



The Nowhere Men

Michael Calvin

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Winner of The Times British Sports Book Award 2014.

A fascinating insight into the enclosed world of football scouts in the UK

A teenaged boy plays football in a suburban park. His name is Raheem Sterling. The call is made: "Get down here quick. This is something special".

Another boy is 8, going on 28. His name is Jack Wilshere. The referee, an Arsenal scout, spirits him away from Luton Town.

A young goalkeeper struggles on loan at Cheltenham Town in League Two. His name is Jack Butland. Within months he will be playing for England.

Welcome to football's hidden tribe. Scouts are everywhere yet nowhere, faceless and nameless, despite making the informed decisions worth millions. Award-winning sportswriter Michael Calvin opens up their hidden world, examining their disconnected lifestyles, petty betrayals and unconsidered professionalism of men who spend long, lonely hours on the road.

The Nowhere Men Details

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From Reader Review The Nowhere Men for online ebook

John Farrell says

Fascinating insight into the world of the soccer scout across all the English leagues

James says

This was in many ways a rarity in football books, an in-depth study of an area that is rarely featured in the press, but still a vital part of the game. This is more than just a collection of conversations with those on the periphery of football; scouts at Liverpool to League 2 are covered, as well as an insightful interview with the Brentford owner.

There are two strands to the book, a look at the individual characters and a wider discussion of the changing nature of scouts to the more modern analysts. This is far from a fawning work, but Calvin is clearly favourable towards the scouts, and late on he admits this is in part due to similarities with his own profession. This adds a warmth to the characters described, and reading this a few years after publication, the youth prospects are generally better known, which made it more interesting for me (but also more surprising that the later edition mentions little-known upstart Raheem 'Stirling' on the back cover). In contrast to Calvin's later book on managers, this has more of Calvin's personal input, which allows him to question some of the interviewees a bit more, as well as offering another viewpoint to the scouting fraternity. He also varies the chapter styles, some featuring matches exclusively, and one which was just a dialogue between three scouts.

The format was clever too. Initially, there was a description of what a scout actually does, but later chapters put this in the perspective of a changing game, one which saw performance analysts replacing 'the flat caps'. Although some more modern voices still paid lip service towards the men who watch games live, multiple interviewees gave the impression that data is so extensive that the traditional concept of a scout is close to obsolete, at least in terms of discovering a player. But even the strongest advocates of data acknowledge its flaws; the exception in this book is Damien Comolli.

The message from this book was ultimately a sad one, however. It's clear that most scouts are paid very little, and are really doing it as a hobby with like-minded souls, clinging on desperately to still be part of football. As a result, they are seen as disposable by managers and clubs, and subject to the whims of a particular manager rather than being treated as long-term employees. Though many bristled at the idea they were going to games as spectators, it was obvious they still wanted to be part of the matchday.

Jertz says

This book was highly rated by others and I could see why after the first few chapters.

The author brings across a detailed account of the sometimes harsh and underpaid lives of football scouts so that you began to feel sad about their lives away from home and on the motorways.

What let the book down for me was that it reverted back to the same characters and teams rather than spread

the net wider to get a better view of the lives at different levels of the game.

Definitely worth a read but was glad when the end came.

Simon says

Dull and meandering with no defined story throughout. Just wanders from one scenario to another, bombarding the reader with insipid anecdotes from a constantly changing cast. A real disappointment.

luke dennison says

Fascinating

Michael Calvin has written a superbly researched, warts and all, sympathetic book about scouting in football. He also covers how this involving using technology and the concept of moneyball. If you want to read this book to read about big stars and how they were scouted, it think football starts and ends with the big 6 premier league clubs don't bother. This is a human story of passion, obsession and love of the beautiful game, it's about scouring the lower league's, the youth matches, getting paid in mileage and not caring about the lack of money. My only small criticism is that occasionally the stories from different scouts are similar to one another but that's not the authors fault and just goes to prove the authenticity of the research. A great read.

lluke says

reads like an unfunny uninteresting hunter s thompson book, an unstructured collection of anecdotes, quite frustrating to read.

Sandy Morley says

Michael Calvin meanders slightly, and it's not always easy to keep track of whose sage advice he's paraphrasing at any one point, but this is an interesting insight into a side of the beautiful game that's as much a mystery to the average fan as anything.

Tom says

Really good piece of reporting into Britain's football scouts. Atmospheric, honest and lets the characters loose to tell their many stories in their own words. One memorable chapter's just a transcript of three of the senior members of the scouting fraternity in a roundtable-with-tea-and-biscuits discussion, and there's some fascinating discussion of the reception Moneyball-style profiling has received from English football, and

what it's achieved so far...

A fair bit of football knowledge is assumed from the reader - stadium names, team nicknames and history and so on - but it's a rewarding read featuring many familiar names and faces from the recent and more distant past. The only letdown for me was some gushing, flowery recollections by the author about "his" club, which seemed out of place in this book.

Read it while it's still current - several up-and-coming Premier League and England stars feature, with some fabulous insights into their background and character.

Steve says

Mike Calvin has provided a fascinating insight into the game that many of us love through the eyes of the scouts who travel mile upon endless mile for little more reward than the personal satisfaction of seeing an identified talent develop into a star. As I get older I become increasingly frustrated with football's soul crushing infatuation with money and Calvin's book manages to illuminate the deep love that The Nowhere Men feel for the game whilst exposing the inhuman way it treats them in return.

Tor-Kristian Karlsen recently tweeted that the overwhelming factor in determining a professional football club's success is their transfer spending and yet these men with their wealth of knowledge and expertise could barely be less valued. Calvin introduces us to some of their number, sharing their experience of both the highs and the lows of their roles and their thoughts on the talent and the clubs that covet it. We get the low down on up and coming youngsters such as Raheem Sterling, Jack Butland and Jamaal Lascelles and we follow the strategies and upheavals of clubs from Brentford to Liverpool.

The insights will help to form your views on the game and possibly even change the way that you watch and appreciate it and the freshness of the anecdotes means that you can look up from the pages and see how those players are developing and where clubs have succeeded or failed in their different approaches. An enjoyable and educational read.

Simon says

Good footballing journalism in telling us just who scouts are and what they do. A chance to look forwards and glance backwards at the same time. Quietly fascinating. I reckon that good scouts, like good sports journalists will see out the IT revolution.

Matthew Andrus says

What a truly Brilliant in sight into footballs unsung hero's the scouts who put the beautiful game before family and in some cases about are only paid 40p mile in pursuit of footballs next golden boy. Nowhere men is a well written account by Michael Calvin of the trials and tribulations these man go through. These men are the real talent spotters of English football

Rob Sedgwick says

Scouting the scouts

This is a fascinating insight into the scouting process that goes on in football. It's not an exact science, more of an art which is in the process of being made more algorithmic. At the heart of the story lies the battle between the traditionalists and the statisticians.

John Costello says

A really well written and interesting look at a part of football I knew nothing about

Mahlon says

In Nowhere Men, Michael Calvin takes a look at some of the most undervalued and overworked professionals in all of football-- The scouts. The author examines scouting at all levels and illuminates the different problems faced by clubs at each. He also examines the way technology has and will continue to affect the future of scouting, and chronicles the way in which the older generation of scout is adapting – or not. Calvin's usual thoroughness is on display here.

My only criticism would be that because he tried to cover so much territory and so many issues, the book felt a little more disjointed than his others. Still a must read for anyone interested in the past or future of football.

Ragnar Liaskar says

More than two years since I read this, but had to come back for a short review as I am shocked to see how poorly rated it is on this site compared to in the football world and media in Europe.

It won The Times British Sports Book Award 2014, and several other prizes.

It was very much appreciated by older and younger scouts and sport directors I know from many of the levels in this game from the top European leagues to local 3rd and 4th level leagues in Norway.

Don't be put off by some of these bad reviews. It is one of the best books on the football industry that has been published the last 20 years.
