

INCHES: THE FINE LINE BETWEEN VICTORY AND DEFEAT

Picture this. It's May 1994. The Wembley atmosphere is electric as rain falls on the pristine turf. A sea of Chelsea blue and Manchester red surrounds me, as 90,000 people cram into the world's greatest stadium to watch the world's greatest domestic cup final. They say it's every schoolboy's dream to play in an FA Cup Final and thousands of young kids around the world are watching amongst the 90 million global TV audience.

The scene is set. It's Chelsea *v.* Manchester United; Blues *v.* Reds; South *v.* North. Manchester United have already won the Premier League. I'm playing for Chelsea but United are the better team. Nevertheless, despite them being League Champions we have beaten them 1-0 twice this season, home and away. And I scored both times. This season, we are their bogey team and I am their nemesis.

All my senses are heightened as I walk onto the pitch; Hoddle, Wise, Spencer, Stein and Cascarino are next to me. It's as if I see everything in Technicolor, feel every drop of rain, spot individual friends and family members in the crowd. I glance up and see my wife, Amanda. As long as she is here everything's okay. I remember our new baby, Jake, not even a year old and safe at home with my wife's mother. I see my parents. Beaming.

They've followed me every step of the way. A thumbs up from my father. Mum by his side. That's all I need from them.

I look across at the opposition led out by their great Scottish manager, Alex Ferguson. They are simply outstanding. Their flying wingers Andrei Kanchelskis and young Ryan Giggs are irresistible on their day. Welshman, Mark Hughes, is physically too strong for most defences. He is paired in a striking role with the awesome, Eric Cantona. No one will grace the Premier League in the 1990s like 'King Eric'. The Frenchman has power, skill and unshakeable confidence in his ability to do the unusual and win matches. He's the best around. My team-mate, Eddie Newton, and I are up against a formidable midfield duo of Roy Keane and Paul Ince. Excellent passers of a football. Hard as nails. Fiercely competitive.

But they hold no fear for us. Our player-manager Glenn Hoddle has begun a transformation at Stamford Bridge – a revolution of sorts. He's changed our style from 'direct and muscular' to 'skilful and mobile'. He's changed our eating habits from tea and biscuits after training to pasta and salad. He's changed the Heathrow practice pitches from West London winter mud heaps with airplanes flying overhead to flat grassy surfaces...still airplanes flying overhead!

I am Hoddle's first signing at the beginning of the season – £1.25 million from Newcastle United. It's a significant fee. After briefly being bottom of the league at Christmas we have climbed back up to mid-table and had a tremendous cup run. I've scored in every round including two against Luton Town in the semifinals a few weeks earlier at Wembley: a result that puts Chelsea in their first FA Cup Final for twenty-four years. The fans have hope once more. We are a good cup team. We have the measure of United. The movement and interplay of our frontline with Stein (5' 6"), Spencer (5' 6"), Wise (5' 7") and me, fits Hoddle's new footballing style. I'm the tallest at 5' 9".

The Mighty Midgets they call us; and we're causing problems for the best of teams.

The build-up for an FA Cup final is more exhausting than the actual game. There are weeks of TV and newspaper interviews. Cameras around the training ground increase and intensify. The players appear at local children's charities, advertise the newest sets of golf clubs and record the obligatory cup final song! Family and friends want tickets for the match. Everyone is coming. The regular season finishes. The nation's focus is all on the final. The pressure mounts daily.

The morning of the match arrives. The team hotel. My Danish roommate, defender Jakob Kjeldberg, gets out of bed looking ready for war. Breakfast. Newspapers. A team walk. A team talk. Pre-match meal: chicken and pasta. I can barely eat as the nerves seem to focus on my stomach. Cup final suits. The coach to the stadium. Playing our favourite song as we look out the windows. Coming down Wembley Way and seeing the famous Twin Towers and the scene of so much history, not least where England won the World Cup in 1966. Fans are everywhere. Thousands of them. Cheering, running alongside the coach, faces painted blue. It means so much to them. Their hopes rest on us. More butterflies in the stomach: this is huge!

The dressing room. The baths are so big and deep you can literally dive into them. Out to inspect the pitch. Firm but wet. Medium length stud for me. Puma Kings – size 8. We head back inside. Envelopes with tickets for family and friends. Telegrams with good wishes. Shirts hanging. Love the blue! Number 10 – 'Peacock' on the back. 'FA Cup Final 1994' embroidered on the chest. Kiss the Chelsea badge. Can't let the fans down.

Coach, Graham Rix, says, 'Gavin, it will fly by. Enjoy the day!'

Now, Hoddle's final words: 'We can do this. Go make some history, boys!' I say a quick prayer – not to win but to honour

God win or lose. We make our way down the tunnel. They see us at the far end of the stadium first, as the plastic tunnel extends onto the pitch. The far end of Wembley begins to cheer. The roar wraps around us like a swirling wind as we walk into full view. Electricity through the body! Goosebumps on the neck. The national anthem. Presented to royalty. Break away. Get to position. Can't hear my team-mates. The noise is too much. This is it. I can't wait to start. Heart beats fast...feels like it's in my mouth.... Then in an instant my nerves are gone. Ice flows through my veins. Referee, David Ellery, blows the whistle. GO!

I get an early touch of the ball. An easy pass. We begin well. I feel good. Like I can run all day. My fitness is supreme. The game plan? Keep it tight in defence. Don't let Giggs and Kanchelskis get on the outside of us. Our fullbacks, Frank Sinclair and the experienced Steve Clarke, are doing a good job, man-marking them. Frank is lightning quick. Clarke is our most consistent player – so reliable. We are breaking forward well. I'm finding space. Our forwards, Spencer and Stein, are getting chances. Cantona is quiet and United are on the back foot.

And then comes the moment. Twenty minutes into the game. I win a header against Paul Ince. (Always a good battle with him. We grew up playing against each other.) A loose clearance from United defender, Gary Pallister, and I anticipate it a fraction before Ince. I get my chest to the ball and knock it forwards. Just enough. It comes up quick off the wet pitch and back towards my body. Momentum is taking me forward. I must get another touch. Arms out for balance. A right foot flick. The ball's ahead of me now – ahead of Ince too. That's good. It's coming down on my left side. Not a problem.

‘You’ve got to be able to use both feet, son. Learn it and your whole game will open up.’ My dad’s words from the time I could kick a ball ring in my ears. Right foot, left foot. Up against the wall in the garden, on the street, on the training field. Right foot, left foot. Different angles. Different techniques. Extra practice. Hour after hour after hour. All for one moment in a match.

I’ve been doing this since I was five. Practice becomes habit and habit becomes instinct when the pressure’s on. All in one movement. Chest. Right foot. Now let fly with my left. Head down! I don’t even feel the ball leave my foot. I know it’s good.... And time stands still.

Everything slows down. The noise of the crowd fades in my ears as Peter Schmeichel, Manchester United’s huge Danish international goalkeeper, begins to stretch for the ball. He’s off his line! The shot is too good! It’s dipping over him! It’s in, I think. 1-0 to Chelsea. Peacock scores again! They’ll think it’s not their year. We’ll have one hand on the cup! Schmeichel dives backwards. The big Dane stretches his long frame. The ball loops over him. Goal!!! No! Smack! It hits the crossbar. Everything returns to normal speed. They are on the counter-attack. We go in 0-0 at half time. We’re playing well, but an inch lower and we would have been one up. If only....

Half-time intervals are a funny thing in football. Sometimes you can’t wait for them to come. You need a rest. The opposition is hammering you and you need to regroup. But sometimes you don’t want the first half to end. You’re playing well. The opposition is under pressure. It’s only a matter of time before