

Four sentences concerning playing as a veteran

One. If you're growing old with velocity of fall, if your interest for the world and the people descends towards zero, if you can find the joys and sorrows of youth only superficial fuss and if the prospect of shortly getting your pension only results in a cynical sneer, if you are really in deep shit and, as an unbearable smart aleck, misanthrope, as a moaner and grumbler, are telling yourself, okay, that's it, this can no longer go on, there has to be a change – then, well, then you will lace up your trainers, you will put shin-pads underneath your socks, put on a ridiculous t-shirt with a famous name on it and drag your hairy, rickety legs into shorts, you will enter the pitch and will trounce all and sundry, breaking the opposition's spirits with relentless pressure, running them into the ground on both sides, peppering their goalkeeper with shots so that he will get a stiff neck from the draught, sowing panic in their defence, eliminating their midfield-general, making their attackers look ridiculous, so that you feel good, you feel life is wonderful and other people will find that you are wonderful, and that football played by veterans is the feelgood-drug of choice for losers, a tool to vent your frustration – this would be nice, but is not true, because

Two. Playing football after the age of fifty is a crime against the body, is overworking the joints and ligaments, the soul and the spirit, is humbug, looked at from the perspective of an insurer, but also in general, it means penetrating pain in both feet when getting up in the morning, pain in the Achilles tendon, in the hammer toe, in the ganglion, in the knees where arthritis has to be sedated with lots of Ponstan-generica, where both menisci leap like flee, the ligaments, all of them, are slovenly and grinding, inside and outside, whereas the calf muscles just are one hotbed of pain, and in the thigh you can still feel the sting from last Sunday done by a dive-bomber just seconds before he crashed, and naturally, the old, ugly scar along the shin which is sensitive to the weather is itching, the nasty double fracture, screwed together manifold, defeated (just!) by titanium plates, the fracture, I say, in view of which an astonished bunch of doctors started talking of a miracle cure, not to mention the memory of a slipped disc which slipped on the pitch, this most amazing of all pains, completely suddenly and viciously, bringing down the victim who whimpers for morphine, for weeks out of any action, and further on the bruised rib, the dislocated shoulder, the badly healed broken collarbone, the nose, eternally out of joint and, after all these years, the mild idiocy stemming from thousands of headers with which to defend against long crosses and powerful shots; all this is still okay, but ...

Three. But the real shit with veteran's football starts if you can no longer run past your opposite number who is fifteen years younger and can't stop him running past you, if you have just enough air for one, and only one, of your rushes, formerly rightly feared, if, because of your declining speed, your technical deficits are all too obvious to see, if your weak shot, after a pathetic attempt of a dribbling, flies harmlessly wide, so that even young mothers who have settled at the sideline don't see any necessity to evacuate their babies out of the danger zone, if you have to get off the pitch after five minutes, breathlessly, and you need ten more minutes till you are able to take a sip of water, in constant fear of a heart failure or a blood clot in the brain or to find your lungs just coughed out in front of your feet, and saddened by the knowledge that you are playing best if you play with a strong team-mate who clears up behind you and opens up the space in front of you which he fills himself much better than you do, and you are degenerating into a pin-ball-machine for very short one-twos in the vast expanses of the midfield, washed up, playing inscrutable bad passes, personally offended by the mistakes of your colleagues, quarrelling with the Football Gods about the notoriously long balls into the penalty area of this World, not to be reached by strikers stuck in the field with trainers of concrete, no, the joy has long gone, but

Four. That, last Sunday, after a long, a very very long lean period, you managed to score (the winning goal!), after a corner which the opponents defended insufficiently, the ball rolling towards your feet, a blessed micro-second of inspiration, the left top corner of the goal clear and present to see, the kick straight and snappy, everything is perfect, the stance, the dropkick, the trajectory over men and mice, the keeper in full stretch, but the ball out of his reach; well, when this is the case, one needs to have no qualms about playing for another year or three.

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(translated by Stefan Howald)