



West Ham United team photo, circa 1972

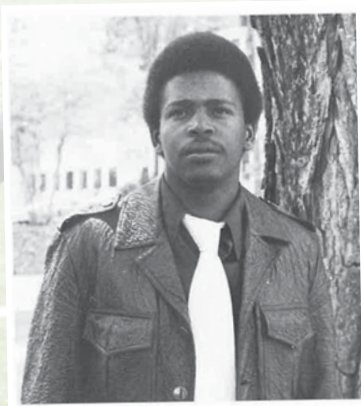
1975-1976 Wolverine Soccer



1982-1983 Wolverine Soccer



The Hon. Dr. Ernest Peets '88
Minister of Youth, Culture, and Sport
Bermuda Government



The Hon. Dennis Lister, JP, MP, '76
Speaker of the Assembly of the
Bermudian Parliament



Jerry Best '83



Dan Egan '83

YOU CAN'T BEAT THE BEST

By Ben Custer

Early in the 1970-71 season, West Ham United Football Club's star striker, Clyde Best, received a chilling piece of mail. An anonymous letter threatened to throw acid in his eyes if he dared play in the next day's game. Clyde was West Ham's first Black player in the top flight of English football¹ and his incredible success brought with it racial abuse from white fans, none as harrowing as that day's threat. But Clyde was never one to make a fuss. He brought the letter to his manager, Ron Greenwood, played the full ninety minutes the following day and did not tell a soul about the incident for the next forty years.

In 1974, Dennis Lister '76 arrived in North Bridgton, a world away from his home in the small island nation of Bermuda. He arrived with several other Bermudians who contributed to a run of dominant Bridgton teams that won the Maine Prep Cup for five years running. Lister spent two years at Bridgton and he recalls speaking with his classmates about another Bermudian footballer: one he compared to Jackie Robinson, one who had the ability to change the racial dynamics of the game for generations to come. His name was Clyde Best, and in 1968, he left the isolated island of Bermuda for East London and West Ham United Football Club. Only seventeen years old, Best brought a rare combination of size and skill and over the course of eight years at West Ham, he changed the perception of Black players in English football forever. For Lister, who grew up in the same neighborhood as Best, Clyde was a hometown super star, a hero for young men to follow. In 1982, Clyde's nephew, Jerry Best '83, also arrived at the Academy where he met Dan Egan '83 and a connection between the island nation isolated in the North Atlantic and the Academy isolated in the hills of Maine was beginning to take shape. Now, decades later, this dedicated group of Wolverines is working to bring Clyde's amazing story to the rest of the world.

It's a story familiar to Bermudians and to the die-hard fans of English football, but one with the potential to inspire so many more. At only seventeen years old, the same age at which many of our students leave



Pictured above: Moments from Clyde Best's time with West Ham United

home for the first time to spend a year in the wilds of western Maine, Clyde Best boarded a flight from his home country to London where he would begin his professional career with West Ham United. Clyde, quite reasonably, expected a club representative to meet him when he landed, but after waiting an hour in the airport, he realized he would have to make his own way in the settling evening. His problem was compounded when, after navigating the famous London Underground to the stop called "West Ham," a stranger on the

street informed him that the club actually played some distance away in Upton Park and, being a Sunday, the grounds would be closed anyway. Fortunately for Clyde, that stranger knew that the mother of two West Ham players happened to live close by and when he knocked on her door and explained Clyde's situation, she welcomed the young Bermudian with open arms.²

Clyde went on to score 58 goals in 221 appearances at West Ham between 1968 and 1976. While he was not the first Black player in England, he was the first Black striker to take the league by storm. At that time, West Ham was one of England's most successful clubs. England's 1966 World Cup-winning team was famously led by three West Ham players: Bobby Moore, Geoff Hurst, and Martin Peters. In addition to these living legends were players like Billy Bonds, Harry Redknapp, and Frank Lampard Sr. whose names still echo around the pubs of East London. All of that to say, Clyde was a seventeen year-old boy stepping into a grown man's game. While there may have been some initial skepticism from the fans about this young Black Bermudian pulling on their famous claret and blue shirt, Clyde's goal-scoring ability won the working class East Enders over immediately.³ Fans of other clubs were less welcoming and it was during away games that Clyde faced racist abuse from the stands. While no other incident compared to the "acid test" described earlier, he faced routine verbal abuse from racial slurs to animal noises when he took the pitch. His response was always the same: to let his game do the talking. Best approached his role with remarkable perspective. He rightly saw himself in a historical context, playing not just for himself, but for all the Black players who would follow after him. Despite the abuse he received from the stands, Best never lost his cool, fearing that if he lost his temper, it would be held against not only him, but future players as well. He finished his career without ever receiving a red card,⁴ a remarkable feat for a player who played as long as Clyde.

By 1975, a lot had changed at West

Ham and Clyde decided to move to the United States and become one of the pioneering Black players in the emerging world of professional “soccer.” Over an eight-year span, Clyde played for the Tampa Bay Rowdies, Portland Timbers, Toronto Blizzard, and Los Angeles Lazers.⁵ The game was growing in America, with Tampa Bay’s rival, the New York Cosmos, attracting world-renowned stars like Pelé and Franz Beckenbauer. During this time, Clyde proved himself adaptable to both the indoor and outdoor variants that were being played. After hanging up his cleats in 1984, Clyde remained in Irvine, California until 1996, when he was offered the role of technical director at the Bermuda Football Association. He has remained home in Bermuda ever since.

In some ways, Clyde’s virtues may be responsible for his lack of recognition: there is no salacious twist, no out-of-character outburst, no terrible flaw exposed by his success. He remains a humble, gentle professional who worked hard and responded to racism with the casual contempt it deserves. But his is a story worth hearing and a small group of Wolverines want to be sure it’s heard.

When Dan Egan ’83 went to Bermuda for two years to work on the 2017 America’s Cup, he reached out to his old friend from Bridgton, Jerry Best, and learned that Clyde had just released his autobiography, *The Acid Test*. Over the following months, Dan spent many nights speaking with Clyde about his life. Egan left Bermuda when his work on the America’s Cup finished, but Clyde’s story continued to circle in his mind. Just over a year ago, Egan, whose accomplished career has focused around media production, proposed to Clyde that they turn his life story into a documentary. With Clyde soon on board, Egan (on the advice of Peter Gately) reached out to Dennis Lister, now the Speaker of the Assembly in the Bermudian Parliament. A partnership with ties back to Bridgton and built on a passion for football was soon underway, and *Transforming the Beautiful Game: The Clyde Best Story* was born. With decades of experience producing sports documentaries and a lifelong love of soccer, Dan was perfectly situated to bring Clyde’s story to the screen. While Lister idolized Clyde as a child, he realized that he could now help to give back to Clyde by opening doors in Bermuda and helping to ensure that this documentary truly captures all that Clyde means to Bermuda and its people. As if the Bridgton connections were not yet thick enough, Egan discovered in an early Zoom meeting that Bermuda’s Minister of Youth, Culture, and Sport, Dr. Ernest Peets Jr. ’88, is also a Wolverine, one who was anxious to lend a helping hand with this important cultural project. Lister and Dr. Peets add invaluable connections across



From left to right: Speaker Dennis Lister ’76, Clyde Best, and Dan Egan ’83.

“We are really excited about the Clyde Best documentary, and we are pleased the preproduction phase has been successful. As a member of the Bridgton Academy Class of 1988, it is a unique opportunity to join two other Bridgton Academy alumni on this project.”

—DR. ERNEST PEETS JR. ’88



Dan Egan with the Premier of Bermuda, David Burt, at the film’s opening press announcement on March 29, 2022

Bermuda and knowledge of the island to the production team, ensuring that the project moves forward quickly while remaining true to Clyde’s Bermudian roots. Dr. Peets explains, “We are really excited about the Clyde Best documentary, and we are pleased the preproduction phase has been

successful. As a member of the Bridgton Academy Class of 1988, it is a unique opportunity to join two other Bridgton Academy alumni on this project.”

As of now, the documentary is IDA-recognized and under production with hopes to be released in time for the 2024 film festival circuit. Excitement about the project is palpable. Lister says he “doesn’t go a week in Bermuda without speaking to someone who is excited to finally see Clyde get his due.” The film’s teaser (available at clydebest.com) spread through West Ham social media like wildfire. Clyde exemplifies many of the qualities Bridgton has always sought to instill in its students: integrity, perseverance, compassion, sportsmanship. It feels quite fitting that a band of Wolverines will be responsible for bringing the Clyde Best story to a wider audience. There is an echo between Bridgton and Bermuda. As Lister puts it, “that little place up North is the key to all of this.” **BA**

¹English football is divided into tiers. While the top league is currently known as the “Premier League,” the term “top flight” is used to specify the highest league in English football over eras in which it had different names. In the case of West Ham United, their first ever Black players were brothers John and Clive Charles, but their appearances did not come in the top flight.

²This was the mother of John and Clive Charles and Clyde’s relationship with the Charles family continues to this day.

³There was a real family atmosphere about the Club at that time and Clyde bonded with the hard-working folk that reminded him of the Bermudians he’d left behind. In *The Acid Test*, Clyde recalls a recent trip back to London in which a supporter casually approached him and asked “Hey Clyde, where you been all these years? On vacation?” He still considers East London a second home.

⁴A red card is issued to remove a player from the match. They are earned by accumulating two yellow card offenses or a single egregious offense. Avoiding red cards for an entire career requires extraordinary discipline, especially for a player of Clyde’s size and power.

⁵His stints in both Portland and Los Angeles reunited Clyde with Clive Charles, the West Ham trailblazer who helped Clyde feel so at home in London.