer. One of them, and something he

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is particularly passionate about, is meditation. 'I think it's a really good thing,' Haaland told *GQ* in January 2023, 'to relax, to try to not think too much. Because stress is not good for anyone. I hate to be stressed, and I try not to be stressed. But the concept of meditation is to try to let go of these kinds of thoughts. It's really individual, but for me it's worked really well.'

One of the many impressive feats of Erling Haaland's career so far is that whenever he moves club, whenever he goes up a level, whenever the challenge becomes bigger, he responds by scoring even more goals than before. When faced with new challenges and difficult obstacles in their professional lives most people would experience at least some kind of trepidation, but, as Botheim put it, mostly Erling is just enjoying himself.

So it made total sense for a 19-year-old Haaland to smile as the Champions League anthem rang out in the evening air, just minutes before kick-off against PSG. The pressure and expectation of the crowd, the game's significance for Dortmund's eternal struggle against the club's financial superiors, none of this would have registered much at all. Another thing that Haaland was likely oblivious to was the eyes of the football world paying particularly close attention to him that night. His rise had been meteoric, yet critics could say that so far his was a career of caveats. He scored four goals in 21 minutes for Molde? Well, that's the Norwegian league for you. He scored nine goals in a single game for the Norwegian U-20s? Yes, but against Honduras. He scored 16 goals in 14 games for RB Salzurg? Well, that was just in Austria. He scored a hat-trick in his Champions League debut? But that was just against Genk. He scored a hat-trick in his debut for Dortmund? Well, that was just against Augsburg. Here there were no caveats. This was the real deal, a Champions League knockout game against Paris Saint-Germain – with names like Kylian

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Mbappé and Neymar on the opposing team. But Erling Haaland just doesn't care, and so he smiled his boyish smile.

From kick-off, Dortmund looked like the better team, but in the first half the players failed to find a way past Keylor Navas in the PSG goal. In the 26th minute, Jadon Sancho forced a good save from Navas, while eight minutes later Haaland himself drilled a shot off his powerful left foot into the side netting. Haaland was quick and looked menacing, but he wasn't fully in sync with his teammates. He hadn't been with the team for very long, and it showed. At half-time the score was 0–0. The Dortmund players were playing well but, with a return leg in Paris to be played in a few weeks, a draw at home would be a poor result.

In the second half Dortmund kept pushing. They had more possession but created few big chances, and PSG looked a threat when they countered. The pace of Mbappé was a constant worry. But Achraf Hakimi, the Spanish-born Moroccan on loan at Dortmund from Real Madrid, is also lightning quick. Playing as a wingback with the experienced Łukasz Piszczek covering behind him, Hakimi looked like the most promising outlet for Dortmund in attack. And it's Hakimi who eventually fashioned a breakthrough. Jadon Sancho played a ball to the right for Hakimi, who had been afforded a huge amount of space out wide by the PSG defence. He advanced with the ball before putting in a cross to where Dortmund's left wingback Raphaël Guerreiro had made an unexpected run into the box. His first-time finish hit a PSG defender, but Haaland was lurking – like he always does. The big Norwegian stabbed the ball home. The stadium erupted, the PSG defence appealed for a non-existent offside and meditation-enthusiast Haaland assumed the lotus position just outside the six-yard box. Grinning, he was quickly swamped by his teammates.

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But PSG, whatever the team's failings may be, still has an extraordinary collection of individuals. Most notably Kylian Mbappé, who rarely goes a full game without reminding the world of what he can do. In the 74th minute, Mbappé had possession some 15 yards inside Dortmund's half. The Dortmund defence were all back, all in position, so this should have been a reasonably safe situation for the defending team. Except there really is no such thing as a safe situation for a defending team when Mbappé has the ball. He skipped past one Dortmund player as if he wasn't there, evaded a rash and mistimed challenge from the covering defender, and suddenly he was in the Dortmund box – albeit out wide, with a difficult angle for the shot. Mbappé instead played a low ball into a central area, where Neymar had eluded everyone and could tap the ball into an open net: 1–1. A good night for Dortmund suddenly turned into a bad one. A 1–1 draw was not a good result to take to Paris. For all their talent and youthful exuberance, Dortmund's team had been undone by the two most expensive players in world football. 'A £350-million goal,' one TV commentator noted dryly.

But Dortmund weren't finished. Roared on by the Yellow Wall, defender Mats Hummels played an incisive ball into Giovanni Reyna in midfield. Just 17 years old in this Champions League match, Reyna has a curiously similar background to Erling Haaland: like Haaland, he was born in northern England in the early 2000s, as his father, Claudio, was playing for Sunderland in the Premier League at the time. And like Haaland, he had been drawn to Dortmund because of the club's reputation for developing and trusting young players. Here, in a knockout game in the Champions League, the 17-year-old received the ball in midfield, turned and headed towards the open space in front of him. The PSG defence had left gaps and, even though Jadon Sancho was on the move to his right, Reyna was only looking

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for Haaland. He squared the ball, and Haaland let it run across his body before taking it on his left foot. But the ball continued to move diagonally and Haaland's touch wasn't perfect – or was it? With a couple of quick strides of his long legs the ball was suddenly in the perfect place for a swing of Haaland's mighty left boot. He unleashed a shot with such venom that it could have done serious harm to fans behind the goal – if the net hadn't stopped it first.

At the Signal Iduna Park a big goal isn't something you just see and hear, it's something you feel. A sound, a noise and an energy that pierces your skin and rattles your bones. This one shook the building to its foundations, shook the ground itself, and in disbelief Erling Haaland wheeled off to assume the lotus pose once again. Except this time his momentum is too great, and he falls over before his teammates have time to swamp him. And this time it is not a grin on his face, but rather the moonstruck look of a teenager who can barely process what just happened and what he just did.

'For the second goal, is it confidence, is it technique, what is it?' former Swindon striker-turned-TV reporter Jan Åge Fjørtoft asked Haaland in Norwegian after the game. '*Æg tenke bare å dryla te for å vær heilt ærlege, så drylte eg an i mål så det va fint det*,' Haaland replied, in his thick regional Norwegian dialect. It's an answer that presents a challenge to translators. *Dryla* is not a word in common usage in Norwegian, except informally in a handful of regional dialects – most typically in Norway's southwest, where Haaland grew up. It typically refers to hitting or kicking something with tremendous force, most usually a ball – though in extreme circumstances one might also *dryla te* a disagreeable person (however, this is not advisable, and one will likely have a problem with the authorities in the aftermath of such an act). The most accurate and phonetically pleasing English translation is probably 'to wallop' something or someone (though again, this is

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not advisable). So Haaland said, roughly translated: 'To be honest, I thought I'd just wallop it, and then I walloped it into the goal so that was good.' If Norwegians were not already sufficiently delighted with seeing their golden boy put the pampered Parisians to the sword, he gained further approval by staying true to his roots and his dialect. Erling Haaland is not someone who will change the way he speaks just because a TV reporter has pointed a microphone at him. If even some of his fellow Norwegians are unfamiliar with what it means to *dryla* something, well, that's their problem. They can watch the replay of the goal, for educational purposes.

Dortmund would go on to lose the return leg and get knocked out of the Champions League. But, at least for one glorious moment at the Signal Iduna Park, the Dortmund fans had seen the wealth of Qatar be undone by one glorious swing of a 19-year-old's left foot. It was a feeling to savour and a moment to remember. As for Haaland, the thumping strike against PSG had well and truly announced his arrival on the world stage. For anyone who had dismissed the hype so far, well, it was time to sit up and pay attention. The goal was also the fully distilled essence of Erling Haaland: the power, the skill, the confidence, and not least the ability to block out all the noise and simply put the ball in the net. And while this will have been lost on the rest of the world, the goal and his post-match interview also showed Norwegians what Erling is all about: even on the biggest stage, against the most famous opponents, he will play the game more or less the same way he played it growing up in Bryne. And if you stick a microphone in his face he will speak like a kid from Bryne. Because that, when all is said and done, is what he is. A giant, unstoppable, irrepressible kid from Bryne.

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GIFTS FROM THE ICE

When the last ice age came to an end some 10,000 years ago, the retreating glaciers revealed a strip of land on the southwest coast of Norway that looked nothing like its surrounding areas. Modern-day visitors who fly into Stavanger Airport from the south on a clear day can hardly fail to notice the abrupt shift in landscape as they approach the southern coastline. Just past the small fishing port of Sirevåg the jagged coastline gives way to a fine sandy beach at Brusand. Here, the craggy, rocky hills of southern Norway are replaced by a long, flat plain, reaching some 40 miles north, all the way to the more heavily urbanised areas around the city of Stavanger. This is Jæren, the largest lowland plain in Norway. It's a landscape that's totally different from both the country's icy north and the dramatic mountains and fjords of the west coast so beloved by tourism campaigns and cruise ship ads.

With incalculable force, the glaciers of the ice age had chiselled and smoothed the bedrock, and had left behind much bigger deposits of sediment than anywhere else in the country. In plain terms, Jæren is flat and has a thick layer of soil, making it just about the best place

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in the country to grow things. With its southern location, Jæren also enjoys a longer growing season than the rest of the country. But there is a catch, or rather, there were a few of them. First, large parts of the area were covered in peat bogs. With trees being relatively sparse, peat was an important fuel resource for many years. But turning bogs into farmable land takes a lot of effort. Second, with its coastal location facing straight into the North Sea, and with no mountains or hills for cover, Jæren lies fully exposed to all manner of weather. It may be milder than in other parts of Norway, but it is regularly swept by howling winds and near-horizontal rain. Third, and perhaps most significantly for the early farmers of Jæren, there are the rocks.

The glaciers may have kindly left an uncommonly thick layer of soil, but they also left rocks, an unholy amount ranging from pebbles to boulders, scattered all over the plain. Any farmer with a notion of working the land would first have to clear it of rocks, which, before the advent of modern machinery, was no small task. Perversely, come the following spring, the fields would somehow be full of rocks yet again. The soil is constantly pushing ever more rocks towards the surface. The landscape of Jæren is capricious: it gives the farmer sustenance and an income, potentially a very fair one, but it also gives rocks, endless rocks, subjecting the farmer to a never-ending test of grit and perseverance. Manually lifting rocks of all sizes out of the ground while cold, piercing winds from the North Sea blasts the landscape: well, it builds character.

Skilling-Magazin, the first Norwegian illustrated weekly magazine, visited Jæren in 1887 and concluded the following:

> The Jærbu [a person from Jæren] has labours in front of him which seem fairly hopeless. But the trials of stamina and hard graft he has withstood, the victories he has won, the

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> conquests he has achieved against the barren nature, give us faith that he is a man with a future. The Jærbu has a heavy task to accomplish, but he will manage it.

In the way that a landscape will always shape its peoples, it is clear that the inhabitants of Jæren came to value perseverance and hard work above all else. Local historian Svein Ivar Langhelle notes:

> The heroic figure of Jæren was and still is the skilled, able farmer. The one who further develops his land. He who through great toil and effort is able to build something, stone by stone, and in the end achieves more than his peers.

At the same time the farmers of Jæren were also keen to look to the future and possessed a strong entrepreneurial spirit. According to Langhelle,

> the farmers of Jæren were more effective than farmers elsewhere at familiarising themselves with new methods and equipment for farming, and … they were quick to adopt methods that proved beneficial.

After all, the arrival of modern machinery meant that the farmers got some help in clearing all those infernal rocks. The machines made a huge difference, changing life and changing the landscape itself: 200 years ago just 1–2 per cent of Jæren had been developed as farmland. Today, in some counties, that number is as high as 80 per cent.

The town of Bryne, which today is the municipal centre of Jæren and technically a city, was founded almost by coincidence. In the second half of the nineteenth century a railway line was being built

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between Stavanger, the dominant city in the region, and Egersund, an important fishing town some 50 miles to the south. It was decided to build one of the stations along the line at the southern end of a lake named Frøylandsvatnet, and when the line was finished in 1878 a village started growing around the station. It would continue to grow, as workshops and small factories serving the local agriculture started popping up. A wool-spinning mill and a dairy also arrived, as did a house of worship and a school. The aforementioned entrepreneurial streak of the locals would continue to drive development of the town: Trallfa, a factory that initially produced trolleys, wagons and wheelbarrows, would in the 1960s and 1970s produce some of the world's first industrial robots and eventually gain a significant global market share. In 1918 the Aarbakke family started a company that made horseshoes, and two generations later Aarbakke AS has had huge success producing equipment for the booming Norwegian oil industry. The outskirts of Bryne was also home to Brøyt, a company that in the 1960s was Scandinavia's leading producer of excavators. Bryne was officially declared a city in 2001, and today has some 12,000 inhabitants. This makes it only the 47th biggest settlement in Norway, but it is the commercial centre of the Jæren region.

Kjell Olav Stangeland, the former chairman of Bryne's football club, was the long-time editor of the local newspaper and has written comprehensive history books on both Bryne the town and the football club. He has no doubt that the local people have been shaped by the land:

> You have to start with the initial poverty and scarcity. People have had to work their way up from very little. For a farmer it was hard graft just to survive. What has been characteristic of the Jærbu has been to be careful of not spending more

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> than you have, and to work hard. You know that you have to work for your supper. And you should never get over-excited or get ahead of yourself. If things are going very well today, they could go badly tomorrow.

Having established that there are certain traits and qualities associated with being a Jærbu, it then becomes necessary to define terms. Geographically speaking, the lowland plain of Jæren stretches all the way north to the urban areas around Sandnes and Stavanger, but culturally people from these cities will most certainly not be considered to be from Jæren. Historically speaking, the people of Jæren would consider themselves to be hardy rural folk and would view the city dwellers from Sandnes and Stavanger with no small amount of suspicion. Traditionally, many would consider Skjævelandsbrunå, a bridge crossing the river Figgjo some 7 miles north of Bryne on the road towards Stavanger, as Jæren's true northern border. People from the northern side of this bridge should be considered city dwellers, with all the foul things this might entail. 'There is a saying here that if you want workers you need to get people from south of Skjævelandsbrunå, because they know how to work,' Stangeland explains.

> To this day you'll find people who will say this, and you'll find people who will insist that the best thing is getting people straight from the farms – because the farmers have learned that you have to get up early and work hard if you want to achieve anything.

Local band Silo & Salt take it one step further in a song titled 'Skjævelandsbrunå':

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This is the story of a small bridge,
When you get there you must turn around,
Beyond it only city people and snobs live.
They insist they live in Jæren,
But God and every man knows damned well,
That a Jærbu lives south of Skjævelandsbrunå
Skjævelandsbrunå,
It's a dividing line between right and wrong
I am strong in my faith, that I live on the right side of the bridge

Still, people lucky enough to be born possessing the good sense to settle on the correct side of this bridge will have to accept that it does come with a certain stigma as far as the rest of Norway is concerned. People from Jæren are known for both a kind of stoicism and for having an economical way with words. But some may see them as dour, possibly even a bit introverted. Arne Garborg – a Jæren-born author who was nominated for the Nobel prize in Literature six times – wrote in his 1892 novel *Peace* that people from Jæren are 'a heavy folk who dig their way through life with ponder and toil'. Still, locals might also argue that there is a difference between being an introvert and simply being understated. What reason is there really for using ten words if two or three, or even a meaningful pause, can suffice? 'Understatement is very typical of Jæren, both in our daily speech and in our sense of humour,' Stangeland says. 'You should certainly never exaggerate anything. I remember when the football club had Kent Karlsson, a Swede, here as a manager in the eighties. When Bryne won 4–0 people would say "oh, that wasn't too bad." "Not too bad? What on earth?!" he would exclaim. He wondered what it would take for us to actually get excited.' But football is something that does get the people of Bryne and Jæren excited. And over the years, it's football more than anything else that has put Bryne on the map.

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2

THE FARMERS

Football came to Norway in the 1880s, and the first ever Norwegian football club – Christiania Footballclub – was founded in Oslo in 1885. In Stavanger, Viking Fotballklubb was founded in 1899 and is the oldest club in this part of the country. When exactly Bryne's football club was founded is a matter of some conjecture. The official founding date is 10 April 1926, though few written records exist to confirm this. The oldest document in the club's archives is an application letter of October 1928 from Bryne Turn- og Idrettslag (Bryne Gymnastics and Sports Club) to join the regional FA. Bryne's membership was accepted, but the club had no stadium of any kind and had a hard enough time finding smooth ground to train on. Eventually a patch of land was rented adjacent to the local mill and the river that runs through town.

In the book *Ups and Downs through 90 Years: The Story of Bryne FK*, authors Reidar B. Thu and Kjell Olav Stangeland (both former chairmen of the club) provide a comprehensive and exhaustive history of the club, and outline how trying to have a football

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club in Bryne during these early days involved some rather unique challenges. The patch of land they had rented was at first not entirely suited for football or any other sporting activity. The ground had to be smoothed, heather and brush had to be uprooted, and – of course – rocks had to be pulled out of the ground. The pitch, such as it was, was positioned within a split in the river. This meant that errant shots had a fair chance of being claimed by the water. To make retrieval of the ball more manageable, and to avoid it being washed away downstream altogether, fishing nets were deployed. Thu and Stangeland also recount one rather spectacular incident involving a Swedish man who had settled in Bryne. This Swede had a passion for duck hunting, and one early evening, in the dusk, he mistook a rogue clearance for a feathery foe. He took aim and, in what must have been a fine display of marksmanship, shot the ball clean out of the sky. As footballs were not as easily replaced back then as they are now, one can only imagine that this outcome was the source of some frustration for the Bryne players. Towards the end of 1930, the club bought a plot of land next to the railway line, about half a mile south of the train station. This is where Bryne Stadium was gradually built up over the years, and where the team still plays.

During the interwar period Bryne wasn't much more than an average village team. Though one incident from 1935 showed what one might diplomatically describe as an increasingly competitive spirit among the locals. Regional newspaper *Stavanger Aftenblad* described an unsavoury incident that occurred during a match between Bryne and the team from the neighbouring town of Nærbø:

> Everything was set for an exciting match in Bryne yesterday. There were many spectators, and the hosts had also ensured nourishment for the soul by inviting a band of musicians.

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> Early on, there was danger at the opposite end of the field, and Bryne's centre seized the moment and scored the game's first goal. It was quite understandable that the patriotic natives would erupt in something akin to a war dance, but that the local musicians were unable to contain themselves was nothing short of a scandal. They readied their instruments, and with the full force of their lungs they performed an entire piece of music, or a march. During this time, the players were free to do as they wished, because no one could hear the referee's whistle. From this point, the motto of the game became to stamp on your opponent. It must be considered sheer luck that there was no need for an ambulance. The game that was played in Bryne yesterday did not further the cause of football.

Thu and Stangeland observe wryly that the byline of this article was simply the letter 'R', and that it was most likely written by one Ragnvald Skjærpe – who was in fact the chairman of the opposing team. Whether this was shameless skulduggery by the Bryne side or a very early case of media bias, we will never know.

During the Second World War, Norway was occupied by Nazi Germany, which put a halt to organised football. But something very important for Bryne's football scene did happen during these years: a pair of brothers, Lauritz B. Sirevaag and Odd Harald Sirevaag, moved to Bryne with their family from Stavanger. The two were gifted footballers, and in the post-war years they were a driving force as Bryne became Jæren's premier football team. Odd Harald 'Buster' Sirevaag was a particularly lethal attacker and, with 257 goals in 385 games for Bryne, he is to this day the second top goal scorer in the club's history. In 1962 Bryne memorably beat their local rivals

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from Stavanger, Viking, in the Norwegian Cup. It was the first time that Bryne had beaten Viking in a competitive match. There hadn't been too many opportunities to try, since Viking at the time had played in the national top division every season since it was established in 1937, while Bryne had yet to ascend to that kind of level. However, the club was promoted to the second tier in 1964, and eventually, after several near misses, it was promoted to the top tier of Norwegian football in 1974. Of the team that secured promotion, all but three starters were from Jæren.

'I think a big part of it is that we never accepted that Viking had to be any better than us,' Stangeland remembers. 'We had no business being in the elite based on our resources, but we didn't care.' For Bryne the rivalry with the big city of Stavanger and its flagship team Viking was always a driving force. Viking had been a significant power in Norwegian football throughout most of its history: after winning the national league – the Hovedserien – in 1958 and the Cup in 1953 and 1959, the club had had a golden age in the 1970s, winning four straight league titles between 1972 and 1975, before claiming a league and Cup double in 1979. Bryne may have been the unofficial capital of Jæren, but it was also at this point a very small town with a population of just a few thousand people. Aspiring to compete with one of the powerhouses of Norwegian club football was a bit of a stretch. 'Bryne is just the right distance from Stavanger,' argues Stangeland. 'You got a lot of ideas from the city, but we didn't have the problem of the smaller towns closer to Stavanger who would lose all their best players to the city. I think that mattered a lot.'

Bryne stayed in the top division from 1976 to 1987. And, incredibly, the club finished second in the league in both 1980 and 1982. With football already popular in the area, the club's success made it a real focal point of the community both in Bryne and in the

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surrounding towns. 'In the 1980s there were no more than 5–6,000 people living in Bryne,' Stangeland recalls. He was the club chairman from 1981 all the way through to 1987.

> And if we had fewer than 5,000 at a home game, that was considered poor attendance. Someone made the point at the time that if this had been in Oslo and you had a similar level of interest, you would have needed a stadium that could fit several hundred thousand.

Everyone cared about the team on some level, and for little Bryne to have a team in the top division was a source of great pride.

On the pitch it was Gabriel Høyland who led the way. He made his debut for Bryne in 1972 aged just 17, and in 1974 he became the first ever player from Bryne to play for the Norwegian national team. Throughout his career he had no shortage of offers from bigger clubs, both in Norway and abroad. He turned them all down, and went on to play an incredible 596 games for Bryne and got 23 caps for Norway before he retired in 1986. Today they simply call him 'Mr Bryne'. Høyland was a skilful, elegant forward who had both flair and an eye for goal – a kind of Norwegian Kevin Keegan, if Keegan had combined football with working on the family farm. He was also compared to Glenn Hoddle, and appropriately he managed to swap shirts with Hoddle after having been an unused substitute when Norway faced England at Wembley in 1980. 'They used to say his style was not dissimilar to mine,' Høyland told the *Telegraph* in May 2022.

Høyland is also, of all things, a passionate Burnley supporter. It's not uncommon for Norwegian football fans to split their loyalties between their local Norwegian team and an English club. Decades before the Premier League became a global sporting and media

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phenomenon, games from the old English First Division were regularly broadcast on Norwegian TV. This started in 1969, a time when there was only one TV channel available to Norwegians. With the games kicking off on Saturday at 4pm local time, they coincided perfectly with people either settling in for the weekend or preparing for lively Saturday nights out. Exact numbers do not exist, but it has been estimated that well over a million people regularly watched these games, which was close to a quarter of Norway's population at the time. It led to many Norwegians forming an emotional connection with an English football club, and this applied to aspiring footballers as much as anyone else. Kjetil Rekdal, for instance, has 83 caps for Norway, scored in both the 1994 and 1998 World Cups, and is a fanatical Leeds United supporter. In this context, Bryne club legend Høyland being a Burnley fan makes a bit more sense. At some point Høyland had developed a passion for the Clarets, and he maintained it throughout his own storied football career. 'In the seventies, I would bring a radio to training or games if Burnley were playing,' he told public broadcaster NRK back in 2003.

A star player's enthusiasm for Burnley wasn't the only British influence on Bryne during the club's glory years. From 1977 to 1979 the team was managed by Stavanger-native Kjell Schou-Andreassen, who had previously won the league with Viking and managed the Norwegian national team. To replace the highly regarded Schou-Andreassen, Bryne turned to Englishman Brian Green. Green had previously managed Rochdale and the Australian national team, and became a popular figure at Bryne. In their exhaustive history of the club, Thu and Stangeland describe how 'the jovial Brian Green became a familiar figure around town, a town which at the time had no more than 5,000 inhabitants. He spoke to everyone, and everyone spoke to him.' People would ask Green over for dinner and he would

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accept, whether he knew them well or not. 'In the shops he would charm staff with his attempts at speaking Norwegian, to the point where he would receive discounts or even be absolved of payment altogether.' On the sporting side of things, the team had been well coached by Schou-Andreassen, but the easy-going Green appeared to further unlock their potential. The training sessions were lighter, and the meetings were shorter. Green led the team to a sensational second place in the league in 1980 and 1982. He left the club after the 1982 season, and Bryne stayed in the top division until relegation in 1988. The golden era peaked in 1987, when Bryne won the Norwegian Cup. Thousands of Bryne fans descended on Oslo for the final, creating the eerie, giddy sensation that the whole town was there. Everywhere the visiting fans from Bryne went in downtown Oslo that weekend, they'd run into friends, neighbours and colleagues. The game itself went into extra time but was eventually decided in Bryne's favour by a goal from Kolbjørn Ekker. It remains the club's only major trophy.

Like most football clubs, and smaller clubs from smaller places in particular, Bryne have had periods of financial difficulty. Raising funds has been a constant battle, but it's also been an area where the club has historically exercised some ingenuity. 'The thing that above anything else financed the club up until 1970 was the dance hall,' Kjell Olav Stangeland says, chuckling. In the early 1960s, massive wooden decking was built close to the stadium by volunteers so that dance parties could be hosted at the club. To extend its use beyond the summer, four walls and a roof were added soon after. *Planen*, as the old hall was called, was used as both a dance hall and an indoor training venue.

> In the first half of [the 1960s], there was dancing at Planen on Saturdays and Sundays. And, if you can imagine, on

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