the press conference with STAN COLLYMORE

by Rob McGibbon

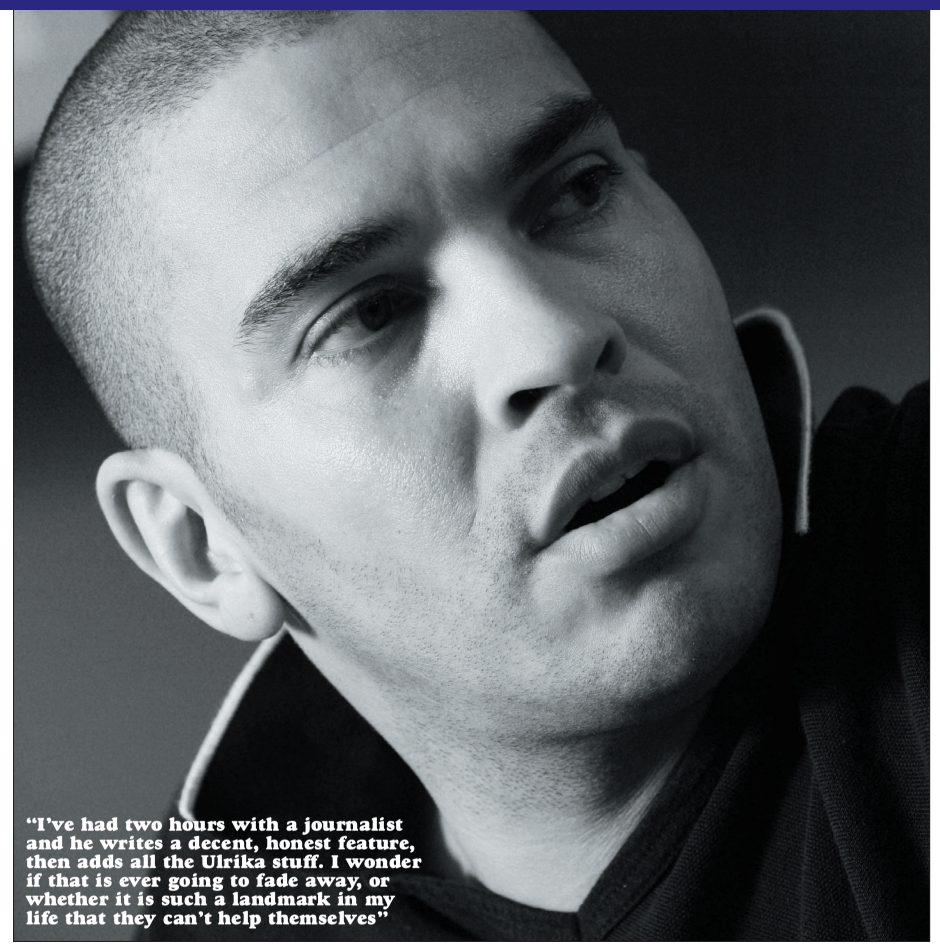
Ask anyone what they know about Stan Collymore and the likely response is one of two things: "He's the bloke who hit Ulrika Jonsson" or "He's the one who's into dogging."

Certainly, those two sensational stories have eclipsed anything he achieved as a centre forward. He emerged as prodigious talent in the early 1990's at Nottingham Forest, which culminated in his, then, record £8.5 million signing to Liverpool in 1995. He became one of the "Spice Boys" of the Kop and scored some stunning solo goals during two heady years.

But Collymore was always beset with personal problems and an attitude that upset managers. Capped just three times for England, Collymore's post-Anfield career hobbled on through a myriad of lesser clubs (ending in Spain in 2001, aged 30), and his off-pitch performances always made more headlines on the front pages than the back.

The Ulrika attack happened in Paris during the World Cup in 1998. Then, in 2004, *The Sun* exposed Collymore's appetite for dogging, which cost him his marriage. More recently, Staffordshire-born Collymore, now 35, has sorted himself out and remains close to his young daughter and a son from a previous relationship. He is successfully controlling clinical depression while building an acting and media career. He recently appeared with Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct 2*, and later this month fronts a football documentary.

I meet Collymore at the Groucho club in Soho. He is courteous, eloquent and bright. One of his people had asked me not to mention Ulrika or dogging. Yeah, right! That would be like inviting Stan to meet 10 supermodels in a car park off the A1 at midnight — then tell him to wear a blindfold and not to touch anything. My compromise: I won't mention either story — unless he doesn't.



"I've had two hours with a journalist and he writes a decent, honest feature, then adds all the Ulrika stuff. I wonder if that is ever going to fade away, or whether it is such a landmark in my life that they can't help themselves"

Portrait **Phil Adams**

To be honest, Stan, I barely know where to start with you and the press. How about you describe what public image you think you have from the newspaper coverage.
Yeah, I see it's difficult because there's been so much, but narrowing it down, there is very much a tabloid image which has consequences in how some people perceive ya. The first thing is always Ulrika Jonsson. Then there is the dogging. *[Hey! Well, it wasn't me who brought all that up]*. So you have immediately got people thinking: wife beater, sleazy, evil, monster, animal. All those words have been used about me by the papers.

I have never had a problem with being castigated for what I have done. What happened with Ulrika — which, let me say was wrong and is one of two major regrets I have — the way that it was dealt with, it was like the full force of every single newspaper came down and every word you could use to basically strip anybody of their humanity was used. They all had primitive connotations of me not being quite human.

So, what do you think of the treatment you got with those two stories?
There is no way that anybody can honestly tell me, without any shadow of a doubt, that the way I am dealt with and the words that are used to portray me are specifically down to me and my personality. They [journalists] don't know me from Adam, but if you are reading that newspaper, how are you ever going to make a distinction? When Stan Collymore is mentioned, certain key words are always used, as opposed to some contemporaries of mine — people like Paul Gascoigne, who admitted serially abusing his wife, among other things, and Tony Adams, who got sent down for drink-driving. When they are covered in features these days it starts off, "Soccer legend", or "Cheeky chappie Gazza". They are talked of in such light and airy terms that the stuff that they've done is almost not attached to them, it is an aside. When I am spoken about, even now, it is almost like, "We can use any word, any expletive and get away with it."

Well, I certainly think Gazza has had his fair share of horror adjectives, but why do you think you might get such a tough time?
There was a history through my football career where I always had a prickly relationship with the press. If they said something disrespectful, I would not talk to them and jump through the normal hoops. There was no doubt there was a feeling of like, when he falls, he's going to fall big.

There has been an issue with *The Sun*, there's no doubt about it. Quite why, I don't know. While other papers have kicked ya, they have kind of stamped on ya. I have felt it has always been very personal and they always go the extra mile in terms of using words like "monster" or "evil". I sit down and think, What is the main difference between me and Paul Gascoigne for them to use words that are so dark and sinister with me and not with other people? And there is only one difference — I am a 6ft 4in black guy, in essence, with a shaven head. [Collymore's mother is white, his estranged father black.]

I know for certain *The Sun* would *say* that is not the case, that it does not deal with you in a racist way.
Yes, I know they would, but I would stick my neck out now and say that has been a factor, whether deliberately or not. And that disturbs me. I have always been loath to say this because that can be a stick to beat you with as well, because I am playing the race card, or whathaveyou. I have researched this and there are many clear examples of negative stereotyping with the press generally and race. Such as Mike Tyson after his rape trial and how the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* dealt with his case, compared to a white guy who got the same sentence for the same offence at a similar time.

Clearly that's a difficult area to go into in detail here. What, in simple terms, would you change in the way *you* are reported?
Whenever journalists write a story about me in the future, can they just start with "Stan Collymore" instead of "Shamed". Why am I shamed? I don't feel shamed. Do I feel regretful about what happened with Ulrika Jonsson? Yes. That was two seconds of red mist and after what happened, first and foremost, I had to make amends and apologise to her. And I did. About a month after that, we started to see each other again, but in private because by that time she had got on the domestic violence bandwagon.

Was the dogging thing embarrassing? Yes. But the only person I needed to make amends to was my ex-wife. But I'm not shamed and I'm certainly not evil or a monster, or whatever other words they always use about me. Not by a long chalk. I have fucked up and made mistakes in my life — without doubt — and I reserve the right to make mistakes in the future.

Clearly the press have had a dramatic impact on your life, what is your view of them generally and would you like to change your relationship with them?
I have no problem with any tabloid newspaper pushing the boundaries if it fits the remit of a cutting edge, issue-of-the-day populist newspaper. But when it gets into the realms of genuinely going out of their way to try and destroy somebody's life and their ability to sustain themselves, well, it can't be right, can it? So, that is my gripe — the beginning, middle and end of it.

Believe me, I don't want to turn things round and be all-singing, all-dancing to any paper, but I think there is a lot I could do in a useful manner, rather than being demonised. I would like to write or speak about depression awareness or be part of an anti-domestic violence campaign. It is a real shame, but this stuff doesn't happen because I am perceived as a hindrance, a pain in the arse by some parts of the press, when I could actually have a lot to offer.

What was it like having such a personal matter like the dogging exposed in the way that it was?
At first, it is a kind of terror when you realise the power of the papers. I was devastated, angry, upset, confused, terrified. It kind of brings it back now, talking about it. I had experienced bad headlines before, but this was like rolling out the major cannons. I have got no qualms with *The Sun* for reporting it, they had every right to. It was a great story for them. If I had been single, I would not have cared less, but I had a wife then and a child. For me, the saddest thing was the breakdown of the marriage. That was the biggest regret, because, by association, your family is involved whether they like it or not. It was not the story, but the consequences of the story. For my wife it was very difficult in the local area, she felt it compromised her name and that is the biggest regret I have in my life.

The dogging was a reaction to a tough time that I was going through, but again I reserve my right to have whatever fucking kinks and fetishes I want to, just as long as it is within the bounds of the law — thankfully, it was.

There are always jokey references about you and dogging, but there was a sad and serious side to it.
The thing that gets belittled is the fact that for six, seven years now I have had bouts of what is still the only illness where people take their own lives — depression. For me, it was not a sexual lifestyle choice. In terms of my sexuality, I have had enough experiences to say, "Each to their own." If you wanna go to swinging parties or have sex on a bonnet of a car with 25 people watching, I don't have any problem with that.

Leading up to the dogging, there had been several issues I was not dealing with well and had got me in a real state. Going dogging, that was a chance to get out of the house and the thought that something might happen — and mostly nothing ever did — was enough of a buzz that it stemmed that awful maudlin feeling. But it is a vicious circle because the next day you feel shit again. That was why I was going dogging. Paul Gascoigne liked to drink. Paul Merson went to the bookies. Those just weren't my things of choice.

Would I do it now? As a sexual lifestyle choice, probably no. Is there anything else that takes its place now? For me, keeping working, exercising, really trying to focus on healthy relationships — whether that be business, or social. I am in good nick physically and mentally, and good things are happening in my career. But I am always aware that things like depression, they come back.

What sort of reaction do you get from the public when you are out and about?
Nobody has ever been hostile or negative to me. I could take you around any city in the UK and nobody would come up and say anything except, "Hi, Stan, how are things?" The worst thing I've got is when White Van Man calls out when I'm in the car and says: "You off dogging, Stan?" That's alright, I can smile at that, no problem.

How have things been since the release of *Basic Instinct 2*, and how would you like it to pan out with the press in the future?
The *Basic Instinct* thing has been pretty good for me. I certainly enjoyed doing it — it was an amazing opportunity. *The Sun* were fair about that and so were the other papers, but little things crept in. *The Independent* did a piece about Sharon Stone saying Stan Collymore is a lovely guy, very professional etc. and added something like, "But remember, this man hit Ulrika Jonsson." It always comes up. Sometimes I have had two hours with a journalist and he writes a decent, honest feature, then adds all the Ulrika stuff. I wonder if that is ever going to fade away, or whether it is such a landmark in my life that they can't help themselves. I would like to think there is no personal vendetta against me by the papers, but it feels like that sometimes. Look at Michael Barrymore — there was a lot of silence, he went off to New Zealand, then he came back. We are talking about life and death with that, not dogging.

I would love to be able to sit down in the future — not that I am important enough or anything. It's not as if Brad Pitt has had a big fall out with *The Sun*! But I would like to be able to ask, "Is there any way this situation will change?" I think there is a lot of misunderstanding and misinformation and I would love that to be different.

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STAN'S NEWS SCHEDULE

Newspapers
I started out reading *The Sun* and *The Mirror* when I was a kid, then I had a phase with *The Guardian* because I have always been a Labour voter, so I thought it was something I should be into. I used to take what I read in a newspaper as gospel, but now I look for agendas and the sub-text.

I only go out and buy a paper if there is something specific I want to read, but I go online every day and scan through *all* the papers — broadsheets and tabloids. I will spend at least two or three hours reading them. I enjoy a cross-section of writers and, despite how they have covered bits of my life, I haven't got a problem with our tabloids.

I also read the American papers online, such as the *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and *Miami Herald*. I'm interested in what they are writing, as the US is the only real superpower. Unfortunately, large portions of their media are too biased for their own good and have compromised journalistic values.

Magazines
I am not a great magazine reader and I am totally at a loss with the *Heat* generation — it is all complete pap. The only magazine I read regularly is *Private Eye*. If that had a bigger profile there would be a revolution because it really opens the eyes to the Whys and Wherefores.

Television
I like *Newsnight* — and *Question Time* is good. I got asked to do that once and I met up with the programme editor, Nick Pisani. He asked me about my political beliefs and said, "You're perfect for the show." I was booked, then they blew me out.

Web
For sport, I use the BBC sports pages, or ESPN for all the American stuff. I use the web for most of my media reading. I have even looked at websites that outline the various personal relationships within the media, like which journalists are married to who. All of that fascinates me and the impact it has on stories. I Google myself and trace back who has written what. You see certain journalists who have written four or five pieces and you spot a theme to the spite. There are even writers who go out of their way to be nasty — then you notice they are friends with Ulrika. They have never met me, but the die is cast.

Stan Collymore's FANTASY FLYERS

What would be the Fantasy Headline of the story you would most like to read?
"The Truth Revealed Behind The War On Terror". What's been happening shouldn't have been done in our country's name.

What would be the Fantasy Headline involving yourself?
For the hell of it, I would like to see the most outrageous, ridiculous *National Enquirer*-type headline about me and see if people would believe it. "Stan Bites Dog" or something like that.

What would be the headline you most dread?
"Official: Britain Is A Police State". That whole Orwellian thing scares me and I think with all the technology there is now we are on the way to it happening.

Who would you most like to interview? What question would you ask?
Ian Holop. I'd ask him if he's been threatened and are there any personal implications to ruffling all those feathers.

What question would you never answer?
I'm not scared of any questions. I've had to answer a few tough ones in the past.

What headline would you like to appear on your obituary?
"He was a good and loving father". Being a good dad is the most important thing.

No interview would be complete without some discreet product placement. We aim to be a bit more up front, so feel free to pull
The Blatant Plug...
Stan Collymore – The Truth about Football is on Bravo at 10pm on 31 May.