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*'You have to be smart enough to understand the game, and dumb enough to think it's important.'*

*US Senator Eugene McCarthy*

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## EARLY DOORS

Never before has the ability to bluff your way in football been as vital as it is now. From boardroom to building site, from wine bar to pub, every other conversation seems to be about the game. The smartest dinner parties, which once echoed with talk of Plato and the Old Vic, now concern themselves with Messi and Old Trafford. In short, if you cannot talk about football, you cannot take part in modern life.\*

If you know that the expression 'early doors' derives from the world of theatre (as in a matinée performance), then you understand more than most footballers and football fans. But you must also realise that it is much better known as a football-related term for the beginning of a game, or indeed any undertaking, as in: 'We've got to make sure that we get stuck in early doors.'

So not only must you never be 'late doors', you must be properly prepared as you step through them. If you attempt to improvise in the jungle of trivia, invective and emotion that characterises modern football, you will soon be caught out. For proof of just how easily this

can happen, you need look no further than the political world. Former prime minister Tony Blair, for example, was asked in a BBC radio interview about his 'lifelong' support of Newcastle United. A local newspaper went on to misreport the interview, claiming that Blair said he had fond teenage memories of watching legendary player Jackie Milburn, who had actually retired when Blair was four. The myth surrounding this 'claim', however, will take much longer to retire – if it ever does. Football fans can detect the whiff of phoniness from a great distance, and if there's one thing they all agree on, it's to hold in contempt anyone who claims to be a fervent supporter of a particular club when they're demonstrably not. Another prime minister, David Cameron, discovered this in 2015 when after years of claiming to be an Aston Villa fan he urged people to support West Ham. He described the incident as a 'brain fade', though many of those mocking him on social media pointed out that his confusion probably arose because the two teams wear the same colours (claret and blue).

Another case in point is Salman Rushdie who once wrote a magazine article professing his long-held love for Tottenham Hotspur in which he praised their legendary Scottish manager Bill Nicholson. Nicholson was in fact English.

So, as a bluffer you would be advised to follow the instructions given out by thousands of football managers through the years:

- work hard in training;
- keep your eye on the ball; and
- don't do anything stupid.

In particular, you should remember the words of another politician, US Senator Eugene McCarthy, who compared his job to being involved in football (albeit the American version): 'You have to be smart enough to understand the game, and dumb enough to think it's important.' Admitting to a lack of understanding about the world's most popular spectator sport is the cultural equivalent to having a bad case of leprosy (in its advanced, pustulent phase).

This book sets out to guide you through the main danger zones encountered in football discussions, and to equip you with a vocabulary and an evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will lend you a few easy-to-learn hints and methods that will allow you to be accepted as a football aficionado of rare ability and experience. But it will do more. It will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your knowledge and insight about 'the beautiful game' – without anyone discovering that before reading it you didn't know the difference between a 'hairdryer' and 'handbags at dawn'.

\* Gender matters: It should be made clear that wherever in this book the impression is given that all football fans, players and officials are male, it is for reasons of grammatical convenience. It is not intended to suggest that men are more likely than women to have a keener grasp of the game. And if you should fall into that trap just remind yourself of the fate of 'expert' Sky football presenters Richard Keys and Andy Gray who were required to step down after a notorious sexism row when they questioned the job suitability of female Premier League assistant referee Sian Massey (who clearly knows more about the offside rule than most men).