

THE SILENT YEARS

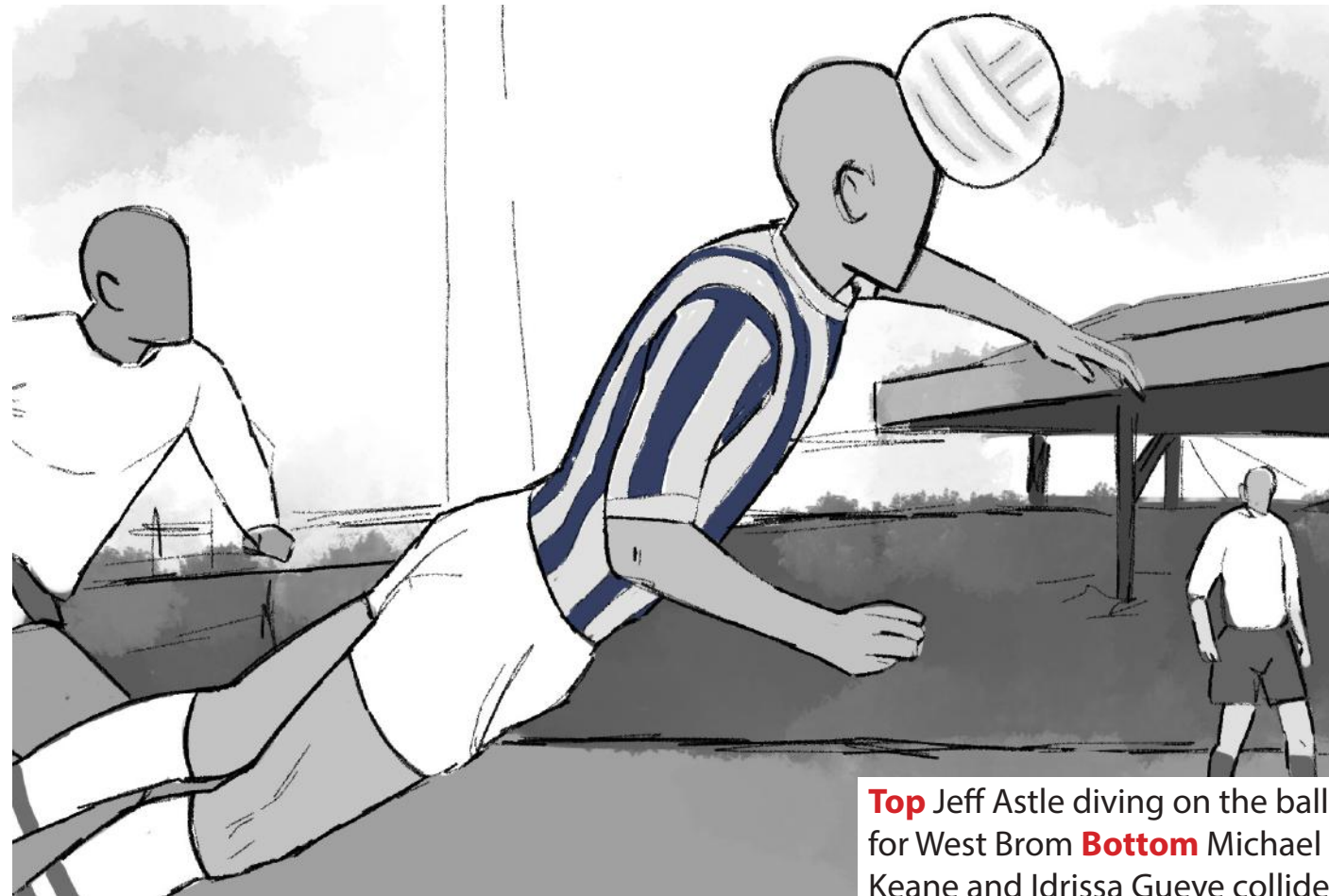
In 2001, the FA promised to carry out research investigating the dangers of heading in football. 17 years on, *FourFourTwo* investigates if progress is finally heading in the right direction

Words Joshua Browne Illustrations Sophie Lawrence

Saturday, 30th July, 1966. England v West Germany. Managed by Alf Ramsey, England have gone all the way to reach the World Cup final. The likes of Bobby Moore, Martin Peters and Geoff Hurst line up to face the biggest game of their careers so far. In the 18th minute, captain Moore delivers a free kick towards Hurst. The fellow Englishman loses his marker and powers home a header to bring the game to 1-1. Hurst later scores two more goals and the rest is history.

Fast forward 52 years and 169 goals were scored at this year's World Cup, 35 of which were headers. The England squad of 2018 looked akin to the class of '66. Exploiting their opponents with intelligent set pieces and unstoppable headers, the tactics, crafted by manager Gareth Southgate, took the young lions agonisingly close to their predecessors' achievements, coming undone to Croatia in the semi-finals.

Inspired by Ramsey, (almost) delivered by Southgate.



Top Jeff Astle diving on the ball for West Brom **Bottom** Michael Keane and Idrissa Gueye collide

Football is the only sport where the head is used as an instrument to hit the ball. Requiring less technique than a strike from 40 yards, a header can often reward the brave rather than the skilled. When it's easier to control a ball with a foot, heading seems impractical. Yet a player, who is willing to lunge his head where his opponent isn't, is more likely to give his team an advantage in the match - and that is where things can get dangerous.

In August, Michael Keane was stretchered off the field after colliding with a teammate. He suffered a hairline skull fracture and was unable to engage in any further head contact for three to four weeks. He later vowed the injury would not stop him challenging for headers in the future.

The spirit of the modern player is comparable to the footballers of a previous era when clashes were a regular occurrence. It wasn't uncharacteristic to see a player run off the pitch to get bandaged up, and return to help their team toward a win - images of the blood soaked Terry Butcher come to mind. Yet, new studies have found heading the ball itself carries a greater risk to a player's neurological health than a collision with

an elbow, head, or even a goalpost.

One man who was best remembered for his heading prowess was Jeff Astle. Known as 'The King', the West Brom centre forward was described as an exceptional header of the ball. In 2002, Astle died aged 59-years-old of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy; a neurodegenerative disease traditionally associated with boxers. The coroner ruled that the years of repeatedly heading heavy footballs during his career, made a significant contribution to the disease that caused widespread trauma throughout his brain.

Jeff Astle's daughter, Dawn, saw her father transition from a prolific and beloved footballer to a man who couldn't remember his success.

"110% FOOTBALL KILLED HIM"

"My dad was a real livewire and would be singing constantly around the house. You'd always know where he was because all you had to do was follow the sound of the laughter."

It was 20 years after Astle's retirement from football that his health notably began to deteriorate. Dawn

heard from the inquest the ruling of her Dad's death was industrial disease.

"Absolutely 110% football killed him but why did the symptoms come out years after his retirement? We don't know. It's known as the silent years.

"He was surrounded by pictures, England caps, medals but he remembered none of it. I guess everything football gave him - football took away. He died not remembering his family, but also being a footballer.

"The blow when you head a football causes the brain to ricochet inside the skull. What we don't know is how many times do you have to head a ball before these changes happen neurologically."

The University of Stirling may have the answer. Dr Magdalena Letswaart has contributed to a study, which has revealed groundbreaking information that shows heading a football causes instant changes to the brain.

"We need to redefine safe limits for people heading a football. The brain is in development

right until you are in your early twenties" says Dr Letswaart. "Until we can fully uncover the impact heading a football has on a developing brain, it's not possible to put an age limit on heading in the game, with any certainty this will make a difference to players."

Supported by growing concussion awareness, the United States Soccer Federation has banned heading for children 10 years old and under, and limited heading for children aged 11-13 to 30 minutes a week. Dr Letswaart doesn't agree with the incentive.

"While we need to protect footballers who will be experiencing significant short term changes to their brain after they head a football, we need to be able to pinpoint what stage this is having the biggest impact. We must uncover the mechanisms that relate to brain health in the long-term, before we can make any concrete decisions about the game among young players."

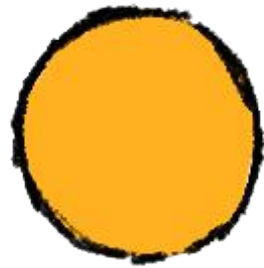
The FA was expected to be in its second year of a ten-year-project when Jeff Astle died, analysing the effects of heading a football and the link to brain disease. However, the Astle family were met with a wall of silence in 2014 when they discovered how the research hadn't been finished. ▶



The authorities began the study observing younger players but because none made it professional, the investigation was terminated early. This left Dawn concerned for current players' welfare.

"It was like my Dad's life and death didn't matter. All we wanted were answers as to what killed my Dad, what might be happening to others like him, and has football got a connection with dementia. We needed to know, but more importantly, football needs to know.

"As a footballer you expect ligament damage, you might expect a metatarsal injury nowadays, but you do not expect to die of catastrophic brain damage like my Dad did. That's when we said football should not, and must not ever, be allowed to shy away from confronting what is an uncomfortable and unsettling reality."



World Cup winner, Sir Geoff Hurst, has fears that his teammates may no longer remember their triumphs of 1966 as reports say some of them are battling with dementia.

Hurst remains the only player to score a hat trick in a World Cup final when England beat West Germany 4-2, at Wembley, 52 years ago. Teammate Martin Peters scored the other goal.

A lifelong friend from when they used to play for West Ham together, Hurst is 'bitterly disappointed' Peters, who is now suffering with Alzheimer's, may soon no longer be able to recognise him.

"I've grown up with Martin and known him since we were teenagers. We played at the top level and scored goals in a World Cup final. He's as close to me as any member of my family I could possibly have without actually being in my family."

It's been suggested the leather footballs used in the past could have been a significant factor that contributed to brain changes discovered in players such as Jeff Astle and Martin Peters. Players would liken a heavy waterlogged leather ball to heading 'a

bag of bricks'. Whilst footballs today have changed radically and are much lighter, scientists suggest modern players could be at just as much of a risk due to the speed the balls can travel.

Hurst, however, believes heading is an integral part of the sport, and says he would not have thought about the possible repercussions of using his head when he played.

"When I was 24-years-old and playing in the World Cup, I wouldn't have been concerned about heading the ball. It's important and I scored a goal with my head in the final. I wanted to play and be successful in my career.

"It's difficult to suggest football is played at the top level without heading a ball. At West Ham, we played head tennis in the gym for practice. We had a football hanging from the ceiling that was swinging, and we'd head that multiple times in training" explains Hurst.

"Particularly defensively and from an attacking point of view, it's vital that people are good in their technique in heading a ball."

Now, scientists are calling for authorities to invest money to protect the players who carry on to play the game as it has been played for centuries.

"Research investment is needed to develop sensitive and evidence-based assessment tools to study the effects of repeated head impact on brain health, as well as, the mechanisms that underlie the link between head impact and health outcomes later in life" says Dr letsvaart.

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The progress made by the studies is encouraging. Heading in football is unlikely to disappear and would seem sacrilegious to some to ever suggest it doing so. However, players mustn't discredit the dangers of heading in football even if they are not immediately obvious, and football's authorities must assist research if we are ever to stay ahead of the game. ♡

Right Geoff Hurst

