

Famed, and once feared, on terraces, Pet Shop Boys bodyguard 'Denton' dies in crash Farewell to The Bear. Gooners pay tribute to fan who became folk hero

EXCLUSIVE
by RICHARD OSLEY

HE was known as The Bear. Big D. Or just "Denton". The undisputed leader of the gang. And there was hardly a fan who stood on the Clock End terraces at Arsenal's old Highbury stadium who hadn't heard of him or the fables of his bruising scrapes with rival fans.

One man's hooligan, he was a folk hero to others – and for many of the young supporters who followed the team home and away in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Dainton Connell seemed, as one fan put it this week, "indestructible".

Yet, on Sunday, friends who would normally have shared a few pints with him before a big Arsenal game gathered instead to mourn his death.

Mr Connell, 46, a father-of-three, died in a car crash in Moscow late on Thursday night. He had been working as a bodyguard for the Pet Shop Boys, a band he had forged a close friendship with over the 20 years he was employed by them. The pop duo said they were "devastated" by his death.

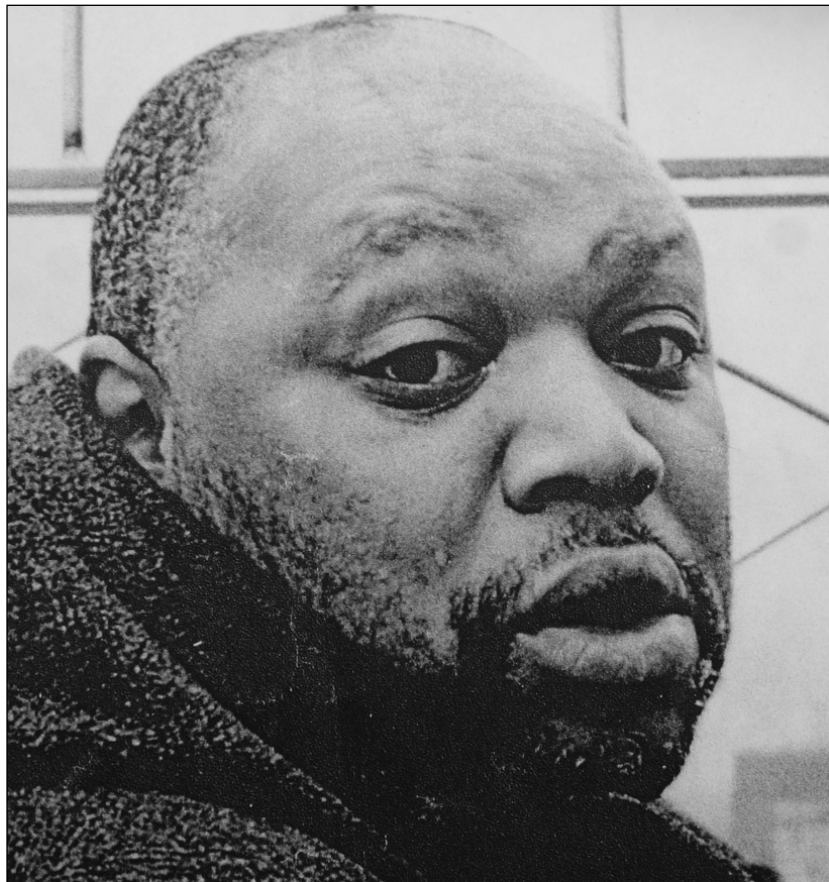
On Sunday, closer to home, more than 1,000 Arsenal supporters left the red and white of their replica shirts at home and turned up for the lunchtime match with Sunderland wearing black.

In an extraordinary tribute, they joined a procession from some of Mr Connell's favourite pubs in Finsbury Park, past his beloved Highbury stadium, being redeveloped into flats, and on to circle the Emirates Stadium, the club's new steel-and-glass home.

All the way, friends and relatives sang his name, some of the terraces' biggest bruisers walking through the streets of Highbury with tears streaming down their faces. "We love you Denton, we do," was their chant.

At the two decorative bronze canons outside the new stadium in Ashburton Grove, they stopped and toasted three cheers to their old friend, leaving behind flowers and teddy bears.

One message left at the shrine said that, if Mr Connell could see the emotional scenes, he would call his old friends



Dainton Connell, 'a genuinely nice man'. Above right, tributes at the stadium

"moo moos" in his familiar booming voice. There was no tribute inside the stadium at Sunday's match, although it is understood approaches were made to request a minute's silence. The funeral is expected to attract thousands of fans from all clubs and possibly a few of his celebrity associates.

Close friends said that, despite his fearsome reputation, he had "mellowed" in his later years as he had become a family man. They suggested he was thinking about becoming a taxi driver so he could spend less time on tour with the Pet Shop Boys and more time with his two daughters and son.

"The 1970s and the 80s were a long time ago," said one old friend, in tears on Sunday. "He had mellowed and a lot of his reputation was



The Pet Shop Boys: 'devastated'

from another time.

"He was just Arsenal through and through – and, if you were an Arsenal fan, he was a friend of you. He never hit a scarfer [an ordinary fan]. He looked out for the younger fans when the team would be playing in the north."

His reputation, however, preceded him and extended beyond the pubs around Highbury. Bulletin boards have included messages from Millwall, Spurs, Chelsea, Celtic and Middlesbrough supporters, who all say Mr Connell "demanded respect" on the terraces.

He is named in books written by self-confessed hooligans who clashed with Arsenal fans before and after matches in the 1980s.

Mr Connell was described as a "main face", albeit with his name misspelt, in Hooligans, a book by the leader of a "firm" of Everton supporters, Andy Nicholls, published two years ago with the help of Searchlight journalist Andy Lowles.

He wrote: "Arsenal's mob enjoyed a resurgence between 1979 and 1983 as a result of this new generations of lads coming through. Two separate mobs emerged, the Gooners and the Herds. The main face of Gooners was a man

called Denton Connor [sic], known throughout the hooligan scene simply as Denton.

"The name Gooners actually originated with a group of Spurs hooligans who intended to chant it as a term of abuse [a play on the Goons and Gunners] but this was overheard by an Arsenal fan and adopted before it could be used by their opponents. Denton and some of the other leading Gooners were later to provide security for the Pet Shop Boys band, one of whom was a big Arsenal fan."

In the same book, Stoke fan Mark Chester is quoted as saying about a match against Arsenal in the early 1990s: "We had a bit of a shock when 400 game-as-f*** Gooners steamed us back into the paddock. We had nothing else to do but fight back... I remember everybody shouting, 'Where's Denton, the big black bastard?' as he was singled out as their top lad."

Accounts in the book have been contested and Mr Connell was reportedly concerned that he had been unfairly named. One associate said: "He had the right hump about it. He didn't think it was fair that he had been named because it was such a long time ago. The world had moved on."

Mr Connell, who



lived in Shacklewell, east London, certainly never tired of following the club. He would turn up to youth and reserve team matches, trek up to forgotten lower league outposts of Grimsby and Shrewsbury and travel across Europe.

If you look closely, the big man in the jester hat seen on television jumping around when Arsenal scored a vital goal at Liverpool in the 1989 championship decider is Mr Connell.

The footage shows him leaping around, close to somersaults. "That was Denton," said a friend. "He was a gen-

uinely nice man who lived for Arsenal. They should name part of the ground after him."

There are differing accounts of what happened in Moscow but the driver of the car, young Russian DJ Anton Antonov, is said to have invited Mr Connell to his club, the Roof of the World.

As they made their way there, Mr Antonov's BMW skidded at speed on wet roads, hit a tree and flipped over railings running alongside the Moskva river. The car ended up in the water. Both men died.

Away from the ter-

aces, Mr Connell had links with many in the pop world and fans of the Pet Shop Boys would look out for him at gigs.

The duo, Chris Lowe and Neil Tennant, paid tribute in a statement and described a man who appeared too warm to be involved in football-related violence.

They said: "Dainton was a warm, kind, lovable friend, a huge Arsenal fan and a larger-than-life character, famous in north London and beyond."

The Sex Pistols' John Lydon – an Arsenal fan – also left a tribute message on his website this week.

Camden and Islington **NHS**
Mental Health and Social Care Trust

Camden and Islington inpatient services: providing the right level of care in the right place at the right time

Public consultation meeting
6.30pm, Wednesday 17th October
Resource Centre
356 Holloway Road
N7 6PA

For a copy of the consultation document see www.candi.nhs.uk.
For more information call freephone 0800 345 7739 or email inpatient.consultation@candi.nhs.uk