PROFILE

Journalist Harry is in the black after writing 100th book

PIERS Morgan described him as "the best football scoop-breaker in Fleet Street history". It is an accolade bestowed on Harry Harris, which goes to the heart of a career spent getting inside football's biggest stories, cultivating relationships with the game's most powerful figures and breaking news that others could only dream of.

For 18 years, Harry was chief football writer at the *Daily Mirror*, before spending a further eight years at the *Daily Express*. Among his scoops was the news that Roy Keane had left the Republic of Ireland's 2002 World Cup squad, discovered that Newcastle United had appointed Ruud Gullit before Kenny Dalglish even knew he had been sacked and investigated the murky world of football's so-called bungs.

He also reported on Paul Merson's struggles with cocaine and alcohol, and followed Wayne Rooney's sensational transfer from Everton to Manchester United from inside the negotiations.

But those were not stories he stumbled across — they were the product of a contacts book that became so extraordinary that it gave his 100th book its title.

In *The Black Book — Secrets From the Heart of Football* (Legacy 11, £25), Harry opens his contacts book to readers, taking them behind the headlines and into a football world that has largely disappeared.

Sir Alex Ferguson, David Beckham, George Best, Diego Maradona, Roman Abramovich, Ken Bates and Robert Maxwell are also among the famous names associated with the stories he has covered.

BY SIMON YAFFE

But the secret of his success was never simply about having the right telephone numbers.

"You have to have honesty, integrity and be transparent," Harry, who covered five World Cups, told me from his London home. "You have to have those three ingredients.

"There was no way you could say something like 'this is off the record and I won't quote you if you just tell me the answer to my question', but then publish something.

> ***'You have to have honesty, integrity and be transparent'***

"If I didn't abide by what they said, they were never going to deal with me again."

And he believes that failure to respect those unwritten rules has cost journalists their relationships with the people they cover.

"I think a lot of journalists, not just then, but generally journalists in all kinds of fields, drop by the wayside because they don't adhere to those three principles that I always had."

Few stories better illustrate the value of Harry's contacts than the extraordinary drama surrounding Keane before the 2002 World Cup.

The-then Manchester United captain was Ireland's most influential player, but a confrontation with manager Mick McCarthy during the team's preparations in Saipan ended with Keane leaving the squad.

Harris broke the news that Keane had walked out, producing one of the defining exclusives of his career.

The story earned him the Sports Journalists' Association's Scoop of the Year award — one of 26 gongs he won during his career.

In his own account of the contacts that made the story possible, Harry has explained that he learned of Keane's departure because someone inside his network was prepared to tell him what had happened.

It was the kind of story that could not be secured simply by turning up at a press conference.

In the era before social media and instant online updates, an exclusive depended on finding the person who knew the truth, persuading them to share it and getting the information into print before rivals could catch up.



STARDUST: Harry, left, with Argentinian icon Diego Maradona and wife Claudia, as well as Spurs and Argentina midfielder Ossie Ardiles

And it was the world in which Harry excelled.

In a profession often associated with rivalry, competition and the pursuit of the exclusive, Harry believes that trust was an asset to be earned and protected.

But, before the scoops, the famous names and the international tournaments, there was a boy growing up in London's East End, where football meant turning up to a field and kicking a ball around with whoever happened to be there.

Harry recalled a Jewish community different from the one that exists today.

He said: "I haven't been back all that frequently, but when I do pass through, it's just impossible to relate it to the same place.

"It is hard for someone young to really appreciate the kind of atmosphere there was then, because it was still a very rough and ready, and hard and challenging, place to live in.

"There was a patch of green around Valence Road, down the Commercial Road, where we used to turn up and just play football.

"It could be about 50-a-side at times because all the kids would turn up there and kick a ball around — it was the original jumpers for goalposts-type thing."

One of those childhood memories has an unexpected connection to the East End's notorious criminal history.

> ***'I had to ask Mrs Kray for my ball back'***

"I remember once that I miskicked the ball and it landed in the front garden of the Krays' house and I had to knock on the door and ask Mrs Kray for my ball back," Harry said.

Harry also played football with Barry Silkman, who went on to become a professional with clubs including Crystal Palace and Manchester City.

LEGACY DIRECTORY





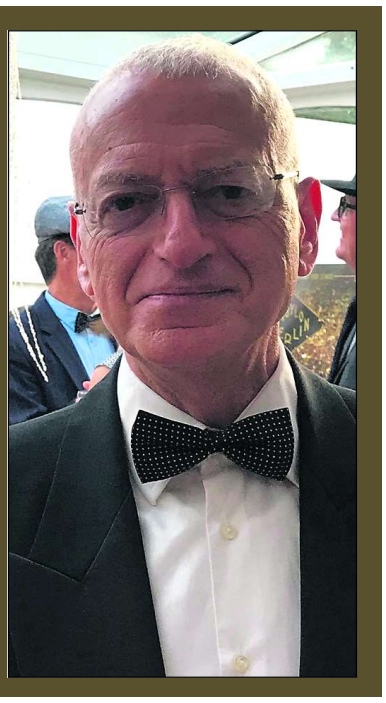








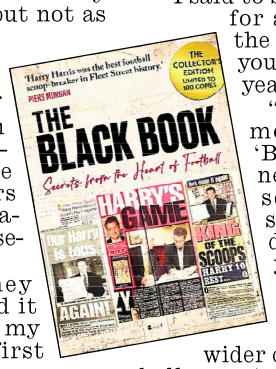
Harry Harris



Harry had ambitions of trying his luck in non-league football, where he would have faced grown men rather than the children with whom he had grown up.

Football would ultimately become his livelihood, but not as a player.

A lifelong Tottenham Hotspur supporter, Harry became aware of the *Weekly Herald*, which ran a competition during the football close season, inviting readers to submit their observations about Spurs or Arsenal.



Harry recalled: "They published my letter, and it was the thrill of seeing my name in print for the first time.

"It then struck me that this would be something I'd like to pursue."

He began visiting the newspaper's office in Loughton High Road, taking photographs at school speech days and sports days, and writing short articles to accompany them.

Harry recalled: "It happened so often that I turned up and said 'any chance of a job here' because one of their leading local journalists had got a job elsewhere, so they were one short and in I went."

In those days, journalism meant learning on the job while studying through block release.

Harry attended Harlow College, but the newspaper group folded while he was still training.

His career nevertheless continued. He spent a year and a half with the *Newcastle Journal*, before returning to London and joining the *London Evening News*.

When that paper folded, he moved through freelance work and eventually secured a position at the *Daily Mail*, where he spent four years.

Each move brought a new experience, but it was football that would give him his greatest opportunities.

As a young journalist covering Tottenham, Harry found himself with an extraordinary opportunity: a direct line to one of the club's most respected figures in manager Bill Nicholson.

His predecessor, David Leggett, introduced him to Nicholson as the new reporter taking over the Spurs beat.

Harry explained: "I shook Bill Nicholson's hand, which was quite a privilege, and Bill said to me, 'what would you like from me?'.

"I said to see you every Monday for a weekly update for the paper — he said I saw your predessessor once a year!

"He thought for a moment, then added, 'But come and see me next Monday and lets see how we go' . . . I saw him every Monday for the next seven years!"

For Harry, those regular conversations were part of a wider culture in which football reporters were close enough to the people they covered to understand what was happening beyond the official statements.

The relationships extended beyond the training ground.

And if a player was willing to talk, there was nothing unusual about calling him at home.

"You could ring them, as I did, at home, they knew who you were and they would give you an interview if they were in the mind to do so," Harry added.

It was a different era, one in which personal relationships could be as important as access to official press conferences.

Harry's investigations into football's so-called bung culture took him into some of the most contentious territory in the sport.

The word "bung" became synonymous with allegations of secret payments connected to transfers — and the issue raised serious questions about the conduct of managers, agents and the people negotiating deals.

Harry pursued investigations into the world of football payments, including stories involving Terry Venables and then-Chelsea owner Ken Bates.

His reporting on Venables became particularly difficult when the manager pursued legal action against then-Tottenham owner Alan Sugar.

Among the relationships he built was with Venables, the charismatic manager whose career took him from Tottenham to Barcelona — where the British press labelled him "El Tel" — and ultimately into the England job.

Harry saw Venables on numerous occasions, particularly during his time in Spain, and liked him enormously.

But journalism sometimes demands that personal relationships take second place to the story.

When Venables launched legal proceedings against then-Tottenham owner Alan Sugar, Harry secured the first interview with Sugar, visiting him at home.

> ***'It was hard to have a relationship with Venables after that'***

It was there that Sugar delivered the memorable line: "You'd think I'd shot Bambi."

Harry reported the story in the *Daily Mirror*, with the sub-editors coming up with the hard-hitting headline "El Till".

"It was hard to have a relationship with Terry after that, even though I met him on a few occasions and tried to explain to him that it was nothing personal," Harry recalled.

The fallout was difficult, but he did not stop respecting Venables.

Indeed, when Graham Kelly, then-then chief executive of the Football Association, asked Harry whom he thought should become England manager, the journalist recommended Venables.

Harry's world also meant spending extraordinary amounts of time on the road.

During his years at the *Mirror*, the number of matches and competitions continued to grow, with international tournaments keeping him away from home for months at a time.

By the end, he estimates that he was covering around 150 matches a year, alongside European Championships, World Cups and an increasing number of other tournaments.

He was spending two or three months away from home at a time, and the demands eventually forced him to reconsider his priorities.

But he had reached a point in his career where he had won numerous awards — 26 in total — for investigative journalism and breaking major stories.



DUTCH DELIGHT: Harry with Holland legend Ruud Gullit



FRIENDS: Harry with Manchester United and England legend Bryan Robson

He wanted to concentrate on that work rather than continue travelling to report on matches.

Harry suggested writing a column, to which *Mirror* execs agreed.

But the reality was rather different as, even after the suggestion that he should concentrate on his column, the first assignment offered was a trip to cover the UEFA Super Cup in Monaco.

"I thought, 'well, I don't mind going to Monte Carlo', so off I went and I came back saying this is not going to work," Harry remembered.

It was a turning point in his thinking about what he wanted from journalism and from life beyond it.

The 74-year-old has watched the football press transform from a relatively small group of reporters, many of whom knew their subjects personally, into a global industry.

The modern game offers more opportunities for football coverage across television, digital platforms and social media.

But he is concerned about what has been lost in newspapers.

"There is a vastly different media out there and more opportunities for football reporters — but not in newspapers," observed Harry, who is married to Linda.

"The *Mirror* only has one senior football reporter and I am amazed newspapers have survived as long as they have."

Harry has written 100 books, an extraordinary achievement for a journalist whose working life has also included international reporting, investigative work and broadcasting. Yet the number still means something to him.

"It still gives me a thrill, which is a good thing because the financial rewards are no longer what they once were," Harry laughed.

Retirement, he believes, can leave people without a sense of purpose if they abandon everything that has occupied their lives.

And he has no interest in stepping away and filling his days with golf. Instead, he continues to pick and choose the projects which interest him, including his broadcasting work as a regular pundit on GB News.

He also served as sports development director at SmartFrame Technologies, which developed technology for photography.

Over four years, he helped sign up clubs including Manchester City, Brentford and Everton.

The company went into liquidation last month, but the experience provided another avenue into a football world which Harry has spent a lifetime exploring from different angles.

Harry had two children from his first marriage — Jordanna and Simon, although Simon passed away at a young age. He has a daughter, Poppy, from his second marriage.

There is another dimension to the grandfather-of-three's story which reaches back to his childhood in the East End and the Jewish community which helped sustain his family during difficult times.

His father, Jack, was a leading furrier, but Harry was only five when he died.

His memories of his father's working life are coloured by the contrast between the business's apparent prosperity and the family's circumstances after his death.

> ***'Judaism means a great deal . . . and not a great deal'***

Harry said: "Dad paid staff on a Thursday and probably earned an absolute fortune, but he'd take all the profits and disappear until Tuesday morning, as he had been in a darkened room playing poker."

But when Jack died, the family was left with nothing, and they had to rely heavily on support from the local Jewish community.

His mother, Sylvia, worked as a machinist and Harry had to find his own way forward.

His feelings about Jewish identity have become more complicated with time, too.

Harry explained: "Judaism means a great deal . . . and not a great deal. My heritage and what I am, but it has become so clouded to know what it all means.

"If you want to distance yourself from extreme Zionism and atrocities on both sides, I feel it is hard to equate that to what is being Jewish and to appreciate it all."

The *Jewish Telegraph* is giving away a signed copy of Harry's *The Black Book*. Just tell us which club Harry supports. Send your entries to competitions@Jewishtelegraph.com by October 30.