

Moulded Souls

- That was Mr Brown on the phone son.
- Mr Brown? Who's Mr. Brown?
- From the shoe shop. On the Belfast Road.
- Oh. Baldy Brown.
- Don't you dare call him that when we're in there.
- Why would we be in there? I got my new school shoes in August.
- I know, I know. But I've paid up my dues early on Brown's Christmas Club after
Granda helped me out when he got his wee Premium Bonds win.
- Paid for what?
- Football boots. Sure didn't you moan all summer about not having any after
England won the World Cup?
- Are they Adidas?
- What?
- The brand England wore in the World Cup. Even though it's German.
- Oh he definitely said they were a brand.

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There they were. My first pair of football boots. They were a brand, but not really a brand. They were “Dunlop”, more associated with tennis and other racquet sports than football. True to Dunlop’s rubber pneumatic tyre they had moulded soles, not screw-in studs.

Baldy Brown had pulled the boots from their box like an over-enthusiastic magician tugging a white rabbit from a hat.

- They’re moulded soles Mum, not screw-in studs.

- That’s right sonny. That means your studs will all wear out at the same time.

Indeed. My soles would be destined to age uniformly like a team of veteran synchronised swimmers. Moulded souls were the thrifty option, screw-ins were where you wanted to be. The boots were to last well, as a few years later, in grammar school, they doubled up as my rugby boots. The soles and studs took on a new dimension with steel studs being mandatory for the fearsome forwards, being filed down to within a millimetre of GBH legality. But while my boots had moulded soles at least they were new and not hand me-downs like some of my cousins had.

(Will I get on? Will I get to play?)

- Try them on for goodness sake!

- The right one’s scuffed.

- Nonsense laddie, it’s just a slight second.

Showing the panache of a matador, Baldy swept his hand over his sweaty pate and proceeded to polish the offending footwear.

- See - Mr Brown knows about these things.

- Indeed I should! Forty-three years in the business, man and boy.

- They’re too big.

- They're not too big, they're just new.

- Growing room my man, growing room. Essential for a boy of your age.

(Am I going to get on? Am I going to get to play?)

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She walked me and the boots to our debut at the “wee park” on Belfast’s Lisburn Road. She’d wanted me to keep the boots on when leaving the shop ahead of the mile long journey. I told her that these boots weren’t made for walking - not on footpaths anyway - and even had Baldy Brown backed me up before we’d left his shop. Several times enroute I took the lid off the box just to smell the unsullied leather, the raw rubber. She looked bemused but at the same time pleased.

- What time do they play until?

- Till it gets dark. Or earlier.

- Why earlier?

- If the boy who owns the ball has to go home for his tea

In Belfast tea was always the evening meal, never referred to as dinner or supper.

We arrived at the park’s main gate, it, like the iron fences, long overdue several coats of paint as rust was now dominating the embattled green flake. Even more dilapidated were some of the council’s dictatorial signs:

“No Ball Games on the Sabbath.”

“This Park Closes at Dusk, sharply.”

On the largest expanse of grass today’s game was in full flow, easily twenty to a side. It was time to put on the boots.

(I’m nearly there. Maybe I’ll get on?)

She'd brought them in the box, which had made for a tactical conversation piece with some of her acquaintances she met during our journey. The box was still stuffed with the paper tissue packaging ("we won't throw it out – you never know when it will come in handy"). She foraged for the boots and the accompanying garish tan bootlaces. She proceeded to lace the boots, a task which to me seemed to take forever.

- I've laced one boot crossed and the other boot zig-zagged.

I looked at her handiwork – the different lacing patterns suggesting that the boots had never met, let alone being a pair. I'd missed five goals already while she was doing this.

- I've done my bit – hurry up and lace them up!

- I can't! They're huge, like big bits of liquorice!

- They're not big, they're just new.

- Not the boots, the laces!

- Tie them underneath.

- Underneath?

- Yes – under and over the soles a few times.

- They'll get mucky!

- They won't – that's why they're tan.

I'd already missed another three goals, so I did what she'd said. She pushed me from the gravel path onto the grass.

(I'm scared to go on! Do I want to play?)

- On you go!

- But I don't know anybody! (I did – but they were all older than the nine-year-old me).

- You'll make some new friends. Now get on the field!

- It's not a field it's a pitch.

- Take your jumper off, the other boys have.

- Not all of them. Those jumpers are the goal posts.

- Go on, go on, go on!

- Uh, ok.

- No! Wait! Stop!

- What is it?

- I forgot these!

She rummaged through her nylon shopping bag.

- Here! A wee surprise!

- What are they?

- Shin guards! Put them on!

She withdrew what looked like two antique cricketing wicket keeper's pads, albeit in royal blue.

These shin guards were not the svelte plastic jobs of decades later but were more akin to Spartan shields made out of some firm but unidentifiable material. So I put them on, stuffing them down my socks. They were a joke, taller than my socks and wider than my calves. It was hard enough to walk or trot given the stiff leather of the new boots - the shin guards made my waddle worse.

- I got them from your Uncle Herbie. He said they've not been worn much.

- Yeah - not since the war. They're as fat as Churchill.

- You're fine now. On you go!

I spoke to a boy I vaguely knew as he ran past me.

- Can I be in your team?

- What? Well I'm not the captain - but ok I suppose.

- What's the score?

- We're winning 17-15.

(I'm on, I'm on! I'm playing!)

For the next five minutes I tried to get involved but my only contribution was to take a throw in when the ball went out of play onto the gravel path. Or at least I nearly took a throw in before the ball was pulled from my grasp by a guy known as "Big Boy". He was well over six feet tall, probably thirteen – at big school anyway – and the self-elected captain of my team today. He sported a red Manchester United jersey, several sizes too small for him, with a crude number "7" on its back, drawn, it seemed with white gym shoe polish.

- You're number 7. Are you Georgie Best?

- Get away to fuck!

- What?

- You heard me! Away to fuck. You weren't picked!

A greenish spittle foamed from his mouth, spreading like lava over his acne.

- But I'm on your team!

- You're not now. Now fuck off!

He bounced the ball on my head, then shoved me off the grass. I trotted along the verge towards a grassy mound quite a distance from the pitch. Mum was the only parent around and I'd asked her to stand there, some way back, arguing that the elevation would give her a good view.

(I'm off! I think it's all over!)

- Is it half-time?
- They don't have half-time here.
- We can have our own half-time. I've made sandwiches and a flask.
- You've made a flask. Clever.
- You! With that sense of humour you'll end up like your Da!
- What kind of sandwiches are they?
- Chicken.
- Oh good!
- Well, chicken paste.
- Oh dear.

I chomped through a few sandwiches, washed down with some overly diluted orange squash. I was having little more fun than the football, that was for sure.

She burrowed in her bottomless bag and pulled out a pair of knitting needles and a few balls of garishly coloured wool.

- What are those for?
- Oh, I can catch up on my knitting during the bits of the football I don't understand. The church is sending woolly vests to babies in India.
- I thought it was Africa?
- No that was last month.

- Where's next month? Donegal?
- Donegal?
- Well it's colder and wetter there than those other places.

Having cast on she started to knit at a speed far superior to any displayed in our football match.

- You better get back on before it gets too dark.
- I don't know if I want to.
- What's wrong? Are you hurt?
- No. Big Boy wouldn't let me play.
- He'll only have been joking.
- He wasn't.
- Well you tell him the council owns this park, not him.
- Aye right.
- And that I know his mother.
- That'll work.
- On you go or you'll have to finish all these sandwiches.

I ran back towards the game, sidling up to Quite a Big Boy, whose brother I knew.

- Can I play on your side?
- What?
- On your side?
- Aye, I suppose so.

I meandered out to the wing, well away from Big Boy, and took some cover alongside Specky Chubs, a portly boy who was usually picked to play in goal. His other nickname was Goggles, reflecting his thick glasses, secured on one side by a sticking plaster.

- Hi Chubs. How's it going?

- Bloody freezing. What are you doing here?

- New boots.

- Screw-ins?

- Nah. Moulded.

- Yeah, me too.

- Why are you not in goal?

- Asthma.

- You've asthma?

- No – him. Wheezy Bollocks in goal there.

Just with that a stray shot landed a direct hit on Wheezy Bollock's ample tummy, his screams even louder than his asthmatic bellows.

- I can't breathe, I can't breathe!

- Put your head between your knees.

- Will that help?

- Well you'll be in the right position if you're going to throw up.

There was really only one thing worse than not being picked and that was to be picked in goal, those put in goal being at the lowest of any hierarchy.

- What the fuck are you doin' back on? Get away to fuck!

- He said I could play!

- Did ye?

- Aye, I suppose so.

- But that gives you an extra man!

- So what? He's fuckin' useless.

- Aye, I suppose so.

The game trundled on. I managed to escape any severe kickings from the bigger boys. From time to time I glanced over to the mound where the vest factory seemed to be in full flow. Until I thought I saw a kite - I wish it had been. Like a demented high school cheerleader she was leaping up and down waving a part-finished vest in celebration. Of a goal. For the other team.

I'd love to say that I scored the winning goal or made a dramatic goal line clearance. In truth I spent most of my time picking up the shin guards which kept ejaculating out of my socks like clay pigeons in a shoot.

I was sure our team was well ahead when Big Boy declared "next goal the winner." He repeated this twice more until his team scored - a shot deflecting off the substantial arse of Specky Chubs into our goal. While I wasn't a hero, at least I wasn't the villain.

(I got on! I played! I stayed on!)

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- You played well.

- No I didn't.

- You've got muck on your knees – that shows you played well.

- Maybe.

- How were the boots?

- OK – a bit stiff.

They'll soften with wear. Make sure you brush them then polish them with your Granda's Dubbin wax.

Dusk was dropping as we walked out of the park. The impatient park keeper, draped in chains and padlocks, pointed some heavy keys in our direction.

- Youse are last out. Do you think I get paid overtime? What kept youse?

- Laces. They took a wee while to get off.

- And what are these in the bin? I emptied it five minutes ago.

- They're your Uncle Herbie's shin guards!

- I wondered where they'd got to.

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We made our way back down the road to my grandparents'

house. I developed a feigned limp to complement the mucky knees.

- Are you limping? Was it that Big Boy?

- No, but it was a big enough boy.

- Anyway - well done.

- Thank you.

- I think I might be busy whenever you next have a match.

- Thank you.