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— Grant Wahl (Sport Illustrated)**

**Foreword by
Bob Bradley**

When Friday Come



**FOOTBALL, WAR AND REVOLUTION
IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

James Montague

WHEN
FRIDAY
COMES

WHEN FRIDAY COMES:

Football, War
&
Revolution
in
the Middle East

by

James Montague



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In memory of the 74.



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FOREWORD

by Bob Bradley

In football there is the journey. As a manager the journey is about leading, analysing, experimenting, solving, hoping to build a team that can be successful, maybe get somewhere it's never been. My journey has me in Egypt where the hopes and dreams of 85 million people lie not only in Tahrir and some new democracy, but in the national team, *Muntakhab*, and the most important Arabic words I have learned. *Kas Al Aalam*. It means World Cup.

A football adventure from the United States to Egypt. Along the way there are many important names, games, experiences, stories. Zak Abdel, loyal friend, goal-keeper coach, Egyptian American. Confederations' Cup 2009. Port Said. Aboutrika. Ahly. Zamalek. Ultras. And yes James Montague.

To begin with the challenges of managing the Egyptian National Team have a lot to do with a personal navigation system. The type of GPS that reads people, situations, politics and emotions. The skills that have been acquired must constantly be improved with new information. This means listening, observing and reading. I threw myself into the columns of John Duerden and James M. Dorsey, and I read *When Friday Comes*. Better yet, I met James Piotr Montague.

He arrived late for our first talk in a hotel in New Cairo, saving a few Egyptian pounds forgoing the taxi for a

microbus, Cairo's cheapest and definitely, most interesting form of transportation. That's James. Substance over style. West Ham supporter. Polish Mum. Witty. All about the journey. Whether in Beirut, Gaza, Doha or Cairo. *When Friday Comes* details personal experiences based on relationships and trusts that develop when you are there in the Ultras' sections of the stadiums or in the smoky, out-of-the-way cafes. Asking honest questions and engaging in true conversations with those that live and breath the game.

James Montague's journey is filled with real life insights that have captivated and helped me along the way. Thanks my friend.

Bob Bradley, Cairo, January 2013

INTRODUCTION

All that I know most surely about morality and obligations, I owe to football.

Albert Camus

The shisha café in the quiet, overlooked suburb of Hor Al Anz in Dubai was the only sign of life on the street. It was late, past midnight, and the sticky humidity that always followed a searing Gulf summer's day coated everyone, and everything, in a thin layer of perspiration. My bed was enticing me home, but I still felt the pull of unfinished business. The lone yellow light along the concrete row of shops and shwarma stands threw itself enticingly onto the pavement in front. A distant clatter of porcelain cups and raised male voices in a foreign tongue wafted over. It was an alien sound, and an alien surrounding, but also immediately recognisable. I instinctively moved towards the light.

Inside, the harsh glow from the strip lighting mixed with the fog-thick fug of sweet apple tobacco and strong, dark cigarettes. It stung the eyes momentarily until a few moments of blinking acclimatised you to the toxic atmosphere. It was standing room only. Every available seat was taken, the space tightly packed together by white-robed Emiratis wearing the traditional *dish dasha*. More stood in any available place they could find. I inched along the back wall and, to my surprise, found a solitary seat overlooked by the crush. A young Pakistani boy worked the cracks in the crowd, emptying ashtrays and refilling tiny thimbles full of thick Turkish coffee as his Egyptian colleague darted around the chairs with his metal ladle of hot coals, replacing the

dying embers from atop each customer's billowing water pipe. The crowd was oblivious to their services. Tactics had to be discussed and players rated. All eyes were glued to the television in the corner of the room for the big match.

The appearance of white uniformity from the back of the room was a myth. Two tribes had emerged from Dubai's darkness to watch their respective teams do battle. An invisible line had been drawn in the sand, the room divided. To the right, the supporters of France, to the left, Brazil. The only way to differentiate the two was the hastily hung flags in each corner. It was the 2006 World Cup quarter-final and neither side could contemplate going home saddled with defeat. Arguments started to break out between the sets of fans over who was truly the greatest player in the world: Ronaldinho or Zidane. One Emirati supporting France had to be pulled back by his friends, so incensed was he that the great Zidane had been defamed. And the match hadn't even started yet.

Fights, devotion and obsession over faraway players and footballing nations was something I had quickly got used to when I accidentally stumbled into Dubai nearly two years previously. I hadn't even known for sure where Dubai was on the map when the email arrived advertising a job on the city's *Time Out* magazine. Two weeks later I was stepping out of an air-conditioned arrivals lounge into a brick wall of humidity. It was August and a thick, moist air had emptied my lungs the moment I stepped out of the controlled environment of the airport. Dubai was noisy, brash and hellishly hot. I had seen many new arrivals to Dubai react in different ways upon arriving in such an alien environment. Some flew back home in a matter of days. Some were driven slowly mad by the heat. Relationships crumbled, vices fed. Most stayed, but stuck to their own in expat communities, replicating the life they had enjoyed back

home oblivious to their surroundings and refusing to mix with the locals to acclimatise.

I had put my faith in football. In the beginning, to appease my longing for home, I would walk to my local shisha café late at night to watch English Premier League matches. More often than not the Egyptian manager would show only Tottenham games, no matter who else was on, given that the Egyptian international Mido was turning out for them at the time. But soon I started to pick up the little threads of local football stories: a 2006 World Cup qualifier where the United Arab Emirates took on the mysterious North Korean national team; the struggles of the Palestinian national football team as they tried, but ultimately failed, to qualify for the 2006 World Cup; riots in the Lebanese league between supporters representing competing sectarian interests; footballers in Yemen struggling to kick the habit of their national drug qat. I devoured each and every story I could find. They were reported matter-of-factly, as if this kind of thing was perfectly normal in the Middle East. In a way, it was. But each story held something of wider significance. At its root football seemed to embody something about the country's psyche, its national character, its place in the world and where it was heading. I wanted to find out more about the Middle East, its mysteries and its contradictions. Football was the perfect prism.

My catalyst was the news that French World Cup winner Marcel Desailly had signed to play in the Qatari league. Qatar was a barren, inoffensive country whose recent discoveries of gas had given it phenomenal wealth. A lot of this money was being pumped into sport, especially football, in an attempt to raise its international profile. Without thinking or having any particular plan I booked a flight to Doha. It seemed an absurd place with absurd ambitions to rule the world. How little I knew back then.

I then booked another flight to Egypt. And then another to Iran. It was the start of a journey that would take me to terraces and football pitches as far south as Sana'a, to Tehran in the east, to Cairo in the west and to Damascus in the north. In all these places I discovered the same thing: a deep and passionate love for the beautiful game and a window of wider understanding.

Talk of the globalisation of football isn't anything new. Neither is it particularly illuminating that passion is something the Middle East has in abundance, though there is a messianic reverence for the game that matches anything in Europe or South America. Yet, in theory, it shouldn't be like this. The Middle East isn't a place pre-disposed to successful Western interventions. Tragedy has stalked every corner of the region and when I first arrived the West's standing couldn't have been lower. Decades of nefarious interference in Iran, Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq to name a few, had created a toxic mix of corrupt regimes, Islamic fundamentalism, poverty, anger and disillusionment. The duplicity and betrayal reached its nadir after the disastrous second Gulf War and the dismantling of Iraq. As the veteran war correspondent Robert Fisk wrote:

From the borders of Hindu Kush to the Mediterranean, we - we Westerners that is - are creating... a hell disaster.

The chaos and the confusion had been a boon for Islamic fundamentalists seeking to paint the world in black and white, in us versus them rhetoric. It seemed - at least it did when I first wrote the introduction to *When Friday Comes* in 2008 - that the diverse range of people who called the Middle East their home were rejecting the ideals that had once been heralded as the force of modernity. As a Westerner, an outsider trying to make sense of it all, taking the pulse of a region would be nigh on impossible normally.

Yet despite all this, one Western cultural export had achieved something that no amount of military intervention, aggressive foreign policy or attempted subjugation could. Football had won hearts and minds in the Middle East. Every country in the region was obsessed with the beautiful game. A weekend of English Premier League or Serie A or La Liga football had the power to momentarily disable the most unforgiving jihadist. On the surface the apocryphal story of how Osama Bin Laden would stand on the Highbury terraces of his beloved Arsenal in the 1990s sounded ridiculous. But it was a testament to the game's power and reach that it was almost believable. Almost.

How had the game conquered the land that one might expect to reject it the most? After all, the document that brought the game to life, one of the only documents that has universal and unwavering approval across the region and across sectarian lines, was set down in a smoke-filled room by English public school masters in the nineteenth century. In his *Twelve Books That Changed the World*, which included the Rule Book of Association Football amongst the dozen, Melvyn Bragg wrote that football:

Has caused at least one war and many battles, often tragic, off the pitch. It has always triggered outbursts of local and national joy, pride and unity . . . and it all flowed from the meeting of a few Victorian Oxbridge graduates in a pub in Lincoln's Inn Fields in London 1863. Before the afternoon was out they had called themselves 'the football association' and the Rule Book was on its way.

It was perhaps the greatest imperialist document ever written, allowing the British Empire to successfully spread the footballing gospel. When the British forces that helped colonise the game from land, sea and air retreated,

momentum did the rest. Now, whether I was in Amman or Irbil, the first question I was asked in cafés and on street corners wasn't about George Bush or Tony Blair, or the war or Israel. I wasn't spat at in the street or harangued for my country's complicity in very bad things. Rather, it was: 'Manchester United or Chelsea?' with the more sophisticated barracking me for supporting such a bunch of underachievers as West Ham United. One Lebanese international footballer in his late 20s even went as far as conceding that the 3-3 FA Cup final against Liverpool in 2006 was interesting to watch, but that West Ham were a shadow of the 1966 team, with Moore and Peters. I watched avowed Hezbollah members profess their undying love for Steven Gerrard, and spoke to Syrians who were livid – angrier than me, certainly – with Steve McClaren for not steering England to the finals of Euro 2008.

Simply put, football is the Middle East's great unifying thread. More so, you could argue, than Islam, divided as it is, sometimes violently, between Shia and Sunni, and certainly more than the failed forces of Arab nationalism. Even language fails the test when you throw the Farsi speaking Iranians and the Hebrew speaking Israelis into the mix.

True, some had sought to drive a wedge between football and the Middle East's most dominant and uncompromising religion: Islam. The most famous being the 2003 football fatwa issued by a Saudi cleric Sheikh Abdallah al Najdi, which signified a strange attempt to Islamify football. In it the Sheikh gave a 15-point plan of how to rid the game of Western influence. These included only punishing transgressions, not by red or yellow cards, but by Sharia law; playing only one half; not playing in front of crowds; and urging followers to use the game only to strengthen the body for jihad. My favourite, though, was point nine:

'You should spit in the face of whoever puts the ball between the posts or uprights and then runs in order to get his friends to follow him and hug him like players in America or France do, and you should punish him, for what is the relationship between celebrating, hugging and kissing and the sports that you are practising?'

According to the Middle Eastern Media Research Institute in Washington, Saudi newspaper Al Watan had reported that the fatwas had provoked three players from Al Rashid football club to leave and join the insurgency in Iraq, even though the fatwas were roundly condemned in Saudi Arabia. The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdul Ibn Abdallah Aal-Sheikh, who was also an adviser for the Saudi Justice Department, told Al Watan:

[The authorities needed to] prosecute those involved in the publishing of these fatwas in a Sharia court for the crime they have committed [and to] track down those involved and prosecute them, in view of the dangers and the venom with which they are trying to influence society.

Neither was there anything wrong with the supposedly heathen rules that had been incorporated from the West.

There is nothing wrong with . . . the soccer rules. All things that come from the West but are not unique to it are permitted. Soccer has become a world sport and does not belong only to the non-believers.

When I first wrote this introduction, it was here that I said that *When Friday Comes* isn't a book with a happy ending,

where football provided some kind of silver bullet to solve the region's seemingly intractable problems. Football doesn't change things by itself. A two-state solution won't be kick-started by the Palestinian national team playing Israel. Currently neither team would even dream of playing the other. And that still holds true. Football – thanks to its ubiquity and its closeness to the street, the beating heart of its society – is a mirror that reflects the Zeitgeist; a sponge that soaks up the tensions, the flaws, the frustrations and the hopes of society. For those involved it is one of the few forms of catharsis. Which might give another explanation as to why, every Friday from Aden to Tehran, millions of fans leave the mosque and head straight for their local football club. In the absence of true democracy and a genuine public space, the terraces provide a forum for dissent. In Jordan, the songs for a free Palestine sung by the fans of the football team from Wihdat refugee camp wouldn't be accepted by the police on the street. In Iran the frustrations of the women's rights movement are vented, not outside the Majlis, but outside the Azadi national football stadium before every home international. And in Egypt it was the terraces that provided a space for young football fans to air grievances with Hosni Mubarak's dictatorship.

In the Middle East there was the mosque and the terrace, and little in between.

The power and the thought that the mosque has engendered has been well documented. But the terraces and stands of the football grounds of the region had been neglected for similar treatment, often because of a misguided idea that sport and politics are separate entities. Football is politics in the same way music is politics, or art, or film. It is an expression of the soul with a tribal beat. And it played its role – in some countries a vital role – in the greatest political upheaval to affect the region since the end of colonial rule.

When Mohamed Bouazizi a poor, young Tunisian fruit and vegetable seller – blazing with injustice and frustration after having his meagre fruit cart impounded – set fire to himself in Tunisia in December 2010 it sparked a wave of uprisings and revolutions that are still only in their infancy. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen; all saw their people rise up to depose leaders that slowly constricted the life out of them. In the time before the Arab Spring, in the dark before the dawn, the atmosphere was hopeless and suffocating. Nowhere was this more true than in Egypt where Mubarak the elder had crushed his opposition so completely that in the paralysis of the jaded he almost, almost, succeeded in passing the mantle on to his son to continue his immorality. But in Egypt the people fought back. Not on the streets, but first in the stadiums. Then outside the stadiums. And then on the streets. For three years the ultras groups of Egypt's biggest clubs grew more anti-regime with every beating and every arrest. Yet they couldn't be controlled. When the damn burst on 25 January 2011, the ultras were on the front line.

It was now more than simply using the game to hold a mirror to something that I wanted to understand better. The game itself had become part of the narrative. In Egypt the ultras I had met by accident during a match in 2007 became the 'protectors of the revolution'. In Libya, the fledgling new transitional government realised that the national team's qualification for the African Cup Nations was worth more than a thousand show trials of Gaddafi apparatchiks. In Bahrain, the royal family realised the power of football too, but for the opposite effect. It was those involved in the game – national heroes – who were punished for their role in asking for greater freedoms. Their fame and their talent had been reversed, turned on them, bastardized to send a message to those that dared to question the status quo. Football didn't cause the Arab Spring. The neglect,

humiliation and abuse of the poor and the young did. But in the game many found a voice that would not be heard by any other means, for good and sometimes for bad.

All the while, at its core, the fundamentals of the game and the passion it engenders remains the same: Indivisible, unchanging, sometimes ugly, always beautiful. It is why now, in tandem with the chaos of the Arab Spring, the new oil wealth of the Gulf is being channelled into football, through Manchester City, through PSG and, of course, through the 2022 World Cup which will be held in Qatar. That first trip to Qatar to meet Marcel Desailly and that evening in Dubai, during the World Cup quarter-final, seem like a world away. But they still uphold the central tenant of what makes the game so fundamental to so many people in the Middle East and beyond: its universality. In that cafe in Hor al Anz I watched France famously dispense with Brazil 1-0 thanks to a Thierry Henry goal. The French contingent of Emiratis celebrated as if the United Arab Emirates had themselves put the Brazilians out. They ran into the street and mounted a fleet of expensive, powerful 4x4s before driving them out onto a patch of sandy waste ground, spinning doughnuts and blaring their horns whilst hanging a French flag out of a blacked-out window. The Brazilian fans quickly walked away, heads down, in silence – the defeat tasting every bit as bitter as it did in Rio.

London, March 2013

PROLOGUE

February 2012

Like the blood-red sun that had just drained and disappeared over the Nile a few minutes earlier, the protest was dying; its power darkened and diminished with each passing second. Hundreds of young men and women – most of the women covering their hair with the hijab – stood in front of a steel, stone and razor wire barricade. They chanted at Egypt's hated police, who had formed a line to protect the country's parliament a stone's throw from the cradle of the January 25 revolution: Tahrir Square. Every side road was blocked by newly constructed concrete walls. Every reflective surface smashed; windows, ATM screens, mirrors. Every wall was daubed with revolutionary graffiti.

'Fuck the Police'
'Fuck the Military'
'Fuck Mubarak'

One protester laid down a piece of cardboard and prayed next to a wall under a freshly sprayed anarchist symbol. It had been over a year since the toppling of The Pharaoh. The January 25 revolution that swept Hosni Mubarak and his cabal of criminals, perverts and cronies from power – his sons Alaa and crown prince Gamal included – was the high tide of the Arab Spring. But for the young people who had congregated here a new threat needed to be combated.

Egypt had become what they saw as a military dictatorship. The iron grip hadn't loosened since the fall of Mubarak, they argued, but merely changed position from Egypt's neck to its wrist.

Protests continued but not in the same numbers or ferocity. Perhaps it was protest fatigue. Perhaps it was the fact that the directions sent out by the organisers via Twitter were vague. The crowd had slowly drifted away; each revolutionary slogan met with diminishing vigour.

The police line took a step forward, sensing the changing tide.

The darkness was suddenly illuminated by a new blood-red fire. A flare had been cracked open by a young man wearing a distinctive red shirt, held aloft triumphantly. Next to him another unfurled a familiar flag; red, with a soaring eagle embossed on a shield: the flag of Egypt's most popular football club, Al Ahly. The young men were part of the Ahlawy, Al Ahly's own ultras group; thousands of militant, anti-authoritarian football fans.

Suddenly the protest was reborn, as if spirit had been thrown on the embers of a fire. The young men stormed the barricades, urging others to climb with them. Even the man praying by the anarchist symbol had rejoined the fray. They flew their flag and urged the rest to sing.

'Horriya! Horriya!'

Freedom.

The police line took one step back.

1 EGYPT

May 2007

After all his planning and high expectations, Assad looked like a man broken by the unforeseen. He sat, along with 40,000 fellow Al Ahly fans, with his face in his hands. The vast stretch of red shirts and flags were motionless in their half of the Cairo International Stadium in Egypt. The silence was stunned and awkward before a brooding malevolence rose, making me feel uncomfortable for the first time.

In the distance, the white half of the stadium was a violent sea of celebration. Furrowed faces darted for explanation between friends and strangers alike. Al Ahly were 2-0 down thanks to a stunning goal worked by Mahmoud 'Shikabala' Abdel Razeq Fadlallah. This was a bad thing for two reasons. Firstly, being 2-0 down to anyone was bad enough. After all, Al Ahly weren't a team that did losing. They had once gone almost three years without losing, a streak that lasted for 71 games and had only finally come to an end a few months previously. But this was worse, for a second reason. Much worse. They were losing to Zamalek, their hated Cairo rivals, their bourgeois city foes.

More people watched this match than any other in Africa, and for the six-figure crowd that turned up to see it in the flesh, the derby meant more than just football. It was about politics, history, identity, colonialism, escapism and pride. And for Assad, leader of Ahly's hardcore supporters group, the Ultras, the battle was equally important on the terraces as it was on the pitch. For weeks he and his band of Ahly

fans had been planning for the game by devising the best way to taunt the opposition's fans.

Their group had only been in existence for a few months but they were nothing if not ambitious. They opted for a huge flag, designed to cover most of the north stand, mocking the 6-1 defeat meted out by Ahly in 2002. It was proudly displayed before kick-off. Assad looked behind at it now, an impotent heap of plastic and paint crumpled at the back of the stand. It was time to go back to basics. The explosion was inevitable.

'Listen everybody,' he screamed defiantly to all those that surrounded him, breaking the silence and the gloom. 'I'm going to beat Shikabala, the cunt. I'm going to beat him in the face!'



In Cairo you belong to one of two tribes, one red, one white: Ahly or Zamalek. There are other football teams in Egypt, of course. Ahly and Ismaily have a big rivalry; In Alexandria the biggest team is Ittihad. But nothing gets the blood pumping like Ahly versus Zamalek. Almost every Egyptian has their allegiance. On a taxi journey from Sharjah to Dubai four months previously my Egyptian driver had spilt his colours before he even told me his name. 'I am Ahly, of course,' he said proudly, before regaling me with stories of how 100,000 people would queue from the morning to get in, with another 100,000 stuck outside. Inevitably riots would break out.

'Do not go,' he imparted ominously as I handed over my fare, 'You will be killed.'

His words came back to me as the plane landed at Cairo International Airport in the middle of the night. Arriving at Cairo airport is like turning up on the set of a 1970s British light farce about the last days of the empire. Jack-booted

soldiers march around in ridiculously ornate uniforms. Men sit at desks where papers and passports are passed along a large line before disappearing into an unmarked bureaucratic hell. Everything – the walls, the desks, the light – was coloured brown and grey and beige. The humid weight of early summer kept the city's overpowering odour of sewage, as well as the border guards' incessant cigarette smoke, at ground level. Once this was the personification of modernity; a bright vision for visitors arriving in a vibrant and upwardly mobile city. Now it was as if a pane of drably coloured glass had been placed in front of the eyes.

It was Friday, the day that Ahly and Zamalek should have played each other. But the authorities had got wise to the violence and moved it to an early kick-off on Monday, hoping that thousands would be put off by the awkward timing. 'Ahly or Zamalek?' I asked the taxi driver after our conversation in pidgin Arabic, and then pidgin English, had ground to a halt. 'Ahly,' he replied with a shrug, as if there could be only one answer.

The roots of the rivalry can be traced back to when the British army walked the streets of Cairo. Football was almost universally regarded as Britain's only popular cultural import. Al Ahly was started in 1907 as the first Egyptian-run club. The name translates as 'The National' and Ahly, wearing the old red colours of the pre-colonial flag, was seen as a team for the nation, a bulwark against occupation and a chance for the average man on the street to come together for a common nationalistic cause. Zamalek, wearing white, was considered the team of the foreigner (read the British), the unpopular, the outsider. Originally called *Mokhtalat*, the hated King Farouk agreed to have the team named in his honour, before Farouk was changed to Zamalek post abdication. The team traditionally attracted not just the occupiers but also the people who had got rich by what Egyptian nationalists called 'collaboration'.

Zamalek was also home to the awkward squad: the authors, poets and intellectuals who were uneasy with Egypt's new-found nationalistic confidence.

As much as the Cairo derby was about nationalism, it was also about class: the truly loyal man on the street versus the effete, shabbily wealthy liberal. But it had always been bloody. As with the majority of the world's great derbies, violence featured prominently in past bouts. Such was the ferocious hatred between the fans that since the 1990s no Ahly versus Zamalek match had been played in their home grounds. Instead, all games were played at Cairo's huge national stadium. The referees were not beyond suspicion either. Foreign officials were bussed in to take charge of proceedings. Scottish referees versed in handling the Old Firm rivalry between Celtic and Rangers were particularly popular. Egypt's notoriously baton-happy riot police took the threat of disorder very seriously and swamped the matches any time the two played. In fact, Egypt's riot police had become even more proficient with their batons in recent months. Hosni Mubarak had recently won what opposition parties called a sham election and had fought off threats to his power, especially from the popular but banned Muslim Brotherhood, a well-organised Islamic movement with links to Hamas. Police prevented voters from reaching the polls, intimidation was rife and opposition candidates were either locked up or denied the chance to stand. Mubarak walked it with 89 per cent of the vote.

Cairo felt hopeless; intractably poor and squeezed between an authoritarian government and Islamic fundamentalism. The hostel where I was staying didn't seem too bothered by goings on in the outside world though. Five young men and a bald pensioner sat in the reception area quickly smoking short joints, giggling hysterically. The pensioner passed it on without saying a word. The keys

dropped into my hand as I sucked in the first breath. Welcome to Cairo.



Ayman Younis knew a thing or two about the enmity between the two sides of Cairo. As Zamalek's star striker in the late 1980s, and a regular in Egypt's national team, Ahly fans targeted him in ever more elaborate, vicious and sometimes hilarious ways. These days he was the main anchor for Egyptian and English Premier League football on state television whilst supplying 3-D advertising mats for sports pitches, as well as being on the Egyptian FA's board. If there was anyone who could get me into Ahly and Zamalek's training sessions – which were heavily guarded in fortified complexes – it was Ayman.

I called him from a public telephone in a grocery store near the hostel. He had some bad news. 'There is no training today,' he said. There could have been any number of reasons: the clubs had swapped venue or date to flummox Egypt's vicious sports press; or worried about fan violence, training might have been cancelled. The answer was far more surprising.

'It's the FA Cup final, Chelsea versus Manchester United. All the players and the coaches want to watch it.' Ayman invited me over to watch the match at his place.

His villa was on the outskirts of Cairo, towards 6 October City. This was where the moneyed middle classes chose to live these days, away from the dirt, noise and poverty of Cairo in a newly built and rapidly expanding settlement. It derived its name from the date that President Anwar Sadat – the man who made peace with Israel – was assassinated. It was as if, rather than struggling to integrate into Cairo, the wealthy had instead decided to rip it up and start again somewhere nearby.

Short and with tightly curled black hair, Ayman welcomed me into his huge house as if I were a long-lost family member. His three-storey home told me that, post-football, Ayman had not struggled. Back in the 1980s he was a fast, skilful attacking midfielder who had a reputation for raising his game for the big derby.

‘I think I played maybe 11 derbies between 1983 and 1994,’ he explained. ‘I scored four times. I was lucky, I always played well in these matches.’

It wasn't enough to take his word for it. Handily Ayman had set up his large entertainment room, which doubled up as his trophy cabinet, so that I could experience some of his magic on television. He sat me down, passed me a Pepsi and slid the first videotape in. The screen blinked to life, initially a distorted mess of popping feedback, Arabic and neon-green. It was a compilation of his best goals: a scissor kick against Ahly in 1988; goals in the African Cup of Nations; the final of the African Champions League. He looked on engrossed, oblivious to my presence.

‘Mubarak was there!’ he shouted, pointing at the screen, lifting himself out of his seat at the same time. ‘There, he was there!’

The crackling Arabic on screen gave way to a Brazilian-esque surge from the overexcited commentator: ‘AyyyyyymanYooooooooooooooooounis!’ And there he was, with his tight retro-shorts, large Afro and barrel chest, wheeling away in celebration after volleying it into the top left-hand corner. The camera focused in on the mass of white celebrating the goal. Men were standing on the terraces holding their babies up in almost sacrificial celebration.

‘Ahly fans say this goal was offside,’ he said, turning around, breaking his grin and taking on an air of seriousness. ‘But it wasn't. That was the goal of the season. But 1990 was my best season, I scored a horrible number of goals.’

Ayman's best form coincided with Egypt's World Cup appearance at Italia '90, their first since a brief, one match appearance at Italy 1934. The stage was set for Ayman's goal-scoring prowess. But he never made it onto the plane.

'I was in Scotland for the last [warm-up] game [before the World Cup] and the fucking number eight,' he spat, still angry at the memory of Egypt's 3-1 victory in Aberdeen 18 years later. 'The number eight[according to the Scottish FA that shirt was worn by Aberdeen midfielder Jim Bett] had a problem with me, he kicked me in the knee and *khalas*, finished, I had to go to Germany for an operation.'

Bett may never realise it but he might indirectly have had a hand in England's greatest World Cup performance since 1966. Egypt had a strong, defensive-minded team that drew its opening two group games with the Netherlands and Ireland. The crunch match came against England, which Egypt lost thanks to a solitary Mark Wright goal. The group was so tight that if Egypt had won 1-0 England would have finished bottom. But Egypt had struggled to score goals without Ayman and, as one of Egypt's most creative forces, he would almost certainly have played in the final game. A 1-1 draw would have created a first in World Cup history: every team finishing on the same points, with the same goals scored and the same goals against. England, Egypt, the Netherlands and Ireland's World Cup future would have been decided on the drawing of lots.

The next season Younis went back to being a thorn in Ahly's side, but he paid a price off the pitch.

'If I go to the stadium I have to go without my car as they break everything,' he said of Ahly's fans who, to this day, still hound him in the street. 'When I was playing I had a lot of problems with Ahly fans. In 1990 I found my BMW car on its side and they signed it 'Ahly fans'. And that was when we lost, 2-0, but they remembered that I scored in the first game earlier in the season.' That, however, wasn't the worst

of it. 'Then there was the time they attacked me in my home. I had to phone the police. Five thousand Ahly fans came to my street and shouted against me, my wife and kids, throwing things at us.'

The FA Cup final turned out to be turgid and, with the game instantly forgotten, Ayman offered to drive me back to Cairo. For Ayman his love of Zamalek, along with its fans, transcended nearly every other impulse in his life, even religion.

'Ask a Zamalek fan, can you change religion?' he said as his sleek black BMW pulled away down the empty highway. 'He wouldn't answer. But you ask them: 'Can you change Zamalek?' They'd say 'No!' And if you see a policeman, they won't ask you whether you are Muslim or a Christian, they'll ask you whether you are Ahly or Zamalek. It's true.' But there was a historical demarcation when it came to religion. 'Fifty years ago Ahly became the team of the devout [but] Zamalek was the team of the middle classes,' he said.

The car's average speed dropped as we neared Cairo and the conversation turned to Israel. Ayman sucked air sharply through his teeth. 'If you have been to Israel, trust me, someone is following you.'

'What, even now?' I asked, looking around for any suspicious black cars keeping a steady distance behind us.

'I hate Israel,' Ayman continued. 'Not Israelis, but Israeli politicians and the wars. We've had three of them and lost something like 15,000 people. Everyone has lost someone.'

Ayman's BMW pulled to the kerb when we reached Zamalek Island. He offered me his card and pulled out a fat wedge of Egyptian notes, counting them out in front of me.

'Do you need any money?' he asked. 'I can give you money.'

'I'm OK, Ayman, I have money.'

'Are you sure?' He looked a little offended. 'OK, but if you need anything, ANYTHING, call me. If you need something,