

# With the Best will in the world



## Interview

by Helena de Bertodano

He is a reformed alcoholic (almost). He has settled down (sort of). He has a job (when he turns up). But George Best is as elusive as ever

**T**HE MEETING with George Best had been arranged for weeks: midday at The Phene Arms, his local pub in Chelsea. But halfway through reading a stack of newspaper cuttings about him, I started to get nervous. Article after article chronicled his vanishing acts: how could I be sure he would turn up for me?

"Where's George?" is the quote from the late Sir Matt Busby on the cover of Best's autobiography. But it is not only the former manager of Manchester United who has suffered from the unreliability of the Irish footballing legend. A few months ago he failed to turn up to his 49th birthday party, even though his 14-year-old son had flown over from the States for it. Last year he excused himself during a function, where he was scheduled to give an after-dinner speech, and wormed his way out of the bathroom window. He even bottled out of his own wedding, eventually marrying 23-year-old Alex Pursey two months ago.

Seeking reassurance, I rang his friend, Les Scott, co-author of *The Best of Times*, the ex-footballer's collection of autobiographical anecdotes published in paperback next month. "He'll be there," said Scott soothingly. "The media image of him is all wrong. He's a changed man — you'll really like him."

Turning up early at the appointed place, I was surprised to see Best already sitting at the centre of the bar and felt guilty for ever doubting him. Wearing his trademark shell suit, he was nursing a half-pint of white wine with ice and playing cribbage with his mate John, an elderly Cockney with a face like a bulldog. Best looked slightly flushed but otherwise in quite good shape, slimmer than usual and perfectly relaxed.

He greeted me cheerfully and we agreed to start the interview after his game was over. As he threw down the last card, he got up from his stool, shook hands with the photographer, smiled broadly and said he was just going to get a coffee. That was the last we saw of him.

"He's done a runner on you," said John after five minutes had elapsed. Another drinking pal chimed in: "Georgie's as unpredictable as the bloody weather."

I've known him a hundred years and he's the sweetest guy in the world but I wouldn't use him as a backup man in a team."

Scott groaned when I called him in an attempt to trace Best. After an afternoon of phonecalls, a sort of explanation emerged. Apparently Best had felt overwhelmed when an unannounced photographer from another publication turned up at the same time as us. It hardly matters but this was plainly untrue: according to someone in the pub, he had said before any of us even arrived that he was not going to go through with it.

"George is feeling really guilty. He's going to rearrange his diary to see you this evening," said Scott. Best obviously wasn't feeling that guilty, however, as the meeting was eventually rescheduled for two days later. Same place, same time. "His mind will drive him there," said Scott, implying that this



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meant I had an odds-on chance of seeing him.

Best is sitting on the same stool, laughing over a story in *The Sun* with John when I arrive. This time there is no messing about. He leads the way to a table in the corner and could not be more friendly and easygoing. Neither of us mentions the previous abortive meeting: it is as though he has never clapped eyes on me.

He has not had much sleep and it shows. He is slightly shaky and explains that he is working very hard at the moment. He has spent the previous evening in Birmingham with Rodney Marsh doing their football nostalgia show

and felt so hyped up when he got back to London that he went to the nightclub Tramp "just to chat to Johnny, the owner, who's a friend of mine".

He is drinking white wine again — several glasses of it. "It's the only drink I ever touch," he says proudly. His partiality for alcohol became something of a national joke after he appeared drunk on the *Wogan Show* five years ago, his turn of phrase blasting the programme well out of family viewing time.

Michael Parkinson wrote afterwards: "Once I was convinced he drank from boredom. Now I believe he is driven by despair." I ask Best if this is true and he chuckles. "It's quite simple. In the early days I drank because I liked drinking. Maybe it was also insecurity or shyness." There followed visits to Alcoholics Anonymous, alcohol-deterrent drugs, a three-month prison sentence for drink-driving and assaulting a policeman and finally a sort of control. "What I do now is if I feel like a drink I have it, and if I don't, I don't."

Despair is certainly not his frame of mind these days. "Things are brilliant, they really are. I've got a great job on Sky [as a commentator] and there's the tour with Rodney."

He thought he had ruined his chances with Sky when he didn't turn up a few times last year. He speaks about it as a sort of chronic disease over which he has no control. "I've got better, but I still do it sometimes — as you saw."

It seems that Sky has got the measure of him now. "They've given me a reprieve and I'd do anything for them in return. Mark, the producer, said to me that if I don't feel up to it sometimes, all I have to do is let him know. 'It's just a simple phone call,' he said. 'You don't even have to explain why. Just say: 'I'm not coming in today.' Don't just not turn up.'"

Best looks delighted with the ingenuity of the plan. Relieved from the pressure of thinking up a plausible excuse, he's doubly determined to please them and has signed up for the whole football season.

His upbeat mood is also thanks to Alex, his second wife, a former air hostess with Virgin Atlantic. She is away in Portugal and Best is really missing her. "When I suggested that she go away for a week I thought it would be nice to have some freedom but it's driving me nuts. I must call her 100 times a day."

The pub phone rings and the barmaid comes over. "It's Alex," she says. Best's face



'Occasionally something clicks in his mind and he just tips over. If he was a painter, he would have been Van Gogh' Rodney Marsh on George Best

lights up and he goes to talk to her. "She still loves me," he says, returning five minutes later. He doesn't really believe in marriage but with Alex it is different. "She's just so special. I suppose that sounds corny but it's not; I'm in love with her."

The reason that their marriage was put off was because they had a couple of arguments the week before. "It made me more determined to make it work. If someone had told me beforehand that I would spend three hours in a registry office filling in all the forms to get married, me, at 49 years old, I would have said they were crazy. But I did and then I called Alex and said: 'Right, it's all sorted, we're getting married on Saturday morning at 10.30,' and she said: 'Don't mess about; you haven't done it.' But I had. I felt quite proud."

In the early days, Best's girlfriends were in the news as much as his goals. He was linked with four Miss Worlds — "it would have been seven but I didn't turn up for three of them" — and seemed incapable of settling down. But he eventually married Angie MacDonald James and had a son, Calum, heralding a period of relative stability. "I was married to Angela for a

long time, and then before I married Alex I was living with Mary [Shatila] for seven years... Because of my so-called reputation, I'm afraid to even talk to girls. Last night in Tramp, I said hello to Brian Lara and his girlfriend and this girl came over and I actually had to ask her to go away."

He says that there is a "minor industry" whipped up by ex-girlfriends who sell stories about him to the press. "Mary Stavin [a former Miss World] did it about six times. Yet she was living with me for six years, so it couldn't have been that bad." He is very hurt that Shatila, whom he describes in his book as "my confidante and my strength", has followed the same route.

Rodney Marsh describes Best as a shy and insular man who has been let down so often that he allows few people to get close to him. "I think he will always live in isolation. He walks a sort of tightrope between the genius and the madman. Occasionally something clicks in his mind and he just tips over. If he was a painter, he would have been Van Gogh."

He has been in the public eye on an unprecedented scale for a footballer of his

generation. His off-field antics, combined with his long hair and good looks, procured him a place in the heart of Sixties culture. He was the first football superstar, earning himself the sobriquet "the fifth Beatle".

**B**UT it would be sad if his skill as a footballer was lost amid talk of the general shenanigans. Those who witnessed his zenith say that it is impossible to convey how much he meant to the game. His control of the ball was hypnotic; he seemed to have double-jointed ankles. As Paddy Crerand of Manchester United once said, he gave his opponents "twisted blood". Even Pele, the Brazilian hailed as the finest player ever, says that Best supplanted him. Alex Ferguson, current manager of Manchester United, has said of his own star Ryan Giggs: "He'll never be a Best. Nobody will. George was unique, the greatest talent our football has ever produced — easily."

Which meant, of course, that he could get away with murder. He drove his managers to distraction, but they always took him back. He showed such forlorn penitence for his actions that no

one could remain angry with him for long. A few months before Sir Matt died, Best apologised for all the trouble he had caused. Sir Matt replied: "You gave me more pleasure than problems." The same could be said for his whole career.

Spotted by a scout in Belfast at the age of 15, Best left his close-knit Protestant family home and came to England. He was a household name by the age of 17, a footballing phenomenon. "Within 18 months I was playing for the best team in the world."

His retirement from first-class football at 26 was regarded as a huge loss. "I do regret it a bit," he says now. "But I just felt football was changing and Manchester United had lost most of its great players. In 1968 we'd won the European Cup, and four years later we were in the Second Division."

Best cannot cope with being anywhere beneath the top. "I love competition — you ask anyone here. I have to win all the pub quizzes. Even when I go to the health farm, I pick out the fittest person in the gym and if he goes on the machine for 45 minutes, I've got to do 60 minutes."

But he was not up to dragging Manchester United back

into the First Division on his own, as he saw it. So he did what he does best, and left. He played in the States for a while and then for Fulham. But his heart was not in it and his descent into alcoholism, bankruptcy and imprisonment began in earnest. His spell in jail 10 years ago marked a turning point. "It gave me time to think. I came out wiser."

Wiser, maybe, but still a maverick — maddening but also strangely endearing. There is no façade; if he doesn't feel up to something, he scarpers. He was an instinctive player and instinct still rules his life. It is like handling a spirited thoroughbred: "Unless he's relaxed he won't do anything," says Les Scott. He should know, having performed the Herculean task of tying Best to a time and a place day after day to write the book.

Indeed, Scott sounds so woebegone about Best's behaviour towards me that I start trying to rationalise it just to cheer him up. He's not a robot, he's a human being, I say. Scott chuckles drily and finally abandons his attempt to sell the new image to me: "There's only one explanation," he says resignedly. "He's George Best."