

Poor Man's Theatre

Deano Standing talks about his Christian faith and love of Millwall Football Club

Deano Standing is a committed Christian, author and works for local radio and Millwall Football Club. He has published several books about football and is a Church Warden in Gillingham.



writer in 1991. In the 1970's and 1980's, Millwall FC had a terrible reputation. At the time the Chairman said we were the coat-peg on which British football could hang all of its problems. To the wider public, the club was synonymous with football hooliganism. It wasn't Millwall specifically. There is something about young, male, tribal warfare that attaches itself to football in the UK, but it was also the same in Holland, Italy and Germany. I think it has something to do with football club fans protecting their turf in what was seen as a very working class, macho sport."

Football fans have been pilloried for their overt racism which began when the first black players joined British football clubs in the mid 1970's. Deano said, "This was at a time when the name of Millwall was, rightly or wrongly, synonymous with racism and ironically, two of their own very popular players - Phil Walker and Trevor Lee - were black. The racism had no coherent rationale. As far as the fans were concerned, these people were different and 'not from around here'. That's all it took. This is in the context of a country where up to the 1960's people rarely travelled more than a few miles away from where they grew up. You can see this in Gospel stories like the good Samaritan. A man was attacked because he was an outsider and two thousand years later, that still exists. Notionally, we want to be with people like us - and Christ's message is one of both inclusivity and exclusivity. You can see this type of behaviour now, with the current migrant crisis."

Born in Horsham and brought up as a Christian, Deano Standing has lived in Kent for most of his adult life. He has enjoyed a life-long interest in sport, especially football. He said, "Football used to be called the 'poor man's theatre'. When I was at school, I wanted to be a sports writer. I just wanted to go to football matches and write about them! I have a degree in government, politics and modern history from Brunel University and I wrote and edited the Student Union newspaper."

Working first as a recreation officer for a psychiatric hospital and then a residential social worker in Hackney, Deano found

work at the Northfleet sports and youth centre. He then had what he describes as "a mid-life crisis at 30" when he gave up his professional life and worked as a builder's labourer instead. He retained his fervent love of football and wrote for the Crystal Palace Football Club magazine, before attending a placement with Crystal Palace FC in 1990. This led to him working with the BBC and Capital Gold as a football reporter/commentator.

Whilst at Crystal Palace, Deano worked with the marketing director. Deano said, "Mike Ryan moved via Celtic to Millwall and called me one day and asked me to work with him as a freelance



Deano has remained loyal to Millwall FC for many years and combined it with his faith. He said, "There's something about Millwall; for all its reputation, it's like a close-knit, dysfunctional family. You have to be a certain sort of player to play for Millwall - it's the archetypal working class club. The fans were originally working class dock workers with hard lives and a short life expectancy. There was real rivalry between, for example, the Tilbury and Millwall docks, with Tilbury dock workers supporting West Ham United. There would be fights in the pubs between the dock workers. They worked five and-a-half days a week and the match started at 3.15 to give them time to get to the game. These were hard drinking men and women didn't generally attend the match. These values were handed down from father to son. Young men were taught to respect the family, value Queen and country and support Millwall."

In a world where footballers are reported to earn more than the captains of industry, Deano is pragmatic about the eye-watering salaries that some professional footballers in the Premier League earn. He said,

"Top level salaries are ludicrous, but when you get below that, players can earn a good to reasonable standard of living. Premier League players might earn up to £130,000 a week and others around £5,000 a week but their career is over at around 33 or 34 and it's an insecure business. Talent isn't enough and players need mental toughness to succeed. Only a small handful of players go from contract to contract. Here's an extreme example: in the 2004 FA cup final, the current best player in the world Cristiano Ronaldo, who now earns in excess of £200,000 a week, was marked by Millwall's left back - Robbie Ryan, who now earns maybe £25,000 a year working for London Transport. He's a lovely person but was injured playing for Bristol Rovers and his football career was over."

Deano's young life was influenced by Christianity; his mother was raised in a family with no TV allowed on a Sunday. He said, "We had a watered down version of that. Although my grandad was a bit of a lad in the day, he gave up alcohol and became a Salvationist. I went to Sunday school and played football in the Saturday league - we weren't allowed to play on

a Sunday. Church was all about the fun things that you couldn't do. Then in the 1970's, we had a school teacher called Peter Worsley who ran the Crusaders. There was loads of sport and he really drew us in. He was saying 'come and do a bit of God on a Sunday and you can play sport during the week.' Eventually, my parents eased up and we played football on Sundays. I was allowed to swap Sunday School for Crusaders, which became a massive part of my life. At 18, I became a Crusaders leader myself."

After his local Methodist church in Hoo closed, Deano returned to the church of St Mark in Gillingham. Invited to be Church Warden, he found it difficult to refuse. He said, "My working life was ludicrous and burning me out and my wife was ill (she is fine now). I was working sometimes seven days a week and I didn't want to work those insane hours any more. Increasingly, I began to think that football was shallow and that maybe I should work for a charity. In the end, the compromise was to do less with football and spend more time on other things, like my Church Warden responsibilities. At Millwall, we have done a lot of charity work, like supporting a local food bank. It would have been a mistake to leave though - I play a lot more golf now and still work within the media department. I think it's great that women are now fully part of the game, either playing, working or supporting. It's a part of our human condition; the best things we do are all shared with other people."

To discover more about the duties of a church warden, please visit: <http://www.churchwardens.com>