

the press conference with SIR BOBBY ROBSON

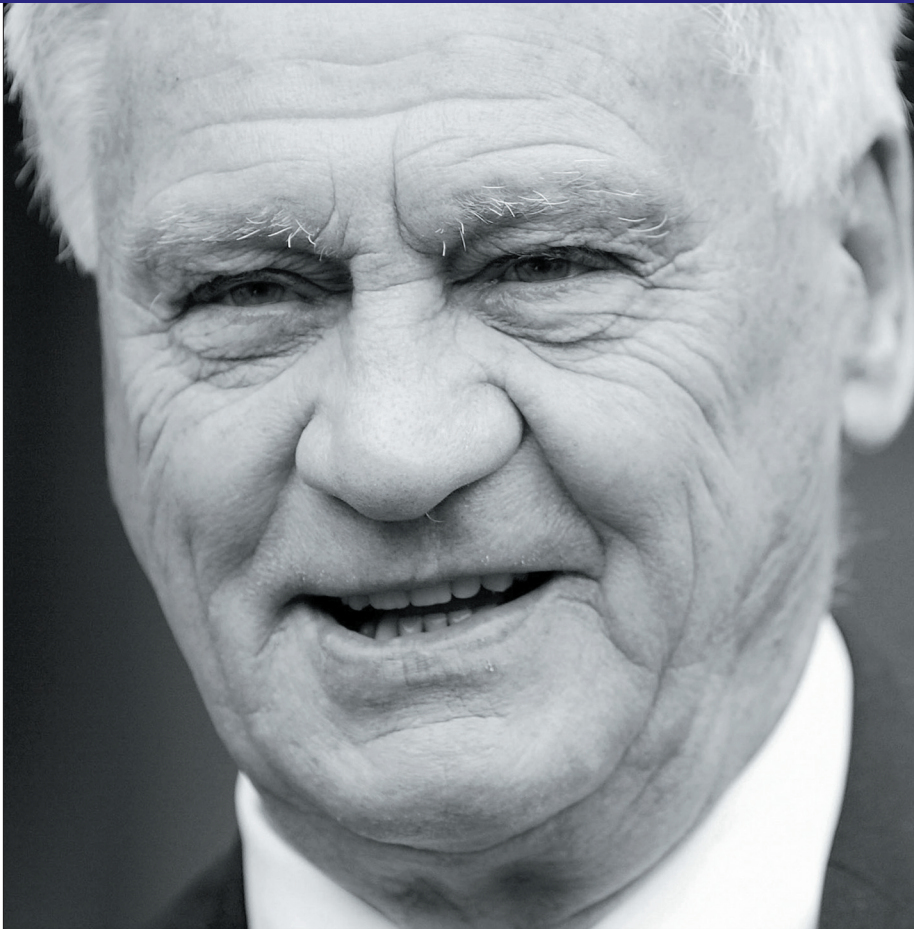
Sir Bobby Robson is embraced as something of a national treasure these days, which makes it so much harder to recall the bucket loads of vitriol regularly poured over him by all quarters of the press while he was England manager.

During his eight-year tenure and two World Cups, Robson was ridiculed relentlessly for anything from his tactics and team selection to his unintentionally hilarious ability to get players' names wrong. But all the vicious headlines were washed away with Gazza's tears when — somewhat incredibly — Robson took England to that fateful semi-final shoot-out against Germany in Italia '90.

Managerial stints followed across Europe, including at Barcelona, where he signed Ronaldo and was named European Manager of the Year. Georgie Robson was the saviour of Newcastle United in 1999 when he took them from the bottom of the Premiership to three top-five finishes, but he was acrimoniously sacked within four games of the 2004-2005 season. Anyone would have thought that was the end of the great man, but he was recently installed as the international football consultant to Ireland manager Steve Staunton.

Robson is 73, but is indefatigable. Only the other week, he had a minor operation for a punctured lung — an injury he got while skiing. He is still taking on life as if it's the downhill. Robson survived cancer in 1995, got his knighthood in 2002 and has now had 56 years in football. He has been married to Elsie since 1955 and they have three sons and four grandchildren. Robson is genial, gentlemanly and good hearted, so it is no wonder the headlines are kinder these days. But he is nobody's fool.

Sir Bobby, the World Cup is on its way. What is it like going into that event as England manager, particularly in the sense of the media attention?
Daunting, but thrilling, because you are in charge of your country's football team. Naturally, it's a huge responsibility, but it is OK if you are confident, extremely knowledgeable and know your players. Some of the more frightening aspects disappear because it is so exciting and such a privilege. I was never worried, or thinking how on Earth am I going to get through this. I knew how good we were and my own capabilities, so I looked forward to it. The press are relentless at a World Cup and you need to do a press conference almost daily. If there is not a story, they will make one, so the trick is to give them a better one than they can make.



You certainly got a tough press, especially when qualifying was in doubt. What was it like on a personal level when the papers went for you?

During the time I was manager, there was a huge circulation war between *The Sun* and *The Mirror*. It was the most massive time that ever existed between those two papers and I got the heat of that. If *The Sun* went in favour of me, the bloody *Mirror* didn't! I tried to get along with everyone and I learnt to keep my head below the parapet. Don Howe used to say to me, "Have you seen *The Sun* this morning?" He would be rite about what they'd said about me or the team. I would say, "No, Don, I haven't, and I will get through the day without seeing whatever paper is slagging me off!"

If they were saying something absolutely incorrect — not just rubbish — I think you had the right to ring up and say so. I did that once or twice, but generally speaking I didn't worry and I let them virtually get away with it. To be honest, I had too much else to think about. You get misquoted all the

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time and you think, Well I never said that. You get away with such a lot, you people, you write stuff and people don't bother you, do they? I could have used people time and time again, but I didn't bother.

But you did in fact sue Today newspaper. What happened there?

I sued Today when they called me a traitor. That was the headline: "TRAITOR". I was stunned out of my life. I couldn't believe what they said. Me, a traitor? I was the absolute opposite. I am a massive patriot and no-one sings "God Save The Queen", or is as proud of the Union Jack and the flag of St George more than me. I loved my job, the most prestigious job in football. I was sad when I left.

That headline was just prior to going into the World Cup in 1990. It came out that after the tournament I was leaving to manage Dutch side PSV Eindhoven. For years the papers were trying to get me out, and when I decided to go, they called me a traitor. Ha! I actually found that quite funny. They

SIR BOBBY'S NEWS SCHEDULE



Newspapers: I think the papers are wonderful and very important. If I was retired I would buy five or six every day, but because of work I haven't got the time to read them as much as I would like. My paper of choice would be the *Telegraph*. It is not a tabloid, but also not too high brow. The sports section is very good. I also like the *Daily Mail* and, naturally, I like *The Mail on Sunday*. And *The Observer* is a decent package. I may not always agree with the tabloids, but they are popular because they are the best at what they do.

We have so many excellent football correspondents. I hardly know where to begin. I like Paul Hayward very much, which is why he did my book. Bob Harris is great, and Brian Scovell and Jeff Powell are good. Ian Woodridge has always been wonderful. Henry Winter, the little lad, Oliver Holt, I like him very much. Matt Dickinson. Patrick Barclay. So many. When I was at Barcelona, they had two papers in

the city just for sport and the first 16 pages were devoted to Barcelona football club. Imagine how many stories they had to get every day. The press were allowed in every day to watch training, so they witnessed everything. Blinking heck, there was tension and pressure there. I'll tell ya!

Television: I think Sky has done wonders for football. The presentation is fabulous. With all their camera positions, they pick up everything. What surprises me is the players don't seem to understand that if they misbehave they will get caught. I also like the coverage on ITV and BBC. There is a good contrast. I try to watch the news every day, generally on the BBC. It is important to keep up with current affairs and I will change a programme to watch the news. I worked abroad for 10 years, which is when I used to watch Sky News all the time. I also tune into Sky Sports News regularly for up-dates.



Magazines: The only magazine I read regularly is *FourFourTwo*. Very rarely, I might read *Hello!* if Paul Gascoigne or some player has got a big article in.

called it an act of treason. You can't win! They took a chance that I wouldn't take any action. The papers get away with it all the time because people don't take them to task. I gave it to a first-class lawyer and we sued and they settled out of court. They knew they were wrong.

Can you give me a classic example of when you have been misrepresented in an article after an interview?

Oh, so many times I can't recall! I once gave an interview to Bob Driscoll when he was writing for *Today*. He pleaded with me to give him a one-to-one. I normally never did that because I didn't think it was fair to other journalists. I usually dealt with everybody together with a press conference. I did the odd one-to-one, but not regular. Bob was struggling a bit, so I did him a favour. One of his questions was, "Can we win the [1990] World Cup?" I said, "Yes, of course we can. But I am not saying we will." Well, I picked up the paper and the headline was "WE WILL WIN WORLD CUP — ROBSON". Not we can! I couldn't believe it. I rang Bob and he said, "But I didn't write the headline, I have no control over that." I said, "If I had known that was going to happen I wouldn't have given you the interview." There were little backlashes and I had to explain that there had been a genuine mistake.

Did you have many clashes with football writers during your time as England manager?
Some of my best friends in journalism were in fact those people who I worked with while I was England manager. I admired many of them and I understood they had to write their bit, what they felt was right. One guy who did have a dislike for me was Brian Glanville [*The Sunday Times*]. He always seemed to

be criticising me. Before Italia '90, we confronted each other and he produced an article about our meeting. Although we did not agree, after that we actually respected each other's views a little bit more. We were never the warmest of friends, but at least it was healthier than what it was before. It did cover old wounds to be honest and every time I see Brian we do have a cordial "Hi" to each other.

I also remember going to Greece to play a friendly [Feb '89]. It was very suspicious to me that there was a large number of press on board the England plane. A little fella called Tony Guzza was there for Sportnight, and he said he would find out why. He interviewed several journalists. One was Nigel Clark from the *Daily Mirror*. He was asked why he was there when two other more senior members of the *Mirror* were there. He said — and I have got the tape — "Well, if Bobby loses tonight, it is my job to fry him."

So we had an Englishman, on the England team plane, hoping we would lose so he can attack the manager. I shook my head at that. Where does that come from! We won 2-1, but we were a goal down and I thought, bloody hell, I am half in the frying pan, ready for the oil to be stirred up. Nigel Clark was always a little bit shifty about me after that. But, to be fair to him, later on we went to play a World Cup qualifier in Poland [Oct '89]. By this time, I would ignore him — I did not want to pass the time of day with him, he meant nothing to me and I meant nothing to him. I had rubbed him out of my life. But he had the decency to come to me in the hotel, put out his hand and say, "I want to honestly wish you good luck in the match today." He did that. We shook hands and I said, "I appreciate that, thank you very much." I would like to say that about Nigel Clark as well. Fair's fair.

You have your column in The Mail on Sunday. How does that come together and do you enjoy being on the other side of the press?

I meet with their football reporter Joe Bernstein on a Thursday or Friday for at least a couple of hours. We discuss all the major footballing issues of the week and we write a very good column together. I enjoy it very much and keep it topical and relevant. The final version is read over to me before it goes in the paper and I don't let them print anything unless it is right. Even one wrong word can do some damage. I try to be respectful to the people I am talking about and honour the game that has given me a great life and a great living. I don't want to criticise violently or go over the top. The papers used to pay ex-players to slag me off, yet those players were about one 20th of what I had been in the game. I think an opinion is better than criticism. I have had enough criticism in my time, so I am fair and professional.

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...
The Bobby Robson Golf Classic is played every year in Portugal. It's on 15 July this summer. And check out www.nobok.com, I'm their sports president and I give them regular interviews.

What do you think of the treatment Sven has had over the years?

Well, he has certainly had some rough treatment. With England, you have got to be whiter than white as well. The trick is to stay cool. They will blast you. Sven has a host of journalists who live outside his house. I think that is awful, unnecessary. Everybody is entitled to some privacy to get on with their life. I don't care who you are. But some people think you are a target, public property, so they write anything they want, which I don't think is right. But if there is anything to do with your work format, then you are fair game. You are a public person. You get money for the job, so people have a right to know what you are thinking. You can't be hidden from the world, that's for sure.

You had a serious run-in with the Newcastle Evening Chronicle at the end of the 2003-2004 season. What was all that about?

At our last match we agreed to do a walk about to thank the fans. Because we had drawn 1-1, it was a disappointing finish I suppose — but I might add, it was still fifth. The chairman would put £100m in the kitty today for that. I tell ya! Instead of staying, about 45,000 fans disappeared, so there were about 5,000 left. On the same day Leeds United got relegated and 38,000 stayed behind singing to the players.

I was interviewed for television after the match and off-camera I happen to say that I had seen our public today and the TV excerpts of the hysteria at Leeds. The cameraman picked that up and it was shown all over the stadium. The press officer, Hazel, came running down. "Bobby you have been caught saying something about the fans." But I hadn't criticised the Newcastle fans, I was commenting on the Leeds fans.

All the press heard it and I said, "Look, it was off-camera, off-the-cuff remark, it's not for publication," and they all agreed not to print it. Everybody agreed — except the *Chronicle*. They had agreed at the time, but Alan Oliver printed it. That story was the most damaging story in my life. It was a wicked piece of journalism and it had no semblance of truth in it at all. By the local paper and by a fella that I had given everything for in five years. That hurt me dreadfully. I rang him up and said, "What are you doing? You all agreed no-one was going to touch it."

Although you got tough treatment from the press, it has certainly worked out well for you with the media generally.

At the end of the England job there was a touch of genuine warmth and honesty towards me. The press guys saw me not fight back, not spit my dummy out of the gram. I tried to give them what I could. When things went wrong, it was challenging but I wasn't afraid of them. When we did so well in Italy, I think some of them were feeling a bit guilty, so I finished with a good rapport. Overall I think I have had a fair press. The press can't do without sport and I think sport can't live without the press. They do a great job for sport. I think we have the best newspapers for sport in the world. There are some fantastic football correspondents and there is an incredible breadth of writing talent. And I firmly believe that the press would rather write a positive than negative story about England — unless of course you are Nigel Clark on a special assignment! And I also believe that the players would rather give the press a positive story to write.

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