

IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

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BOOKMUNDO, AMSTERDAM 2026

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Bookmundo, Amsterdam 2026

Coverdesign: Elisabeth van Beeren

ISBN: 9789403900285

ISBN: (e-book) 9789403900292

<https://publishnl.bookmundo.com/elisabethvanbeeren>

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For Wim

'Emancipate yourself from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds'

Bob Marley

1:

It was sometime in the spring of 2017 when you called me from the editorial offices of *Soccer International*, the renowned football magazine that had long since earned its stripes in football journalism and with which practically every football-loving boy had grown up since 1965. Who hadn't grown up with it? I still remember my father having a subscription to *SI* and how the magazine would land on the doormat every week. It must have been after the 1974 World Cup that he subscribed, because as a welcome gift he received brightly coloured pennants that had circulated after Germany's victory. They hung in my parents' bedroom, probably not least because my mother didn't want them in the living room. Men en masse subscribed to the magazine back then because the Netherlands had put itself on the map with the total football of the Dutch national coach Rinus Michels and Johan Cruyff as the absolute world star. At its peak, that meant 250,000 subscribers.

"Things aren't going so well here," you said, and from the tone of your voice I could hear the exhaustion that had taken hold of you over the past few months.

You were calling from outside, inhaling the smoke from vanilla-flavoured Moods filters. "Outside," in this case, meant downstairs at the foot of the office tower where *SI* had been housed for several years since moving to

Amsterdam. You could see the glass high-rise from a stone's throw away from the station, making it easy to walk to. In my mind I could picture you standing beneath the canopy when it rained, or just beside it when the sun was shining.

The earlier Saint Nicholas celebration we had still attended the company party there with the children, inaugurating the building in traditional fashion with a staff gathering to which everyone's family had been invited. At the time, *Soccer Intermediar* occupied three floors: one for the chief editors and reception area, one for the editorial staff, and one for the kitchen and support personnel. Usually around thirty people were present, including the editors and support staff. The journalists came and went or worked from home.

The place was rather modern for the eighties, complete with suspended ceilings, adjustable computer desks, and ergonomically rotating office chairs. There was a lot of red and blue in the carpeting, while other primary colours decorated the pipes and window frames. A few pool tables stood next to some spectacular-looking computer games, giving every visitor the impression that entertainment was never in short supply. The children brought along to the Saint Nicholas celebration could hardly believe their eyes and ears and could barely be pulled away from the games.

Had Saint Nicholas unexpectedly failed to show up, it would hardly have been a disaster. But Saint Nicholas would not have been Saint Nicholas had he not already been present on the top floor. During a tour of the offices

we found him there, fully dressed and made up, ready to surprise the children. It was a strange sight to see Saint Nicholas sitting there with his upper body half exposed beneath his makeup and mitre.

Normally, you would have found Johansen sitting in the green leather swivel chair in the editor-in-chief's office—if only he had ever actually set foot in the Utrecht location. Still, you could picture him there with his legs on the desk and a cigar dangling from the corner of his mouth while dictating or writing. The Beatle haircut remained intact, as did the enormous mustache, remnants of the days when he had managed a rock-and-roll band from the eastern part of the country. A golden age when the grass was greener and sex was still considered dirty. The sixties and seventies testified to that.

Johansen's office at the former editorial headquarters had been lined from floor to ceiling with books. Otherwise, the rooms had remained virtually identical over the years, even after the move. When the editorial offices in Milltown were refurbished years before the relocation to Amsterdam, Johansen had once again chosen the same carpeting, the same curtains, and the same paint colour. He disliked change and made no secret of it, insisting on the familiar blue pattern with red dots. It was a miracle the fabric was still even available.

His office was therefore not to be entered when he himself was absent. Johansen always noticed when someone had used his office or borrowed a reference book. He could tell by the way the book had been returned—or not returned at all. Swearing and ranting, he

would loudly express his displeasure whenever possible, making sure all three floors could hear him. That happened regularly and was simply part of daily life.

If it wasn't a borrowed book, it was the meal vouchers that had gotten out of hand, or the use of his computer, on which he could barely compose a proper e-mail without the assistance of Sylvia, his secretary, whom he summoned constantly to help him navigate the new digital world. In today's woke culture, some of his behaviour would certainly be considered crossing boundaries, because he could explode like a madman. Especially on Mondays, when deadlines dictated the rhythm of work and an entire issue had to be assembled.

Things changed completely once Paula Cross took over as interim director. In a male-dominated world with little understanding of football journalism itself, surviving among alpha males who thought they knew everything was exhausting. After eighteen months she rightly called it quits, clearing the way for the next interim manager to clean house. She later even wrote a book about the experience, generously sharing what she called her "life lessons."

A restructuring was underway, and it had already been going on for years. The third wave was about to begin, yet you had just received a promotion. By then you were already occupied mainly with other journalistic work and had little to do anymore with desk editing or statistics.

Originally, you had been hired for the photo department, working alongside a childhood friend from Milltown and Tina, one of the few women who could hold her own

among the men and who was therefore regarded as “one of the guys.” Tina lived in Amsterdam with her girlfriend, so when you later moved there as well, the two of you often drove together to Milltown, laughing the whole way.

She was also one of the few colleagues who visited after the birth of our child and who later recommended you to the chief editors as coordinator. In turn, you once introduced a close friend to Johansen, who hired him immediately, making him your direct colleague.

Casper and you worked daily with Milo. At first, the three of you were responsible for statistics and their publication. That lasted until Milo hacked the e-mail account of Ajax’s director, scooping exclusive stories that he passed on to the Ajax correspondent. Milo was fired on the spot once his IP address was traced. The correspondent, naturally, claimed to know nothing about it, yet over the years he managed to build quite a successful career from those scoops.

You stayed out of those kinds of things. You were too principled for that. Loud-mouthed perhaps, but white-collar crime held no appeal for you, just as ordinary crime didn’t either. Deep down, you were rather decent.

After your years working with statistics came the annual Magazine Season Catalogues and the yearly national football quiz championship in Riverlock, an event Soccer Intermediair would go on to win no fewer than nine times.

Amsterdam was not necessarily an improvement for the editorial staff. Rather, it marked the beginning of a new era dominated by reorganizations carried out on supposedly “neutral ground.” In the eyes of the old editor-in-chief, neutral ground was sooner Milltown than Amsterdam, because football supporters were less likely to become threatening in a provincial town. Yet under pressure from the publisher, the move to Amsterdam was made because of its central location.

In this way, the provincial image of the local little football paper slowly disappeared, making room for the metropolitan ambition of the football brand *Soccer Intermediair*, which was expected to generate new revenue through initiatives launched by the interim managers whom publisher DPG appointed after Johansen’s departure.

Only then did it emerge that the then-director of the Dutch Press Group had purchased shares in a Flemish amusement park using company funds. The losses had to be compensated for through cutbacks, including at *Soccer Intermediair*.

Even interim manager Bacon—a friendly man who believed in you completely and encouraged you to work in video production and present quizzes—failed to get the organization back on track. After his departure, an astonishing six or seven hundred thousand euros had apparently vanished without a trace.

The managerial blunders did not go unnoticed and hit the magazine hard financially as well as internally.

Years later, Dick Christopherson eventually gave you complete carte blanche in shaping your new role, which mainly consisted of presenting online quizzes on the new magazine website, providing live commentary during football matches, interviewing football heroes, and producing a football quiz book.

The company had undergone a major transformation after Johansen handed over the reins, which eventually ended up in Christophersons' hands. He had a different vision and was expected to drag the magazine out of the mire through aggressive restructuring, though he was clearly seasoned in that field: he had done the same thing at the *Public Paper*. He had already swept through several newspapers and magazines before arriving here, doing precisely what he had been hired to do—reorganize on an interim basis.

During his introductory speech he presented himself as a man “with a vision and a ball.” Climbing onto the stage holding a football, he attempted to speak metaphorically about “the whole of things,” an idea he had apparently borrowed from a Dutch soccer star, who liked to appear at lectures holding a football as a metaphor for virtually anything imaginable.

What had once been a mildly amusing idea from some media coach had by then become a cheap gimmick for every idiot trying to identify himself with football during motivational speeches. The word alone made your jaw ache.

At first, Christopherson appeared respectful toward the staff and toward the magazine itself. Naturally, he

claimed to understand the transition from print to digital and acknowledged that declining subscriber numbers made layoffs unavoidable.

Even so, when you needed an employer's statement in order to buy a house, he simply invited you to pick it up in his megalomaniac office, decorated with giant wallpaper images of Diego Maradona and fitted out with an actual artificial grass carpet.

Only much later did his narcissistic streak become fully visible, when he began ignoring employees who greeted him or simply refused to answer when someone asked him a question.

Gradually, the editorial office became a genuine snake pit, one that had begun forming almost immediately after Johansen's departure.

At first there was the constant uncertainty that lingered for years among the old guard of the football magazine. At the helm were two editors-in-chief from the shop floor itself—known as “the two K's”—formerly Johansen's right- and left-hand men. Once Johansen had stepped aside for them, both proved entirely incapable of leading the magazine because each held a different vision and neither truly understood how to manage an editorial organization.

The office split into supporters and opponents of the restructuring, with a neutral middle group in between. Some buried their heads in the sand out of self-preservation while others tried carefully to navigate the minefield.

The days of “one for all and all for one” were over. The cohesion of a close-knit group of editors and journalists who had breathed *Socker Intermediair* and who embodied the magazine in every fibre of their being slowly disintegrated.

One colleague nicknamed “the oracle,” spent years under suspicion of betrayal and hypocrisy, only to be declared redundant himself and dismissed without mercy after decades of loyal service.

People were turned against one another. Some burned out, others fell ill, and many were simply cut loose. At first management followed the traditional “last in, first out” policy, but after that anyone who was weak, struggling, or vulnerable was quietly pushed out.

They were replaced by freelancers or programmers on temporary contracts who had no emotional connection to the magazine and little sense of collegiality.

One day you told me that your hands had started trembling when you drank coffee with certain colleagues. You had never experienced anything like that before.

As though it were the most normal thing in the world, Machiavellian tactics flourished inside a culture of fear that outsiders barely noticed, except for the staff themselves.

Every time management announced that fewer pages would be printed, another wave of anxiety swept through the editorial office, because everyone knew what it meant: fewer employees.

Years earlier, when optimism still prevailed, there had been a genuine yes-we-can mentality. People believed declining subscriptions could be offset by digital media or compensated through gambling websites linked to football matches.

But when none of it worked and subscriber numbers collapsed to a meagre sixty-five thousand, harsher measures followed. Permanent employees with expensive contracts became targets and were replaced by flexible temporary workers.

The new colleagues seemed to have little interest in the authenticity of *Socker Intermediair* or in the people behind it. The old guard watched with sorrow as the crown jewel of football-loving Holland was stripped down and repackaged as cheaply as possible.

Sections were shortened or removed altogether. The magazine paper itself was replaced with inferior quality stock. But worst of all was the atmosphere of insecurity that dominated the editorial office.

That distrust only deepened when it was announced that a “new wind” would soon blow through Amsterdam.

The new wind—Dick Christopherson himself—would shape the chief editorship entirely according to his own methods.

And admittedly, his reputation preceded him. The Dutch media world is small, after all, where gossip travels just as fast as news.

Very few people had fond memories of the divide-and-rule culture that flourished under his leadership. “One man’s death is another man’s bread” became the credo at the editorial offices where he arrived.

Lawsuits followed from former employees whose careers had been terminated with shocking disrespect, and in some cases, it bordered on character assassination.

They were miserable conditions under which Christopherson stepped effortlessly over bodies without ever extending a hand to the staff left behind to help them cope with the increasingly inhuman atmosphere.

Instead, he simply installed new people from his own network—often lacking expertise—while building legal files against veteran employees in order to dismiss them as well.

At *Soccer Intermediair*, he was welcomed publicly as a visionary, though internally everyone knew better.

Resigned, the staff endured the feared transformation.

Still, not everyone lost their head in the process. In a few cases, Christopherson even promoted people. But the men who had built the once-thriving football magazine from the very beginning were ultimately pushed aside in large numbers, ruthlessly and without ceremony.

Apart from a handful of people within the Editorial and Works Councils, nearly everyone could recount how the magazine had gradually been squandered and sold from one publishing company to another, all the while

throwing employees overboard through cynical deals and backroom agreements.

If you were smart, you joined the Editorial Council yourself, where at least the journalists settled in comfortably, protected by the privilege's membership afforded them. Before any major decisions were made, they first had to pass through the council for approval.

Thus, in 2016, the restructuring of the seventy-two-person media company was approved there, along with the question of who would have to leave the field.

If you wanted to save your own skin, you joined the council and accepted that your evenings would now be spent in meetings discussing the dismissal of colleagues.

Some employees left before they were pushed. Ryan Manheim, for example—once named colleague of the year—started his own statistics website dedicated to Lionel Messi and began a new career with the Dutch cycling federation.

After the winter round of layoffs came another round in spring, and after that there seemed to be a new round every single year.

Those who sensed danger because they were systematically ignored by colleagues or supervisors who clearly knew more than they let on had an especially difficult time trying to keep calm while simultaneously maintaining their network within football journalism for the future.

Yet however bitter and unsafe the working environment became; most people were too afraid to leave and throw away a lifelong career.

So when you received your promotion into the new role, it felt to us like a green light to buy the house we had spent years saving for. Nothing was spared once the signed employer's statement was finally in our hands.

'Is it bearable there at all?' I asked you.

'Yeah,' you replied. 'This Thursday there'll be another round of personal meetings with employees who won't be staying. Afterwards the rest of us will hear the new direction they want to take.'

'And what kind of direction will that be?'

'Well, the restructuring is mainly necessary because the magazine isn't making a profit anymore. In fact, we're running at a loss. And it doesn't look like circulation will increase anytime soon—more likely the opposite.'

'I suppose it makes sense then that they can't continue with the current staff,' I said carefully.

Then I quickly added:

'But those new initiatives they launched... haven't they helped generate more revenue?'

'Apparently not enough to offset the losses. And on top of that, the publisher has certain expectations regarding returns and profitability.'

You fell silent for a moment before continuing.

‘So now they’re taking new measures.’

‘How many jobs do you think are at stake?’

‘Honestly? Nobody here knows yet. Or at least they’re not saying anything before the meetings happen. Otherwise, everyone would just start speculating. But the Editorial and Works Councils have already approved it.’

‘Jesus,’ I answered. ‘And only two years ago things actually looked hopeful again, didn’t they?’

‘Yeah. It all happened very fast,’ you said.

‘But nobody here can really help it. This is just a new era where print media are slowly going under. We’ll just have to see where the ship runs aground.’

‘Do you have any reason to worry?’ I asked.

‘No,’ you said firmly. ‘Absolutely not. And neither do you. I’ll see you tonight, sweetheart.’

2:

Lex had never truly aspired to become a journalist. More than anything, he simply wanted to do something with soccer. After completing his degree in Cultural and Social Development, he gathered his courage and applied for a position at the local editorial office of the soccer magazine that just so happened to be the biggest in the country.

After all, anyone can become a journalist if they manage to get a foot in the door. Countless academic paths may eventually lead to a glittering career in journalism. Sports journalism, however, was another matter entirely. Once established, always established — or so it seemed. The mastodons of Dutch soccer journalism had certainly proven as much.

He still remembered vividly how, after sending an open application to *Soccer Intermediair*, he had been granted an audience with Derk Johansen. At the time, Lex was playing football at a high level in his hometown, and he cleverly steered the conversation toward the possibility of a journalistic career at what was then the largest soccer publication in Dutch history.