

'66 hero Alan Ball dies

Football

AFP, London

Alan Ball, who teammates said was the hero of England's 1966 World Cup winning team, has died from a heart attack at the age of 61.

At 21, Ball was the youngest member of the England team that beat West Germany 4-2. His man-of-the-match effort typified his attitude in a football career that saw him play 975 first-team games over 21 years.

The England legend collapsed and died outside his home after attempting to fight a blaze that had got out of control, police said. His death was not being treated as suspicious.

Ball is the second member of the side to die. Captain Bobby Moore died of cancer in 1993.

Ball played 72 times for his country between 1965 and 1975, scoring eight goals and captaining the side six times.

The former Arsenal and Everton midfielder also forged a career in management, taking charge at Southampton, Manchester City and Portsmouth.

Ball's son Jimmy said his father had watched on television as Manchester United beat AC Milan 3-2 in Tuesday's Champions League semifinal first leg.

"I was talking to him last night just after the football and he was in great form. We were talking about (Paul) Scholes's pass," he said from his father's home.

"And then I got a phone call in the middle of the night. It's unbelievable and very, very sad."

He added: "I would like him to be known as a nice man with a passion for football. He had a big heart and was very generous."

Ball cut a distinctive with his diminutive stature, high-pitched voice and flame-red hair.

In the 1966 World Cup final, his cross set up striker Geoff Hurst's famously controversial goal that put England 3-2 ahead in extra time.

Hurst said fellow teammates were "all totally devastated" by Ball's death.

"He was the youngest member

of the team and man of the match in the 1966 World Cup final," said Hurst.

Born James Alan Ball on May 12, 1945 in Bolton, northwest England, he began his career with Blackpool, turning professional in May 1962 and making his league debut that year aged 17.

His tenacious performances caught the eye of England manager Alf Ramsey, who gave him his first cap in a 1-1 draw with Yugoslavia in Belgrade in May 1965.

He made it into Ramsey's World Cup squad and his heroics earned

him a 110,000-pound move to Everton in August 1966.

Ball made 208 league appearances for the Toofees, scoring 66 goals. Everton were 1968 FA Cup finalists and won the 1969-1970 English title.

Champions and FA Cup holders Arsenal bought him for 220,000 pounds in December 1971, but they lost their grip on both trophies, and Ball earned another FA Cup runners-up medal.

He played 177 league games for the Gunners, scoring 45 goals.

In 1973, he became only the

second player to be sent off in a full international, which meant he missed a crucial World Cup qualifier which England failed to win, keeping them out of the 1974 tournament.

Southampton manager Lawrie McMenemy signed Ball for 60,000 pounds in December 1976 and he helped them back into the top division in 1978. He earned a League Cup runners-up medal with the Saints in 1979.

He played for Philadelphia Fury and Vancouver Whitecaps before returning to Blackpool as a player-coach in 1980.

Ball then played for Southampton again, Hong Kong side Eastern Athletic before joining Bristol Rovers in 1983, where he finished his career, having played 975 competitive matches in total.

He took charge at Portsmouth in 1984 and guided them back into the top division in 1987, though they were relegated after one season and Ball was sacked.

He took over at Southampton in 1994 and kept them in the Premiership.

Ball then joined Manchester City in July 1995, but they were relegated from the top flight and he quit three games into the following season.

He returned to second-tier Portsmouth in February 1998 and hauled them out of the relegation zone that season.

However, his contract was terminated as the club fell into a financial crisis.

He and four others from the England's World Cup winning side were finally made members of the Order of the British Empire in 2000, given the MBE honour decades after their teammates, an anomaly which infuriated many England supporters.

To raise money for his family, Ball auctioned his World Cup winners' medal and commemorative tournament cap for 140,000 pounds in 2005, something many fans found tragically sad in an era of vast players salaries.

McMenemy said the pair were due to play Wednesday in a heart charity golf event.



ALAN BALL

Cruyff's new legacy

Football

AFP, The Hague

Dutch football legend Johan Cruyff celebrates his 60th birthday here on Wednesday where he is revered not only as the greatest player of all time but also as a cultural phenomenon who even has his own language: Cruyffian.

Comments like "coincidence is logical" and "you don't get it until you understand it" have earned the ex-player a cult status in the Netherlands.

Cruyff, born April 25, 1947, is even the subject of articles in the Dutch *Onze Taal* (Our Language) magazine.

"Cruyff the speaker slices and turns, accelerates and slows down in his language just as easily as he used to on the field," linguists Guus Middag and Kees van der Zwan wrote.

The triple European Footballer of the Year (1971, 1973 and 1974), and the European Footballer of the Century, is not just a famous ex-player but a football oracle in his own right whose opinions on the game are at once enormously insightful and startlingly simple.

His analysis are often rambling stream-of-consciousness remarks like "Italians cannot beat you but you can lose to them".

The Dutch love it.

"It had the power of paradox that comes with an air of deeper

insight. It was slightly funny as with everything that could either be obvious or nonsense," the linguists said.

In the 1970s Cruyff symbolised the football revolution of the so-called total football -- a fluid team where every player can play from every position if necessary -- that the Dutch national team and his club Ajax made famous.

He won eight Dutch league titles with Ajax Amsterdam and three European Cups and reached the World Cup final in 1974 only to lose to the Netherlands' arch-rivals Germany.

He went on to a successful career with Barcelona where he was revered as El Salvador (the saviour).

Cruyff has always been an intelligent and strong-willed player.

Even when he was not yet a coach he was always advising the other players around him.

After his playing career ended he became a coach even though he initially lacked the necessary qualifications.

Eventually the Dutch football association (KNVB) grudgingly agreed to give him the status of coach without him having followed the required course.

After a successful run coaching Ajax and Barcelona Cruyff became a football analyst for Dutch public television.

It was there that his strange

use of language, coupled with his insights, propelled him to the status of resident oracle in the Netherlands.

His so-called Cruyffian language is very popular with his "every disadvantage has its advantage" becoming a modern catch phrase.

In a poll commissioned by Dutch news agency ANP for his 60th birthday that phrase was voted most popular ahead of other classics as "if we have the ball, they can't score" and "it doesn't matter if the opposing side scores a goal as long as you score one more than them".

In the ANP poll only 25 percent of the 1,200 people polled said they understood his insights. Fifty-three percent said they can't always follow his analysis but don't mind.

According to the book "Who is Johan Cruyff. Insiders explain the oracle" by Mik Schots and Jan Luitzen his biggest critic is his wife Danny.

She told the authors that when he comes home from his TV job she often tells him "explain that to me again because I don't understand what you mean!"

The current Dutch national team coach Marco van Basten once said: "Johan drives me crazy because he always wants to be right".

"Then two months later he really drives me to insanity when it turns out he was right all along."

too respected in the game and I respect him.

"I reacted the same way I've always come back from things, like whenever people say I'm not up to the job."

"I proved to him I am a professional. I think he said, 'How can he be committed to the team when he's signed to someone else?'

"But I proved I am committed; it doesn't matter if I'm going."

"I'll still go flying into tackles and try and win something with this team."

The former Manchester United midfielder has been a popular figure during his four-year stint in the Spanish capital, but speaking about Capello's decision to leave him in the cold, he admitted he was just as shocked as everyone else.

"I was really surprised," Beckham added. "He (Capello) has always been pretty fair with me."

"He's been really respectful of

me as a person and a player and that's why it was such a surprise."

"But he's shown what sort of a person and man -- and manager -- he is now."

"I was thinking I would never play for (Real) again and it was hurting me a lot."

Now Beckham, who has just returned to the side after a knee injury, will play a part in Real's unlikely bid for the Primera Liga title and get the chance to compete once again in what he considers to be one of the world's finest sporting arenas.

"For me playing at the Bernabeu is one of the best feelings in the world."

"I always loved playing at the Bernabeu and when I look back, playing at the Bernabeu will be the highlight of playing at Madrid except, obviously, for wearing the famous white shirt."

INTERNET, undated

David Beckham has admitted he never once lost respect for coach Fabio Capello when he was dropped from the Real Madrid first team earlier in the season.

The former Manchester United midfielder has been a popular figure during his four-year stint in the Spanish capital, but speaking about Capello's decision to leave him in the cold, he admitted he was just as shocked as everyone else.

"I told Sky Sports 2: 'I'm thankful (to Capello). I would never come out publicly and criticise him. He's

always been pretty fair with me.'

"He's been really respectful of

the team and man of the match in the 1966 World Cup final," said Hurst.

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