



State of Play: Under the Skin of the Modern Game

Michael Calvin

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***** Award-winning author of *The Nowhere Men*, *Living on the Volcano* and *No Hunger in Paradise* returns with his magnum opus on the state of modern football *****

First he revealed the extraordinary lives of football scouts in *The Nowhere Men*.

Next he unearthed the pressures on football managers in *Living on the Volcano*.

Then he chronicled the hardships of young players striving to make it in *No Hunger in Paradise*.

Now in *State of Play*, in what marks the pinnacle of a career investigating the human stories of football, award-winning writer Michael Calvin turns his eye to the biggest story of all - the game itself.

From mental health to money, concussion to Champions league, fan-owners to oligarchs, women's football to world cups, Calvin gets under the skin of the beautiful game, and reveals why it is truly the game of our lives.

Based on hundreds of hours of interviews with leading figures around the world, from Arsene Wenger to Steven Gerrard, Calvin reveals the winners, the losers, the politics, the pleasure, the hope, and the despair of the world's most popular sport.

State of Play: Under the Skin of the Modern Game Details

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From Reader Review **State of Play: Under the Skin of the Modern Game** for online ebook

Ian Anderson says

Brilliant

Fantastically written book. If you're after something that delves a little deeper into the sport, this is the book you're after.

Greville Waterman says

To the cursory observer all seems well with the game of football at present with the nation still celebrating England's unexpected achievements at the recent World Cup, and the pomp and circumstance surrounding the start of another over-hyped Premier League season. Some of the top players and managers in the world are indeed competing and exhibiting their skills in this country and the game – certainly at the top end – is awash with television cash, but are things quite as healthy as they seem?

Sometimes you need someone to act as your conscience, poke around beneath the surface and pose the questions that most observers are afraid to ask – the ones that the administrators would prefer to be swept into the long grass. It is sometimes hard to bite the hand that feeds you and it is understandable, if not forgivable why some commentators and pundits perhaps pull their punches at times and gloss over some issues, but such an accusation can never be levelled at Michael Calvin.

There is so much written about football nowadays and Amazon now stocks over 20,000 books on the subject, but I would be staggered if more than a tiny minority are more than dross and have much literary merit or originality. Amongst the ghost written pap there are a frustratingly small number of authors who stand out from the sea of mediocrity and one of them is Michael Calvin. I make no apology for lauding him, but with the forthcoming release of "State of Play" he has now written five exceptional football books each providing a detailed, hard-hitting and informed study of a different aspect of the sport.

He has previously spent a season as a fly on the wall in promotion winning Millwall's dressing room, given a voice to scouts – one of football's most ignored groups, demonstrated just how stressful and perilous is the role of a football manager and, most memorably provided a forensic, lacerating and yet sympathetic study of what it takes to become a professional footballer and the toll the game takes on young players. Now he shines a light into the darkest corners and recesses of the game and much of what he uncovers is unpleasant and unsavoury in the extreme.

He has divided his new book into four sections covering players, managers, clubs and other football people and he leaves no stones unturned in revealing some of the key issues that affect and blight the sport today.

I will remember the impact the opening chapter of one of his previous books made on me as he described the electroconvulsive therapy treatment undergone by Martin Ling, a well-respected lower league manager who laid bare his struggles against depression. That stayed with me for many months as will, in his new book, Calvin's heartbreaking, moving and poignant description of the terrible last minutes of former England striker and West Brom icon Jeff Astle as he choked to death on his own vomit in front of his helpless family.

He had been in deep and inexorable decline from the effects of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) caused by his constant heading of a hard leather ball, and he died at a tragically young age. Calvin shines a spotlight onto the growing scandal of far too many footballers from recent decades suffering dementia or worse as a result of “industrial injury” from playing professional football.

Dawn Astle, Jeff’s heroic daughter has campaigned tirelessly to force a reluctant hierarchy to fund research into the effects of heading a ball (which is now banned for under 14’s in America) and Calvin justifiably made scornful mention of PFA chief executive Gordon Taylor’s appallingly arrogant, ignorant and unforgivable comment to Dawn that “my mother’s got dementia and she’s never headed a ball”. Finally after years of obfuscation, denying responsibility and putting their head in the sand, the FA and PFA have commissioned an independent study into the long-term effects of heading a ball on 15,000 former players. CTE is a ticking time bomb. I was researching a book on my own team, Brentford recently and discovered with horror how few players from even the mid to late 1960’s were still with us as dementia has taken such a heavy toll. I am sure that many former players from even more recent times lie awake at night worrying about what might happen to them in years to come.

Calvin does not stop there as he examines many other burning issues that tarnish and shame the game such as homophobia, racism, sexism, drugs, gang culture, concussion, depression, suicide and mental health issues, the social media revolution and keyboard warriors, uncaring and ignorant foreign ownership, venal agents and how the sport has generally tried to sweep them all beneath the surface and not accept and deal with them at source.

The book is not always easy or comfortable reading as Calvin gets under the skin of the modern game and tells a series of hard-hitting stories that often show the game in an appalling and uncaring light and yet there is still hope, there are many heroes who are swimming against the tide and doing their utmost to help footballers who are struggling to cope with the physical and mental demands of a relentless and unforgiving game where the rewards for success are enormous and the cost of failure just as massive.

Their positive stories are also told and we hear about former journeyman footballer Drewe Broughton who has reinvented himself as an empathetic and highly effective performance coach acting as a father confessor figure providing holistic support to a group of players who are struggling to keep their heads above water. Holocaust survivors such as Zigi Shipper and Harry Spiro tell their awe-inspiring tales of survival from Nazi tyranny and genocide to spellbound groups of international footballers. Pragmatic Accrington chairman Andy Holt who has triumphed against all the odds also cocks a snoot at the patronising “have’s” from the upper echelons of the game who have no conception or interest in what it is like to scabble around simply to pay the electricity bill. The wonderful work of the Fans Supporting Foodbanks movement which does so much inspiring work in the North West is also highlighted amongst many other such organisations.

Calvin also writes lyrically and from the heart about how Watford, the team he supported as a boy, wildly celebrating Barry Endean’s winning goal against Liverpool in a long-forgotten FA Cup tie as a ballboy, has been transformed, not all for the better perhaps by the ownership of the Pozzo family. There is sufficient rich material here, I believe, for another standalone book.

“The Secret Barrister” – an excoriating polemic that lays bare the myriad shortcomings of the criminal justice system has proved to be a recent publishing sensation and massive success story over the past few months, and I fully expect Calvin’s “State of Play” to fulfil a similar role for the football industry. There is much that is wrong but also so much that, not before time, is beginning to be done to help make things better for our current and future generations.

Michael Calvin has done the game a massive service with this broad ranging, hard-hitting and exceptionally well researched book and he has also written it in a beautiful, lucid prose style. In his introduction Calvin paid tribute to the great Arthur Hopcraft and his seminal study of football in “The Football Man” which helped inspire him to take up writing as a career. The biggest compliment that I can pay Michael Calvin is that this book is as well crafted as anything Hopcraft wrote and in years to come football fans will be reading “State of Play” as they still do “The Football Man”.
