

Nigel's Webspaces News

A newsletter distributed by [Nigel's Webspaces](#), a website dedicated to the history of English football cards 1965/66 to 1979/80.

Issue 10

Hyder Jawad recently wrote an interesting article on A&BC Chewing Gum, based on an interview he conducted with Douglas Coakley. His article was published in the most recent edition of the excellent [Backpass magazine](#). As with most published articles, Hyder's original draft was edited to fit the needs of the magazine. In this edition of Nigel's Webspaces News you can read the full article. Many thanks to Hyder for providing it.

Until next time...**Nigel**

A&BC Chewing Gum by Hyder Jawad

There is no logic to the whimsy of childhood. It is the clarity of the image not the importance of the event that matters. How is it that the defining image of my father's childhood is of riding a bicycle through a crowd in Baghdad as the guns heralded the start of the 1958 Iraqi Revolution, whereas mine is of buying my first packet of football cards, aged 5, in September 1973 from a Liverpool newsagent?

I can still remember the moment: ripping open the white wax packet, pulling out the five photo cards (one of which was Ray Clemence), laying them out in a line on a table, and then devouring the yellow strip of chewing gum. Ah! The sweet smell of the gum, the vivid beauty of the cards... this was an assault on the senses. Even the shade of green used for Clemence's Liverpool goalkeeping shirt had a strange magic about it.

Only later, once adulthood had demystified everything that was pure about youth, did I learn that these cards were produced by A&BC Chewing Gum Ltd, were part of the 1973-74 blue-back collection (261 cards), and that the company was coming towards the end of its existence. The complete set of 1973-74 cards would now be worth in the region of £1,000 – far more valuable than my father's old bicycle.

But in the world of football cards, time can stand still. Not only can I still pursue the hobby – I own complete sets of the A&BC cards from 1973-74 and 1974-75 – I can even talk to the man who produced and marketed them. His name is Douglas Coakley and talking to him gave me as much pleasure as meeting personal heroes such as Bill Shankly, Bobby Moore, Bob Paisley, Andre Agassi, Tony Benn, and Eric Hobsbawm. Coakley is 86, lives in Langlade, France, and subscribes to every English national newspaper to keep in touch with the news about his beloved Chelsea. He does not live in the past. He enjoys football as much in the Premier League era as he did when his friend, Jimmy Hill, was striking a blow for facial hair (and scoring goals) in the First Division for Fulham in the 1950s.

There was, however, something special about the 25-year period (1949-74) that saw A&BC produce many millions of cards. "My main memory of the A&BC years was how much fun we had," Douglas says, with the clipped tones that evoke images of Henry Higgins in *Pygmalion*. "There was so much excitement. I must have met most of the star footballers from the 1950s to the 1970s. I struck deals with the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. But best of all was that A&BC was one big happy family. The whole thing was a dream that I hoped would last forever."

Indeed, so successful was the card-production, and so iconic have the collections become, it is interesting to note that A&BC existed for nearly a decade before it entered the football world. When A&BC was formed in London in 1949 by four men – Simon Anysz, Rudolph Braun, Douglas Coakley and his brother, Tony Coakley – it was only to produce chewing gum with a new artificial sweetener (enabling the company to circumvent the strict rationing of sugar). "It was difficult in those days because of rationing," Douglas says. "And it was not easy to get the right machinery. But we grew quickly and had quite a lot of staff. I remember we had one woman working for us whose son used to come to the factory [in Colindale, north London] straight after school. He was inquisitive and full of energy. Within a few years, this young boy was to be featured on our football cards. He had grown into a world-class

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forward. His name was Jimmy Greaves. I've spoken about it to Jimmy since then and he remembers the excitement of the factory."

A&BC produced its first card collection in 1953 (a set of TV personalities) to promote the gum, and, in 1959, struck a licensing deal with Topps, its American equivalent, that would enable each company to sell its products in each other's market. A&BC produced their first football collection in 1958, which, for many boys, was the first time they had seen what the likes of Bobby Robson, then of West Bromwich Albion, and Brian Clough, then of Middlesbrough, looked like in colour. Known as the "Planet" collection, a full set of 92 cards can be acquired now for £100.

It was not long before the company's *raison d'être* changed. Instead of using football cards to promote chewing gum, now A&BC went *volte-face* to produce gum as a means of promoting the cards. It seemed the only appropriate step; football souvenirs were increasing in desirability, whereas the chewing-gum market was becoming ominously claustrophobic. "Producing cards was not a step into the unknown because we believed strongly in what we were doing," Douglas says. "Our best years came when we produced football cards. We kept outgrowing our premises and kept moving. We started off in Cricklewood then moved to Colindale and later to Romford, where we had a few hundred staff churning out packets of cards."

Douglas, a marketing expert with a fertile mind, designed the cards himself and employed an agent, who would travel to each club and pay players £10 to appear on the cards. The £10 never increased and, in an act of micro-socialism that adds to the charm of the A&BC story, did not take into account the talent or marketability of the individual – whether he was George Best, who, by the late-1960s, was the most celebrated player in Britain, or a Second Division player of little distinction. "The £10 was something I felt was right," Douglas says. "I explained to some of the top players that the across-the-board payment was a deal that helped younger players just starting off or players in a lower division who did not earn much. Most First Division players agreed that this was fair. I had to telephone a few players [Tommy Smith of Liverpool was, apparently, among them] to explain our policy but it was not usually a problem. In those days, £10 was a lot to a young player."

According to Nigel Mercer, the football historian whose superlative website (<http://cards.littleoak.com.au>) celebrates the golden age of card-collecting, George Best refused £10, asked for £1,000 instead, and was turned down. Best does not appear in any A&BC card collections after 1968-69, which coincided with the beginning of his decline and that of the Manchester United team for which he played. The key year for A&BC was 1964 – the year of their greatest financial success, the year of the Beatles, and the year that marked the beginning of the end when Rudolph Braun sold his stake in A&BC to Topps. Braun's decision left A&BC vulnerable to takeover, but not before Topps could cash in on Douglas's foresight in signing the Beatles. "I remember meeting Brian Epstein, the manager of the Beatles, to agree a deal to produce a special Beatles set of cards," Douglas says. "He was wonderful to work with. One night, I was staying at the Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool when the Beatles were playing a mile or so away, but the taxi could not get me there. It was too crowded. Earlier in the day, Brian had actually asked me if I could get him some A&BC cricket cards that he was missing from his collection".

"The Beatles were very good for us. But with the Rolling Stones, it was the opposite. Their cards did not sell because parents did not want their kids to be associated with a band that had a certain reputation. By comparison, the Beatles were clean-cut and acceptable. Beatles cards sold in the millions."

A&BC grew to such an extent that, by the early-1960s, the company was able to open two dozen newsagents, mainly in London, for the sole purpose of product-testing card collections. Mercer says that the Rolling Stones cards never went to full production after failing to make much of an impression during the testing period. "This may explain why the Rolling Stones cards are so rare."

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The football cards, however, were a different story. They never failed to sell, always conformed to modern design, and exemplified the nature of a changing game. Notwithstanding George Best's attitude, players were, by and large, honoured to be featured in A&BC collections. The 1966 World Cup, which England won, ensured continued good sales for A&BC and encouraged the company to experiment with the production of club badges, player posters, and 'lucky bags' of football souvenirs. What could possibly go wrong?

Quite a lot, actually. First, there was a falling out with Topps over company policy. Second, there was a fire at the A&BC factory at Spilsby Road, Romford, probably in November 1973, which is likely to have affected the production of the 1973-74 cards (hence their rarity). Third, Mercer has discovered that A&BC suffered problems of liquidity, which made it easier for Topps to remove Douglas Coakley from the board.

Incredibly, although Topps was a minority shareholder of A&BC, the American company went to court to remove Douglas and replace him with a marketing executive from New York. Just after the 1974 World Cup, the Coakley brothers, who had sunk everything – time and money, hopes and fears – into A&BC, lost the court case and looked on helplessly as the company was wound up.

"It was a mistake that we allowed Topps to come in and take over," Douglas says in a surprising understatement. Mercer wonders if the verdict was a miscarriage of justice. "Some lawyers have since expressed an opinion that A&BC should not have lost the court case," the Tasmania-based historian says.

The orange-backed collection of 132 cards, which came out at the beginning of 1974-75, was the last to be produced by A&BC. The cards, a complete set of which is now easily acquired for about £120, were still available in shops when Topps was deciding what to do with its new-found control of the British football-card market.

Topps launched its first English football-card collection in September 1975, the famous grey backs, which were larger and more expensive, but less alluring, than anything that A&BC had produced. Few boys would have known or cared that A&BC, which produced the finest catalogue of football cards that the UK had ever seen, had been cast aside like a dirty rag. Naked commercialism in its crudest sense had defeated sentiment and charm.

In all, according to Mercer's records, A&BC produced 30 football collections for the English market (1958-74), 13 football collections for the Scottish market (1961-74), and 94 collections covering a range of subjects for the whole of the UK (1953-74).

"It gives me pleasure to know that even now people still collect the cards that we so lovingly produced," Douglas says. "I am told that some of the collections are now worth a lot of money. We did it because it was fun and we wanted boys to have the same fun in collecting the cards as we had in producing them. You never expect that something you produce in one generation will be relevant many years after the whole thing stopped. That can take you by surprise."

Douglas, who does not possess any cards from the 137 collections he produced, lost touch with the football-card market almost as soon as A&BC folded up. He claims to know little about how and why Topps lacked the feel for production and why, by 1980, were issuing cards of such poor quality that kids lost interest. Even the rise of the football album, which turned Figurine Panini from a small Italian company in the mid-1970s into a big player on the global market, failed to inspire Douglas.

From the serenity of his home in the South of France, he does not care why Topps returned to the market in the 1990s. "You tell *me* what happened," he says, sharply, not really wanting to know the answer because, to him, it is not interesting.

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But what is interesting – to me, at least – was the extent to which the A&BC cards shaped my childhood. The cards taught me to spell “Norwich” and “Middlesbrough” correctly long before any of the other 5-year-old boys at Birchfield Infants School, Liverpool.

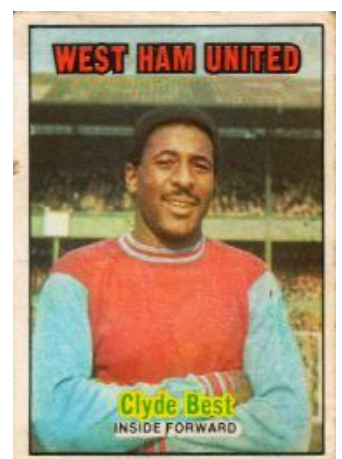
Then there is the story of how the cards taught me about racism. There is no doubt that memory, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Only memory can transpose you from the safety of Wembley Stadium in August 2007 to the uncertainty of a school playground in Liverpool in autumn 1974. I suppose I should have been concentrating on the match but England internationals, even against Germany, are rarely edifying experiences. It was when Micah Richards went darting down the right wing, evading one tackle, flicking the ball into space to avoid another, that my mind flashed back to the school playground and my first meeting with a bloke called Clyde Best. In those days, Clyde Best was a football card; no, make that the black face on the football card. He played for West Ham United – alongside Bobby Moore, Trevor Brooking and Frank Lampard senior – but the only thing I knew about him was that he was black at a time when every other footballer in England was white. It was the Clyde Best football card that introduced me to the ignorance and irrationality of racism.

Even at the age of six, I felt hollow and perplexed when my so-called school friends decided that this particular card had no value. Imagine the scene: kids swapping football cards in the playground and all of them, *en masse*, discarding one particular card because the man in the photograph happens to be black. If only I could plead innocence, but I cannot. Peer-group pressure forced me, too, to discard my Clyde Best football card. I have been ashamed of myself ever since, even though I did eventually acquire another Clyde Best football card and, indeed, the other 119 in the collection.

I might have asked myself a question: What does it profit a young boy if he gains the whole set of A&BC 1974 football cards yet loses his own soul? How odd that such an unfortunate, wretched, memory from my childhood should enter my thoughts at a time when, at Wembley, I would have been better absorbing everything that was good about my career of choice. But I felt uneasy. You see, I knew that Micah Richards could not have happened without Clyde Best. I found myself appreciating everything about Richards, from his talent as a footballer to his humility as a man. I wondered if I would be as humble if I played for England at age 19. That is one of things I find intriguing about some, but not all, footballers: how well they deal with the attention.

The attention is not always good but it is constant. Clyde Best was forced to deal with attention of a different kind. "The monkey chants, the hate mail," he once said, "well, that was never easy." But he made it look easy. He dealt with the racism with more grace than I ever did when, as an Anglo-Arab playing junior football in Liverpool in the early Eighties, I also suffered abuse for the colour of my skin. I spat back. Best did not have to, which is one reason why black players have it easier now than he did a generation ago.

I find it strange that I have such an affinity with Best. I have never met him – probably never will – and never saw him play. I have read the odd article about him but, overall, my only image of him is that solitary A&BC orange-backed 1974 football card. I feel differently about it now. I regard the card as a token of change; a tangible record of my personal enlightenment.



In some respects, it is a tangible record of the game's enlightenment. Best suffered all that abuse so the likes of Micah Richards would not have to. It is only a freak of timing that has put Richards into an era when black footballers can play without the barrier of racial tension and, if they are good enough, can earn enough in five years to last a

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lifetime. Best still has to work for a living, which he does, with a smile, in Bermuda, and he is not the slightest bit resentful.

A&BC projects his fame, an eternal fame, through the football cards that placed him into the bedrooms of children up and down Britain. Best is timeless because A&BC cards are timeless.

A&BC was not perfect. Printing errors and problems with quality-control sometimes made it difficult to acquire complete sets (yes, there really were two different John Toshack cards in 1973-74). And it seems certain that the company records were destroyed in the fire of 1973.

On the other hand, Douglas Coakley and his colleagues have left behind a legacy of social history that transcends football. We collect because the artifacts – even if they be mere football cards – make the memories tangible. And what better football memories are there than those of the golden period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s?

A&BC Chewing Gum Ltd: 1949-1974 . . . R.I.P.