

WINNING TOGETHER

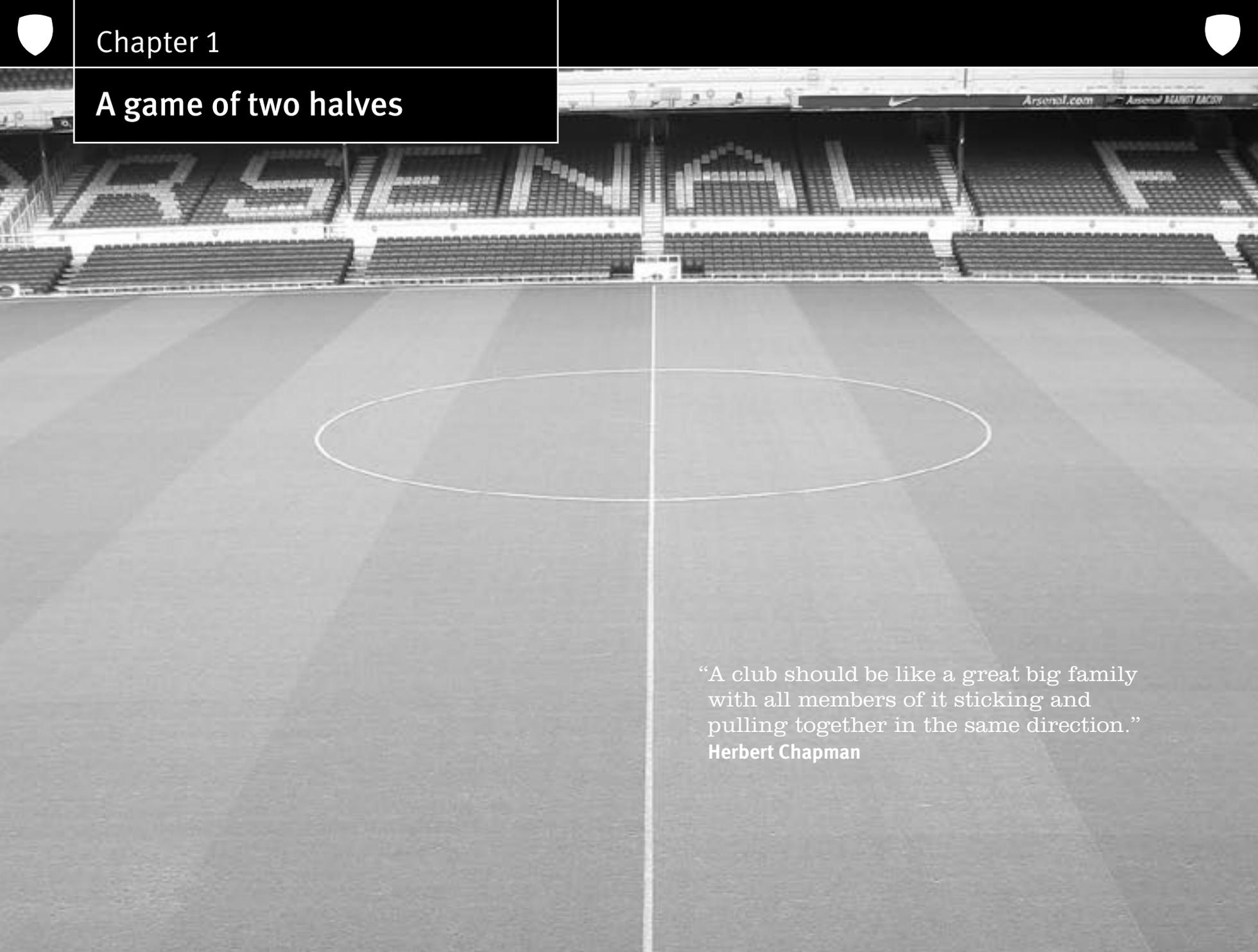
The story of the Arsenal brand
John Simmons and Matt Simmons

CYANBOOKS



Chapter 1

A game of two halves



“A club should be like a great big family
with all members of it sticking and
pulling together in the same direction.”
Herbert Chapman

We started writing this chapter by email, sending each other pieces and then responding, from John to Matt and back again.

John

From: John Simmons

To: Matt Simmons

Subject: A game of two halves

From father to son, from generation to generation. Many people will be shocked, or think I'm being frivolous, when I say that the thing I was always keenest to pass on to you was a love of the Arsenal. But that's the truth. I'm sure it was the same for my father. And the fact that your sister Jessie is Arsenal through and through doubles my delight and relief.

Supporting the Arsenal is a family tradition. We have fewer of these traditions today as political, social and religious allegiances are much looser. It seems, though, to have had the effect of strengthening sporting allegiances, perhaps to fill some of the gap. There is something political, social and religious in our adherence to Arsenal. Watching Arsenal play, in a large and like-minded crowd, is one way to express a belief in a world without barriers of race and class. So we associate ourselves with these people wearing the team colours, on and off the pitch, we share the values; it's a big family in which our family is an integral part of the whole. It's in the blood, we share the DNA, we can never lose the sense of belonging to this family.

That's an incredibly valuable quality for any brand to have. There's probably no other area of commercial life where loyalty runs so deep. Other brands have to work hard to provide emotional connections and memories; here we have a constant stream. What's your first memory of the Arsenal?

Matt

From: Matt Simmons

To: John Simmons

Subject: A game of two halves

My first Arsenal memory. October, 1982, Birmingham City at home. I remember practically nothing from the game, a fact which has less to do with a failing memory, and more to do with the fact that I don't think I was paying much attention at the time. Now, in my defence the game was a boring 0–0 draw, an experience which at least prepared me for the last few years of George Graham's reign at Highbury. I never travelled to Highbury in the expectation of seeing fluent, exciting (or even competent) football. Obviously that all changed with Arsène Wenger. But in early eighties North London, Arsenal were far from being a fashionable team. On the other hand, Spurs at the time were an exciting, skilful side, containing exotic, foreign internationals, and still capable of winning the odd trophy...

So, tragically, my first memory of watching a whole match was the 1981 FA Cup final replay between Spurs and Manchester City on the telly. Though I remember greatly enjoying it, I also remember being aware that this Spurs team who had won the game were not my team, in fact were the opposite. For reasons I couldn't begin to understand, let alone explain, Spurs were the enemy of my team Arsenal.

Anyway, back to October 1982. The game was terrible, but even if it had been a 5-4 thriller I might well not remember much about it. At that stage it was less about the football, and more about the whole experience of going to the Arsenal with my Dad. You're quite right to stress the importance of the family tradition to football. I grew to love and understand football, and Arsenal, but initially I just think I enjoyed it as a chance to bond with you. I haven't discussed this with Jessie, but I suspect it might have been the same for her. Jessie started coming with us a couple of years later, and I remember

that at first she was more interested in us, and the crowd, than the game taking place. That changed of course, just as it had for me previously.

We left the ground after the Birmingham game, and joined the long queue outside Arsenal station. Just the same as everyone around us, you wanted to conduct an inquest into the game. However, upon mentioning some of the (few) significant events from the game it soon became obvious to you that I hadn't been paying much attention. Drastic measures were obviously called for, leading to you issuing the threat that if, when we next came, I couldn't tell you what had happened on the pitch, we wouldn't be coming again.

The threat worked. I've barely taken my eyes off the pitch in all the years since. What a day. My first Arsenal game, and an early introduction to the concept of tough love...

John

From: John Simmons

To: Matt Simmons

Subject: A game of two halves

You mentioned a 5–4 thriller. I suspect that's because I've talked often about the game at Highbury in February 1958 when Manchester United beat Arsenal 5–4. This was the game that infected me with a lifelong passion for football and – despite the defeat – for Arsenal.

At the time Manchester United were definitely the glamorous team. They were known as the Busby Babes because the team was filled with young (mainly teenage) players. They had Duncan Edwards at half-back, idolised as the finest prospect of his generation, and a young Bobby Charlton. They played with style, swagger and a youthful joy. Of course, I hated them, because they weren't my team. My team played in red shirts with white sleeves and was full of older players with Brylcreemed hair, including my favourite player Derek Tapscott (Tappy). By any objective assessment, I should have

supported the Busby Babes. But objectivity rarely comes into it when it's about supporting a football team – or a brand.

My dad took me from home (near King's Cross) by tube. You could feel the excitement in the air as you walked along the street, but it was that walk up from the platform of Arsenal station that burned into my memory as a 'brand experience'. A noisy hubbub, not a lot of singing (that came later in the sixties) but loud talking, shouting and the noise of horns and rattles. Inside the ground we made our way to our usual spot on the North Bank, the second barrier back, behind the goal. When I was smaller I sat on the barrier, on a cushion, with my dad behind me, holding me on. But by this age, nearly ten, I was standing on a stool. My dad came prepared.



29th September 1956

Division One – Arsenal v Manchester United

Arsenal's Derek Tapscott cries out in frustration after his shot beat Manchester United goalkeeper Ray Wood but missed the goal

The match started, the noise was amazing, but the situation on the pitch couldn't have been worse. The United youngsters swept forward at pace, making the Arsenal players look leaden-footed. By half-time we were 3–0 down and it was a gloomy cup of tea we shared. But the second half brought a transformation. Arsenal equalised, 3–3, and it seemed as if the crowd had roared them back into the game. Then it slipped away again, we went 5–3 down before my hero Tappy scored to make it 5–4. We lost but the Arsenal had won my devotion for life. It was a performance full of character and I was proud of them. You don't always have to win. You associate yourself with the effort, the commitment, the dreams that you see out on the pitch.

A few days later it was all put in perspective, not that I was mature enough to see it that way at the time. Manchester United had a midweek European match against Red Star Belgrade and their plane crashed on the runway at Munich Airport. Eight players died including Duncan Edwards and most of the team that I had seen three days earlier. Their manager Matt Busby almost lost his life. Strangely, it was the making of the Manchester United legend. For Arsenal, though, the bleak years of unglamorous underachievement were to continue. But there was still something there that made us the Arsenal. I'm interested in trying to define what that is because it's nothing to do with style of football.

Matt

From: Matt Simmons

To: John Simmons

Subject: A game of two halves

You're quite right to say it's nothing to do with the style of football, as I'm sure the fans of most other clubs would be the first to point out.

I wonder how central the actual football is to any club's identity though. Our great rivals, Spurs, are a good example of a club who have positioned the idea of playing football the 'right' way centrally to their identity. But, as you know, this aspect of their identity is a relatively recent development, springing from Bill Nicholson's great side of the early sixties. Furthermore, Spurs haven't been known for their stylish football for some years now (even appointing our very own George Graham as manager at one point!), yet this has had very little impact on Spurs fans' sense of identity. The football seems (almost) incidental.

It would be easy to say that actually there is very little to differentiate one club's identity from another's. I think this would be wrong though. Every club, and Arsenal more than most, has its own 'feel', something quite distinct from the shirts the players wear, the manager at the time, or even the ground the club play at.

For myself, this sense of identity seems to sit more with the fans, than with the club itself. Our fans are often criticised for being too quiet at games, something which has led to our (current) ground being re-christened "The Highbury Library" by rival fans. On the other hand, there's a lot to be proud of. In over twenty years of going to Highbury I've rarely, if ever, heard racial abuse. We have one of the most cosmopolitan and tolerant crowds in the country. There is practically no hooligan problem among Arsenal fans, and most (unfortunately not all) of our fans support the club with humour and passion. There's a certain bleak sense of humour that comes with supporting Arsenal, that you just don't find amongst fans of other big clubs. We always seem to expect the worst, even at the best of times.

Ultimately, as AFC Wimbledon have shown, a club's identity rests with the fans.