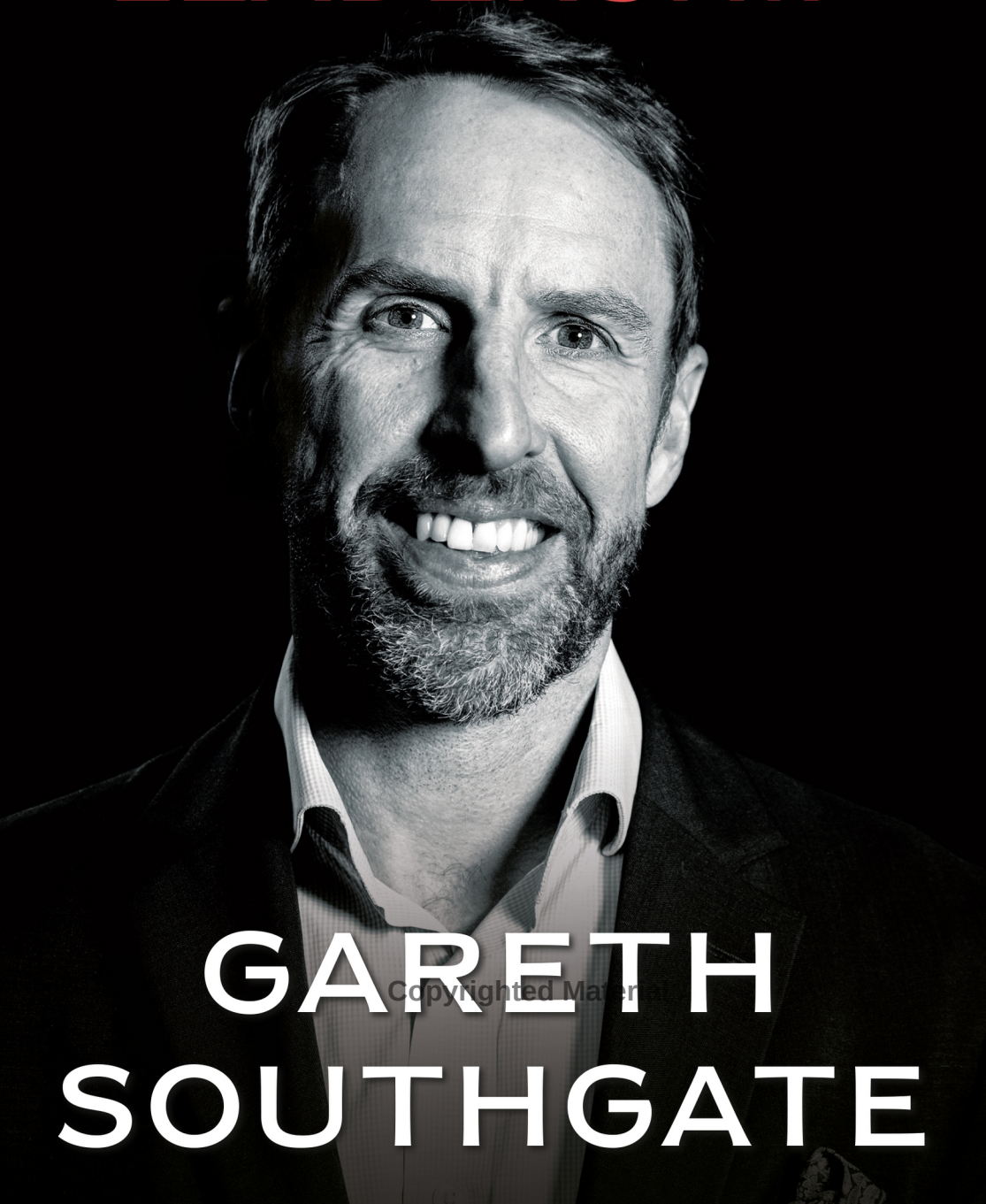
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DEAR ENGLAND

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP



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To Alison, Mia and Flynn.
You are the only ones who know fully where this journey has taken us all. Without your strength, love and unwavering support, it wouldn't have been worthwhile, or remotely possible. Thank you for understanding.

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Introduction

England v. Spain, Final, 2024 Uefa European Football Championship, Olympiastadion, Berlin, 14 July.

It was like a punch in the gut.

The eighty-sixth minute of the match, the ball flying low and hard into our penalty area, the outstretched boot . . . And then the net rippling and a horde of their subs and coaching staff exploding out of the dugout next to ours and chasing off in ecstasy down the touchline.

Two–one to Spain, and time almost up.

There by the pitch, I'm not sure I had ever known disappointment feel so visceral – so much like an actual physical blow. Was this really how it was going to end?

Only a quarter of an hour earlier, we had put ourselves right back into this game. We were 1–0 down and getting forced repeatedly backwards by formidable opponents, and I had already made the decision after sixty-one minutes to withdraw our captain, Harry Kane, and send on Ollie Watkins up front. I then changed things again and brought on the young Chelsea forward Cole Palmer in the seventieth minute.

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Cole had been menacing defenders all tournament as an impact sub and, in the previous game, he had made Ollie's winning goal. I felt sure the pair of them would make the difference here. It would mean playing our attacking midfielder Jude Bellingham a little further back, and it would risk making us less stable when Spain had the ball, which was often. But it would increase our goal threat. And we were going nowhere, obviously, without a goal.

And almost immediately the change paid off – after just 142 seconds, to be exact. Under pressure in Spain's penalty area, and with Ollie distracting defenders in the centre, Jude laid the ball back to Cole. From twenty yards out, the freshest player on the pitch calmly stroked it into the bottom corner. It was the fastest-ever goal by an England substitute. More importantly, we were level with Spain, and our fans, banked in the stadium's west stand, could start to believe again.

And why not? Weren't resurrections a bit of a theme for England in these Euros? We certainly had some recent history in this area. In each of our knockout matches in this tournament, we had come back to win from a goal down. Now we just needed to do it again; to fight the fatigue, find the belief and make one last comeback, here in the final.

Game on, then. For the next ten minutes, the match see-sawed. The speed of Spain's passing remained relentless, but we were now finding the composure we needed to mount counter-attacks and create moments of our own. And like the fans thunderously encouraging us, I genuinely felt that we could do this – score again, complete the turnaround, win the trophy and start a national party that had

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been waiting to kick off since 1966. Given the decision I had recently made in private about my own future, I was as desperate as anyone in that stadium that we should make it happen.

Then the eighty-sixth minute came, and that stomach punch – Marc Cucurella's raking pass, Mikel Oyarzabal's sliding lunge . . .

I've always been an optimistic person – have always tried to dig deep for positivity when things start going against me. I did so now, striding out to the touchline, urging my players to get up and go again, to keep pushing. I wanted them to remember that we had come back from the brink before – with even less time left on the clock, in fact. There were still whole minutes here in which to equalise. There would be another chance.

And there was. Right in the dying seconds we forced a corner. This was the moment, surely, the moment to send the game into extra-time and keep the dream alive.

I watched the ball float into the penalty area – saw Declan Rice rise above the jostling pack to meet it. What followed was a chaotic flurry, something which, from fifty yards away, looked closer to volleyball than football. I saw Declan's header get pushed back out with a flailing arm by the Spanish keeper. I saw Marc Guéhi jump at the rebound, saw the ball heading for the goal again, only to be blocked on the line. With each of these actions my own body involuntarily jerked. And then I saw the ball come out to Declan again, saw his reflex header loop up and over the bar and fly away.

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At that point, my assistant coach and I turned to each other as we had so many times before. Steve Holland and I had navigated our way through more than a hundred England games together. Our working relationship ran deep. He knew what I was thinking and feeling. We had worked every day for eight years towards this dream of a trophy. But we knew it was fading.

Seconds later, with the referee's final whistle, it was gone.

Football offers few moments as raw as the immediate aftermath of a final you've lost. And if you've lost it to a late goal, it's about as bad as football gets. Glory has been within touching distance, only to be snatched away. There's so much invested in these campaigns: all the hours of preparing and training, all the personal sacrifices made, all the hope built up over time, all of the focus on this one thing. And then it's over and all the air goes out of you, every last bit. Everyone in our team, players and staff, looked hollow. Meanwhile, Spain danced in front of their supporters and got ready to receive the trophy. At that moment, I wanted to be anywhere but on that pitch. We all felt the same.

Yet some kind of autopilot kicked in. I had to set my personal feelings aside. I was the manager. I had duties. I needed to congratulate our opponents, thank the officials, and console my players. Most importantly of all, and with the team joining me, I needed to cross the pitch to applaud our supporters, the thousands of them who had arrived so hopefully in Germany but were now as floored as we were.

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This may have been the rawest moment of them all. Looking up into the crowd, I could see faces painted red and white – was close enough to make eye contact with some of them individually, with children, women and men draped in the flag of St George; families and friends from different generations who had made the trip and were now united in disappointment. There was also some disgruntlement, no question.

But I genuinely shared their pain and their anguish at that point. Not only had I narrowly missed a genuine opportunity to transform our fortunes and bring home the trophy that had eluded our country for so long, I also knew I wouldn't get another. Later that evening, I was going to tell my bosses at the Football Association that I was stepping down as England manager.

Before then, though, my sole focus was on throwing my arms around my players and staff. Our bid to become champions was over, but my responsibility to the team went beyond chasing bits of silverware. Some were in tears. Others were just numb. I did my best to find the right words but sometimes there aren't any.

It would be some time before I could look back on that 2024 final with any objectivity – and even longer before I could put it in perspective with all the other moments and milestones in my eight years in charge of the England team. In other words, it would be a while before I could sit down and write this book. But now I can see that, right until the end, on that pitch in Berlin, and in the moments afterwards

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when we were finally able to retreat to the dressing room, I was learning lessons in leadership. And perhaps that's one of the fundamental facts about such lessons: that, while you're a leader, they never really stop.

I was learning those lessons in extraordinary circumstances all along, in high-pressure situations, often with the whole nation watching and with millions of people deeply, emotionally invested in the outcome. I was learning them in what I think most people will agree is, however you look at it, an extraordinary role. Actually, I think there might be no job quite like managing England.

That said, I've spoken to all kinds of leaders over the years, from all walks of life; have taken every chance to seek them out, in fact, in order to pick their brains and share experiences and find out what I could learn. And, no matter what their field was, or how different from mine, we've nearly always found some common ground.

As my career took shape – as a player and then afterwards in coaching and management – leadership was always the subject that really fascinated me. What kind of people become great leaders? What are the qualities required to become one? What life experiences, skills and lessons do they learn along the way?

In my professional life, I had the chance to observe and be led by leaders of many different sorts – the shouters and screamers, the quiet types, the inspirational figures . . . you name it. And I eventually had the opportunity to carve my own path through leadership's many and sometimes wildly

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unpredictable challenges, and work out my own way of being a leader. That's the journey I'm going to try to describe in this book.

—

My field has always been football of course, and a critical part of preparing a football team is the tactical detail. An inordinate amount of my time as England manager was spent with my staff, studying and working through the best way to maximise our strengths and hide our weaknesses on the pitch. Systems, formations and patterns of play are constantly evolving and, in working at the highest level of the game, we needed to be across every innovation. That is the 'technical detail' of the business of football, a unique operating and information index, which every business will have in relation to their own sector or industry.

These technical and tactical components, of course, don't easily translate to other fields of play. So, for the purposes of this book, we are focusing on my leadership and management experiences – which, I believe, will resonate way beyond the football pitch. The way I see it, many of us find ourselves called upon to be leaders at some point in our lives. It might be in business. It might be in a charity. It could be in a school or in a community group. Or we find ourselves having to take on leadership roles in our families. There are so many situations where what's suddenly called for is some leadership.

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So my hope is, whatever meaning leadership has for you, or whatever form it comes to take in your life, the stories I tell in these pages about my own learnings as a leader will also occasionally chime with your own experiences, and maybe even in some cases offer you some guidance.

That match against Spain in Euro 24 was the last time you saw me on the touchline as England manager. It ended in defeat, and that night the pain of losing was all I could think about. But there was a whole journey leading up to that moment whose lessons would endure – a journey that I came to realise was transformative in ways the simple, brutal fact of that final scoreline could not destroy.

Or, to put it another way, that final was the end of the story. But it was by no means the whole story. Let me tell you the whole story.

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CHAPTER 1

Finding My True North

On building resilience and defining values

Positive influences

On the eve of the 2020 Euros, I composed an open letter to fans. It began 'Dear England . . .' and it set out some ideas I had about national identity and unity and what it means in the twenty-first century to come together proudly as a country, and how football can help us do that. I wrote it from the heart, not just as a football manager but as a proud Englishman, and also as someone who really wanted to make a difference and who believed that, through football, he could do so. It came from my deeply held values: integrity, courage, empathy, resilience and accountability. But to tell you where those values came from, I need to take you right back to my childhood.

Like every child, there were men and women in my life who influenced me greatly. None of them were famous or 'influencers' in the modern meaning of the term but, fortunately for me, they were people whose example has meant a

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lot and shaped the way I try to go about things. They were, in effect, leaders in my life and I still feel their presence today.

There was my grandfather, my mum's dad. Football was at the centre of my world from the start, and it was my grandfather who took me to the park to practise. He was a veteran of the Second World War and he carried himself with quiet dignity: kind-hearted, morally anchored, always immaculately dressed – a shirt and tie every day. When I stayed over, I would watch him wet-shave every morning and polish his shoes. Like so many men of his generation, he had his standards of decency and he kept to them, raising his hat to say good morning to people as he passed them. Sometimes he'd buy me sweets on the way home, but I wouldn't be allowed to eat them in the street. He believed in the idea that the way you do the small things reflects who you are. And even though I'd be absolutely desperate to tuck into those sweets, I came to admire him enormously for that attitude. I was lucky to have my grandfather in my life.

Then there was my mum, a dinner lady who also worked in the classroom, helping children to read, and who swallowed her disappointment when I announced that I wouldn't be taking A levels after all, but would be quitting school for a highly uncertain life in football instead. Not that my mum didn't value sport. She had been a hurdler in her youth, and she was still good at overcoming obstacles in her later life. She was quietly competitive, not least when it came to family board games. And in crazy golf on holiday, there were no gimmies. 'No dinner if you don't win tonight,' she would say when I had a game after school. And I think some kids

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thought she was serious. I know she wasn't. Well, she may have been semi-serious I guess.

Then there was my dad, who had a steady job with IBM and coached at a local athletics club in his spare time. In fact, that's how my mum and dad met, through athletics, both representing Hertfordshire at the English Schools trials. So competitive sport was always in the family. My dad was a humble man – he stood quietly at the side of the pitch, never criticised the ref, encouraged me but never grilled me on the way home if I'd played badly. He responded to wins and losses in the same way: with dignity. I tried to follow him in that.

From my dad I also learned how generosity of spirit could promote loyalty and trust, and how it could help to fuel morale. I remember visiting him at his workplace one day after football training. Watching him mill around the office, I was struck by how popular he seemed to be with his colleagues. He was just a decent guy who got along with everyone around him. It made a big impression on me, and from that day forward informed how I set out to relate to the people I met.

In everything I did, my parents expected that I would try, and they had high hopes for me. That said, they were supportive and never pushy. And looking back, my parents provided the love and stability that my sister and I needed to make a solid start, and they made it possible for me to speak very casually later in life about having had 'an ordinary childhood'. It's not until you have children of your own that you understand exactly how much work and sacrifice goes into producing a childhood that's 'ordinary'. I so appreciate what they did for me.

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Then there was Alan Smith, my coach at Crystal Palace when I was an apprentice player there, aged sixteen. I was struggling, and he knew it. Like all the apprentices, I was on a small wage, but, at least in theory, I was living the dream: getting paid to play football! In reality, I was hating it. In a group of mostly outgoing and confident kids, I stood out as the quiet one and found it really hard to fit in. Plus, there was the job itself, which included such glamorous activities as cleaning the first-team squad's boots, not to mention a large amount of toilet-scrubbing and floor-mopping.

And then there was the two-train commute every day from Crawley in West Sussex, which saw me setting out early and getting home late every day. All in all, it was quite a lot for a kid who was fresh out of school to adapt to. Alan, as the man in charge of overseeing my progress, recognised something in me but felt I needed to show my harder edge, if indeed I had one, in order to make it as a professional footballer. He took a dim view, for example, of the fact that whenever we lost a game I made a point of congratulating the opposition and shaking their hands. Not that I wasn't gutted; I was. But I buried that disappointment publicly and dealt with it later in the privacy of the dressing room, where, in those days, and throughout my time at Crystal Palace, the team's disgruntlement would often spill over into arguments, stand-offs and even punch-ups.

However, that public show of respect would drive Alan mad and, after one moment of despair, he took me aside and said, 'Gareth, you're a lovely bloke, but if I were you, I'd think about becoming a travel agent.'

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Now, I love a holiday, the same as anyone, but at that point my dream was football and I had no ambition to go into the flight-booking business, so Alan's reassessment of my future course rather threw me off. I left his office feeling well and truly sorry for myself.

Today, though, I look back and consider Alan's remark a turning point, something I'll always be grateful to him for. What he was doing was challenging me, trying to shake me awake to something very important for my development: that I was going to need to exhibit some steel. It didn't mean that I had to reinvent myself overnight as the kind of player who stormed off the pitch like a spoilt child every time we lost. I could still be myself and still shake hands, win or lose (something I would continue to do for the rest of my career, and something I believe demonstrates both courtesy and the ability to keep your emotions in check). But I needed to be tougher and not come over quite so readily as a soft touch. Point taken.

My grandfather, my parents, Alan Smith: they were all crucial influences in their own different ways on my development as a person, and, by extension, as the kind of player and coach that I turned into. And consequently, at some level, these people will always be part of what I mean when I talk about leadership.

Making a leader

Are leaders born or made? That's an enduring question. Are effective leaders the product of nature or nurture? Or are they

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the result of both of those things in some combination? The view I've come to is that there are particular personal qualities that are essential for leadership. Traits that are built over time, but timeless. Values that are easy to talk about but hard to live by. For me, as I've mentioned, integrity, courage, empathy, resilience and accountability are values I try to embrace and stand by. They are how I try to live my life. And they are the foundations of how I try to lead.

They are by no means the only values to have to be an effective leader. There are many others that work. But whatever values you accrue, or aspire to, they will likely be forged over time, by the challenges you face. And they will not necessarily be dependent on your personality type, be it extrovert or introvert (for the record, it may or may not surprise you to learn that I place myself in the latter category).

Right from the beginning, from my earliest days playing organised football, I found I was being asked to take charge on the pitch. This was at primary school and in the team I turned out for at my Cub Scout troop. (Yes, I went to Cubs, and I don't mind saying I was a very proud wearer of the woggle.) In other words, before I even really knew what a captain was or did, coaches started picking me to be captain.

I can think of two reasons for this, and they're slightly contradictory. First, it was clear to anyone that I was boundlessly enthusiastic about the game – a football-mad, sticker-collecting kid who punted a ball around the park, the garden, the playground and anywhere else he got the chance to. And passion was obviously important in a coach's eyes.

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But, diametrically opposed to that, I was also considered to be quite sensible, and that was probably a slightly rarer commodity at that age. And when it came to captaincy, level-headedness, rather than passion, was probably the quality that clinched it for me with the coaches.

So suddenly I was a kid who was learning captaincy on the job and finding out how it worked. I noticed how the coaches would communicate with me, as captain, in a slightly different way to how they communicated with other players. I understood to some degree that I was the coach's representative out on the pitch. I mean, this was Cub football, so obviously there was no mind-blowingly complex, data-driven game-plan going on. But essentially it was down to me to lift the team if our heads dropped and it was down to me to thank the referee at the end of the game. It wasn't the biggest job in the world, then. Yet it gave me some responsibility for others, not just myself. It made me see that being captain went beyond how I performed as a player and became a matter of what I represented. And it showed me quite quickly that I could influence and galvanise people if I was given the chance. For someone who was naturally quite introverted, and certainly not a big noise-maker by comparison with the other kids, that was a major revelation.

Decency and respect

To some of my teammates, I was the posh boy, and surely too middle-class for football. And given first impressions count,

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I can forgive them for thinking that, as I was the kid who, on his first day of duty as a Crystal Palace apprentice, turned up in his school shirt and trousers to find everyone else in casual-wear. (Look, I thought we'd be expected to come smart and those were the smartest clothes I had. Where was the memo?)

I suppose 'nice' was the label people put on me in those days, the inference being I was 'too nice to make it'. That just made me dig deeper to prove them wrong – a harder tackle, standing up to bravado, practising for hours on end. And if doing that while showing decency, manners and respect, on and off the pitch, is still 'too nice', then I'm guilty as charged. But given I went on to represent England more times as a player and manager combined than anyone else in the history of English football, I guess I wasn't too nice to make it. In fact, as I have developed as a leader, the inference in football, and sometimes in life, that in order to have a winning mentality you have to be nasty, aggressive or divisive is exactly the opposite of how I see it – and exactly the opposite of how I was raised to see it.

For me, there were no contradictions between being determined to win, prepared to challenge people and fully capable of making tough decisions while also showing decency and respect for others. On the contrary those values – the values which had been instilled in me all my life – would shape my leadership style and end up giving it strength. They were the place of authenticity from which I would lead. And let's face it, if you asked most of the players I have dropped from my squads or teams over the years, I doubt they would describe me as nice. Probably quite the opposite.

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Building resilience

However nice I was, or wasn't, that had no bearing on the lessons in resilience I, and every player I knew, learned in order to make it as a professional. My journey began at the age of twelve when I was given the opportunity to join Southampton's youth programme, training with them once a week at their Centre of Excellence in Crawley.

I loved it. I was a late developer, and inevitably found myself pitted against bigger, stronger boys in that setting. But it forced me to raise my game and I improved as a player massively. It was the best fun, and I thought I was already on my way to achieving my childhood dream of becoming a professional footballer.

And then after three years, when I was fifteen, they let me go.

'Dear Gareth Southgate,' said the letter. The 'dear' was typed. My name was handwritten. This perhaps gives you a sense of the personal nature of this communication. It went on: 'On behalf of Southampton Football Club, I am writing to inform you that we will not be offering your son a place on our Centre of Excellence.'

My *son*?

It was gutting – and not just because of the tactless nature of the dismissal, though that didn't help. The fact is, I could have been flattened altogether by that rejection and given up on the ambition. It certainly tested my faith in myself at that tender age. But I was determined. I kept plugging away,

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kept striving to be a better player. Eventually, I was invited to train with Crystal Palace Under-18s. I was only fifteen, but quite used to playing with an older cohort, so it was another brilliant opportunity to stretch myself. One year later, I was offered my apprenticeship.

On my first day at Crystal Palace, I was lapped in a twelve-minute run at the end of training and had to perform an extra lap as a 'reward'. Still skinny for my age, I quickly realised that I would need to get physically stronger – but also that it was mostly my mind that had previously limited me in tests of endurance. Slowly, through painful practice, I realised that I could run a yard further, and then 200 metres further, and then a mile, and soon I would be up and down another two hill runs. This exertion helped me to build stores of mental fortitude that I believe I've drawn on ever since. Maybe my team-mates and I should have used the ball more in training in those days, but I believe the physical and mental strength we were building was a huge factor in my staying fit throughout a career that would eventually span 700 matches. This exertion also stood me in good stead for the many trials I would later experience in my career.

That mental fortitude was essential to make it through the youth system and into the professional game. There were eight other apprentices alongside me at Crystal Palace and only two, maybe three, would be offered a contract. So I realised I needed to work harder, and be better, than my team-mates to make it. The moments that could build resilience were constant and relentless. Every day you were competing, not just with your opponents, but with your own team-mates.

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If there was a place up for grabs, it had to be yours. That was the pact in football and it was cut-throat. Looking back, I realise it's incredibly hard to make it as a professional player.

Determination was the trait that got me through those years. I had a constant desire to improve and a strong work ethic, allied to self-reliance. If I fell short, I believed it was on me to recognise the reasons why and fix them. It was a matter of mindset as much as anything. When there were setbacks I would try to rise against them and learn from them, rather than be sunk by them. I honed the ability to bounce back and that resilience stood me in good stead. For it was only after five years of travelling up and down the country playing for Crystal Palace's reserves that I finally broke into the first team. By the time I did so, most of my mates that I had joined up with had fallen by the wayside. But I kept at it, and I hung in there, and I came through.

If resilience and belief were the keys to me making it as a player, they were not traits that appeared overnight. This is something I always try to explain to young people, especially those who meet with rejection in some form for the first time and are immediately driven to despair. I understand that the strength to continue in the face of adversity is built, step by step, experience by experience, through grit and determination, over time. This is the consequence of meeting rejection, getting beyond it and keeping going, until you have deep reserves of those qualities that you can easily reach for when you need them. And then you are a stronger person.

These cumulative encounters rapidly built up as I turned professional. Twice a week I played matches. I won, I drew,

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I lost. I pushed myself physically and mentally to the limit. If there were five minutes to go in a game, 1–0 up away from home, and the ball was flying into our penalty area, I was fighting to defend our lead with every scrap of my energy. My defeats or individual errors soon became public. They were highlighted on television. I was taunted by opposition fans. Sometimes I would crawl into bed bruised and battered after a game, mentally exhausted. Like my fellow professionals, I had to find the strength to go again the following morning.

As the stakes got higher, I continued to be (to use the interesting phrase) 'captaincy material'. At Crystal Palace I was made captain at the young age of twenty-three. The manager who gave me the job? Alan Smith. Clearly, for Alan, I had finally lost the 'travel agent' tag. It was no secret that some of the older players in the squad at that time felt the role should have been theirs, quite reasonably, and that was potentially an awkward hurdle for me to negotiate. I could only apply myself to the task and work on it until those older players accepted my authority. That year we won the First Division title – the Championship, as it is now. Later I would move on to Aston Villa and then to Middlesbrough, and I would captain both those sides too. I had become someone who could be relied upon to lead.

My worst moment

My England debut was against Portugal on 13 December 1995. It was one of the proudest days of my life, and it would begin a period of representing my country that lasted for the

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best part of a decade. But that rarefied air I was now breathing as an England player also brought with it the noxious fumes of pressure and attention. Most acutely, I would have to draw heavily on my supplies of resilience and belief following my penalty miss in the semi-finals of Euro 96. Without question, that was a watershed moment for me. Four years earlier, a still-uncapped 21-year-old who had just completed his first full season with Palace, I had been on holiday with mates in Portugal, watching Euro 92 (which was in Sweden that year) in bars – and watching England fail to win a game. Nevertheless, I'd found myself turning to one of my friends and saying, 'Wouldn't it be great to be involved in that next time?'

I wasn't wrong. The first major football tournament hosted in our country since the World Cup in 1966 took place in conditions of high national fervour, and an exciting and richly talented England team rode the wave. Terry Venables had accelerated me into the side and there I was, less than a year after my international debut, a starter in defence. Everybody in the country seemed to be watching and sharing the mounting hope and excitement. Bobby Charlton described my performance as 'world class'. Truly heady times.

And then Germany at Wembley. Ninety thousand people in the ground and millions watching at home. Ten penalties, all perfect, and I make the long walk from the centre circle as the first taker outside the designated five, my head already repeating the worst question I could have been asking myself at that point: 'What if I miss?' My unconvincing penalty is saved, Andreas Möller scores the winner, and in that handful of minutes my life is turned completely upside down.

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A countrywide party had come to an anguished halt because of me. I was centre-stage. I'd never been centre-stage before in my career, and now I was – for ending a nation's dream. Back in the dressing room, I felt broken, overcome by the sense of having let down not just myself and the team, but everyone in the land. I was comforted by Terry Venables and by the captain, Tony Adams, who did their absolute best for me. But I was inconsolable at that point. I felt like I had just done something that was going to overshadow everything I did forever afterwards, something truly irreversible from which there would never be any escape. It was suffocating, and it was a feeling that would stay with me for a very long time. Arriving home the following day, the press already camped on my front lawn, I admit the thought came to me, 'How am I ever going to recover from this?'

Eventually, though, I was able to begin to turn it around. The recovery began with invaluable advice from my friend and team-mate Stuart Pearce. Stuart had missed a critical penalty in a shoot-out during the 1990 World Cup in Italy. Not only had he survived, he had remained an important member of the England squad, so that was encouraging in itself. Less encouragingly, he was able to warn me about the sleepless nights I would face, the kind of newspaper headlines I would read and the abuse that would be hurled at me in the streets for years to come. And all of those things he was absolutely right about. But he was also able to suggest a way for me to begin processing the incident.

Stuart pointed out that, in football, nothing would likely ever be as painful for me again as that Wembley experience.

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In other words, just about the worst thing that could possibly happen to me on a football pitch, short of dire injury (and possibly even including that), had happened, and was over. As Stuart had found out for himself – and as I would duly discover – accepting that reality was a motivating force going forward. I was now able to see that I still had a choice at that point. I could choose to be permanently floored by that moment. Or I could get back up and keep going. The way in which that moment defined me was still within my power to control. I could, by my own actions, turn it to my advantage and use it to make me even stronger. Even though away fans would ridicule me for years, even though people would shout out of vans as I walked down the street, and even though I would be introduced as 'the guy that missed the penalty' for about two decades, I would build fortitude.

I would learn that setbacks and failures are the inevitable consequence of striving to perform at the highest level. That doesn't mean they don't hurt – that they aren't even traumatic sometimes. But with the right, positive mindset and the will to learn, they have the potential to deepen our reserves, increase our resilience, and inform and shape the personal style with which we then lead.

Listening and learning

When I became a manager, I had already seen the many forms that effective leadership from the side of the pitch could take.

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In fact, you could say I'd had a fast-track education in that subject.

For example, there was Steve Coppell, my first manager at Crystal Palace. Steve was young and forward-thinking – a university graduate, which made him pretty much unique in football management at the time. He was way ahead of the game in seeing how data could help him make informed decisions. Yet perhaps his biggest strength was how attuned he was to the players and their different personalities, and how well he accommodated that variety in the group. He allowed the creative types a little more leeway, providing encouragement in different quantities and at different volumes according to which player needed it, and was firm when it mattered. He was particularly good at giving a chance to players who had a point to prove. In that team, we were all either from the youth system, or from the lower leagues. Most of us had been rejected somewhere along the line. In some ways, we were a team of highly motivated misfits. We trained unbelievably hard to compensate for the feeling that we were catching up, which meant that we became an athletic, powerful team to play against. Steve was clear about this identity for our team. He recognised a great leadership truth, that getting the best out of people was first and foremost about understanding their characters. When I thought back on my time under Steve, I realised that he had shown me a lot about the value of emotional intelligence and reading the room.

Then there were the four England managers I played under. There was Terry Venables, for whom I had enormous respect – and not just because he was the manager who first

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