



# PLAY THE GAME

## JEZ ROBINSON TAKES A MISTYEYED FLICK DOWN MEMORY LANE

**tfs** Most football fans can cite any number of key moments that nurtured a passion for the game during their formative years. Maybe it was their first home kit – the full kit, mind you, socks and everything. It could be the gathering of relatives for an important game on the telly and the wonderfully charged atmosphere in an otherwise tranquil living room. Probably the most affirming single moment of them all is your first live match. What should not be underestimated, however, is the influence of the humble football game. Whether it was blow football or Subbuteo, those happy childhood hours did their job. Even if it did reveal for the first time the scary competitive side to your dad.

It was Christmas Day 1972, I was seven, and absolutely anything seemed possible.

With just a few years starring for the school team to go before I embarked on my glittering football career, I'd determined that in order to make the transition from unknown hopeful to household name as swiftly as possible I should devote my time not actually spent playing proper football pursuing other versions of the game; Wembley, Internash, Headers and volleys, or Three-and-in with my mates, ideally. Failing that, I'd provide the neighbours with running commentary as my penny floater bounced off their back wall. Being confined indoors entailed practicing keepy uppies with a balloon, or attempting to bend a cushion around the front room door and between the legs of the radiogram.

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But I'd decided what I really needed to speed my ascent into football's higher echelons was a game I could play – on my own if necessary – which would sharpen my appreciation of tactics. The only organised football I'd played had been of the six-a-side variety – but I sensed a place in the Cubs' second team was not beyond my grasp, and they played on a full size pitch and everything.

According to the later pages of Shoot!, what I needed now was “Chad Valley Big League – with all the action and skill of real football.” And so it came to pass that Big League – controversially, I might add – beat Subbuteo onto the list I sent Santa in 1972. I doubt he had any trouble getting hold of mine, because so few veterans of my vintage seem to recall the game existed at all. Selective memory loss, maybe?

The magnificent beast that was Big League featured an absolutely massive pitch, goals with real nets, and players who actually kicked the ball with spring-loaded legs, which you pulled back then released, courtesy of a little peg moulded onto their ankles. That kicking mechanism, coupled with the fact some players were left footed and some right, and that it came complete with a set of paints and brushes



### Subbuteo

More fully-fledged cultural movement than mere football game, this baby had the lot – and we wanted it all. The range of teams alone was mind-boggling.

Then there were the floodlights, the stands and tiny people populating them, dug-outs, stretcher-bearers, scoreboards and even trophies. Just like in real football, providing you had enough pocket money to pay for it, the world was your lobster. Everyone knew someone who had the complete World Cup edition with working floodlights, a pitch tacked onto a sheet of hardboard and stands full of tiny plastic supporters.

Few of us had ever seen such a thing, though – our fantasy fixtures were generally played out on gently undulating pitches that wouldn't lie flat on carpets. They featured players in varying states of disrepair, some of whom actually appeared to have been fashioned from airfix glue and blu-tac and were watched by four of the five fans we'd bought ready to populate the stand we were still saving up for. Plus the dog who had eaten the other one.

The fact the Subbuteo ball was enormous compared to the players just added to the ridiculousness of the whole thing. Ultimately, it was the dream rather than the reality that sold Subbuteo.

with which you could transform them into the teams of your choice, was the clincher for me.

And there it was on the floor before me, that Christmas morning, next to a yellow and green panelled leather football with “Brazil” and a picture of Pele, which I'd unwrapped first.

I ripped into that parcel and pulled the lid from the box to reveal a pitch a seven-year old could conceivably have utilised as a tent. Sadly, there were no Big League accessories, and if they



### Pokkit Socca

Not to be confused with pocket billiards, this tiny game was a big deal at schools the length and breadth of the land – before being banned by most of them. Inside the pocket-sized green tube came a plastic grid-marked pitch, a miniscule football counter

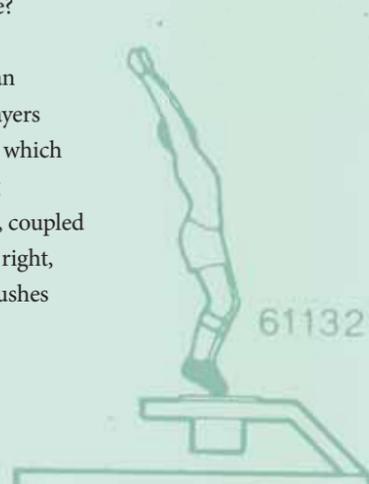
(lost within hours of purchase, commonly replaced with half a small fishing shot painted with Tippex) and two cast metal “dice”, which were properly weighty affairs.

Rolling them dictated the ball's movement around the pitch and dictated events like FOUL, SHOT or SAVE in some fantastically complex manner I cannot remotely remember, now. It was a bit like a football version of Battleships, really.

Football and violence were seldom far removed in the 70s, though. Sadly, at the peak of Pokkit Socca fever (leagues forming, dinner money changing hands) one of the hard lads discovered inserting the dice into the end of your school tie provided an instant playground weapon – and the game soon went the way of “Clackers”. Apparently, a form of this old school favourite is currently enjoying a revival as an “app” for those fancy Dan iPhones.

had made stands to border the pitch like Subbuteo did, they'd have been so big you'd have had to get a safety certificate for them. But, with goals replete with pink plastic keepers on sticks at both ends, and 20 pink plastic players in formation, my box-fresh Big League was truly a thing of beauty.

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Patience and seven-year-olds are rarely on the best of terms, and throwing paint into the mix is asking for trouble. Completely failing to grasp that painting red and white striped shirts, black shorts on my pink plastic protégées would entail applying several coats and waiting for them to dry, I soon had four or five players sporting a strangely psychedelic purple strip, featuring purple leggings which, on reflection, were ahead of their time.

Given that the plastic patch of green grass each of them had stood on was now an equally implausible shade of purple, I appeared to have created part of an extra terrestrial eleven. I attempted in vain to give one of them a Billy Hughes moustache, admirably undeterred by the failure of my initial effort, I soon had several pristinely pink players with entirely black heads.



## Striker

Largely thanks to Subbuteo's iconic, retro-chic status, it sometimes seems the true story of Striker has never really been told. It may not be fashionable to 'fess up to these days, but many found this six-a-side 70s creation much more fun than its "flick to kick" rival. Players' heads were pressed to make them kick a ball that somehow seemed to move quite realistically, and accomplished operators could actually achieve chipped passes and shots into the top corner. Over-head kicks could be achieved by lying a player down on his back with the ball balanced on his kicking foot. Special rules had to be drawn up to facilitate such advanced practice, of course.

Early editions featuring a pitch that folded in half and was bordered by a clip-fixed plastic strip to keep the ball in play were less than ideal, but by the time Super Striker came along, all glitches had been ironed out. A perfect surface featured raised sides and there was even a version with floodlights to aspire to. Happy days.

Turning my attention briefly to playing the actual game itself, I soon discovered broken legs are not restricted to real footballers, and that the Big League boys weren't designed to tackle each other, or do overhead kicks. By the end of Boxing Day, Big League had long been deemed eminently forgettable – just as my football career proved to be. Perhaps things might have been different had I gone for Striker or Subbuteo instead?

I doubt it, as these days I like to think I was always destined for management, really. I got Championship Manager for Christmas last year and I've been putting the hours in – this is 2010, after all, and in fantasy land anything's possible. I'm 45.



## Logacta Chart Soccer

There were seemingly no in-betweens with Logacta – you either loved it to a degree where your life seemed to revolve around it, or you simply didn't see what all the fuss was about. A boffin's dream, Logacta consisted of seven dice and a series of charts which wouldn't have looked out of place in a Nasa manual. From these bare essentials, those that way inclined could conjour a statistically complete record of an entire football season, resplendent with domestic and European trophies, and even World Cups. Results were resolved by rolling different colour dice in accordance with the Dice Selector Chart, which was like the Bible to a legion of Logacta believers.

Obviously, the charts that came with the game didn't last your average addict very long, and further sets were available to those who had long since waived the real world good-bye. Despite being decidedly lo-tec, Logacta did bear more than a passing resemblance to games like today's brilliant but time-sapping Championship Manager.



## Casdon Soccer

Featuring a particularly scary picture of that incredible comb-over on a box lid which promised "Bobby Charlton says it is the nearest thing to English soccer it is possible to experience in one's own home, and has spent many hours playing with his own family." this

odd little game was a steady seller throughout the 70s, and had many ardent devotees.

A ball bearing was at the heart of the action, and was moved round by players that utilised a flipper at their base to drive it along a series of grooves and gullies which could make playing the game an infuriating experience. Each player was situated in a dip in the pitch to allow them to receive the ball, apart from the goalies who were stood at the top of a small plastic hill! It has been suggested playing Casdon Soccer as a child provided the inspiration behind the tactics John Beck employed whilst managing Cambridge United in the early 1990s.

## Jumpers for Goal Posts

In the good old days there was only one obese kid per class so if you couldn't wait until you got home to play super striker for your footy fix you could indulge in a competitive game of footy at playtime. Here are a few Rules of the Playground, a longer version of which The Football Supporter was delighted to receive in its inbox the other week from about eight hundred people (you know who you are!).

- Matches shall be played over three unequal periods: two playtimes and a lunch-time. Each of these periods shall begin shortly after the ringing of a bell.
- The scoreline, to be carried over from the previous period of the match, is in the trust of the last players to leave the field of play, and may be the matter of some debate.
- The object is to force the ball between two large, unkempt piles of jackets, in lieu of goalposts. These piles may grow or shrink throughout the match. Each jacket added to the pile should be placed on the inside, nearest the goalkeeper, thus reducing the target area.
- The on-going reduction of the size of the goal is the responsibility of any respectable defence and should be undertaken conscientiously with resourcefulness and imagination.

- In the absence of a crossbar, the upper limit of the target area is observed as being slightly above head height. When the height at which a ball passed between the jackets is in dispute, judgement shall lie with an arbitrary adjudicator from one of the sides. He is known as the "best fighter".

- In games on large open spaces, the length of the pitch is obviously denoted by the jacket piles, but the width is a variable. This is determined by how far out the attacking winger has to meander before the pursuing defender gets fed up.

- Teams are selected democratically in a turn-based picking process, with two appointed one-man selection committees and growing from there. The initial selectors are the recognised two Best Players. Their first selections will be the recognised Best Fighters, ensuring a fair balance in the adjudication process.

- Stoppages such as ball on school roof or over wall may be prolonged by the argument to decide which player must risk life and limb to return the ball to play. Disputes usually arise between the player who actually struck the ball and any other he claims it may have struck before disappearing into forbidden territory.