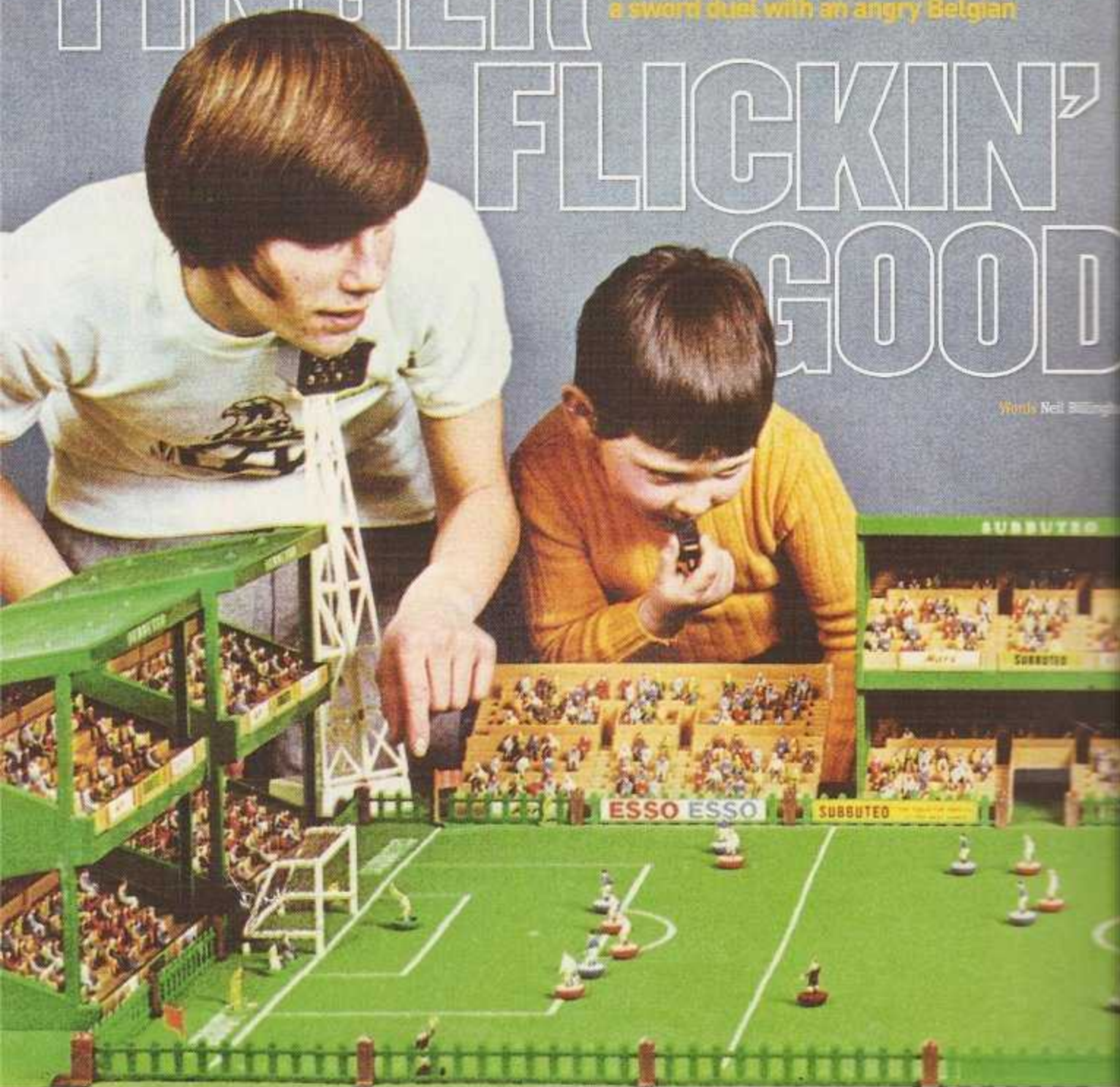


FINGER FLICKIN' GOOD

It became the choice of a generation but Subbuteo's global success was almost scuppered by Sir Stanley Matthews and a sword duel with an angry Belgian

Words Neil Billing



July 5 1982, and Italy have just defeated Brazil 3-2 in one of the most memorable World Cup matches of all time. I'm 10 years old, my hero is Zico, and I'm absolutely gutted. It's of little consolation that every commentator and journalist is describing the Samba Stars as 'the best team to never win the World Cup'. So, 10 minutes after the final whistle, with a sense of injustice still raging, I challenge my brother to a re-match: Brazil versus Italy in a game of Subbuteo. This time Brazil

win 3-2, with goals from Zico, Falcao and Socrates, the winner coming in injury time. And immediately – strangely – I feel better. Brazil's 3-2 defeat in the real World Cup has been avenged, and all is well with the world again.

That was the great thing about Subbuteo: it mattered. In a recent UK survey it was estimated that more than 90 percent of fathers over the age of 30 owned Subbuteo sets. At its peak, in the 1970s, Subbuteo was played in more than 50 countries by more

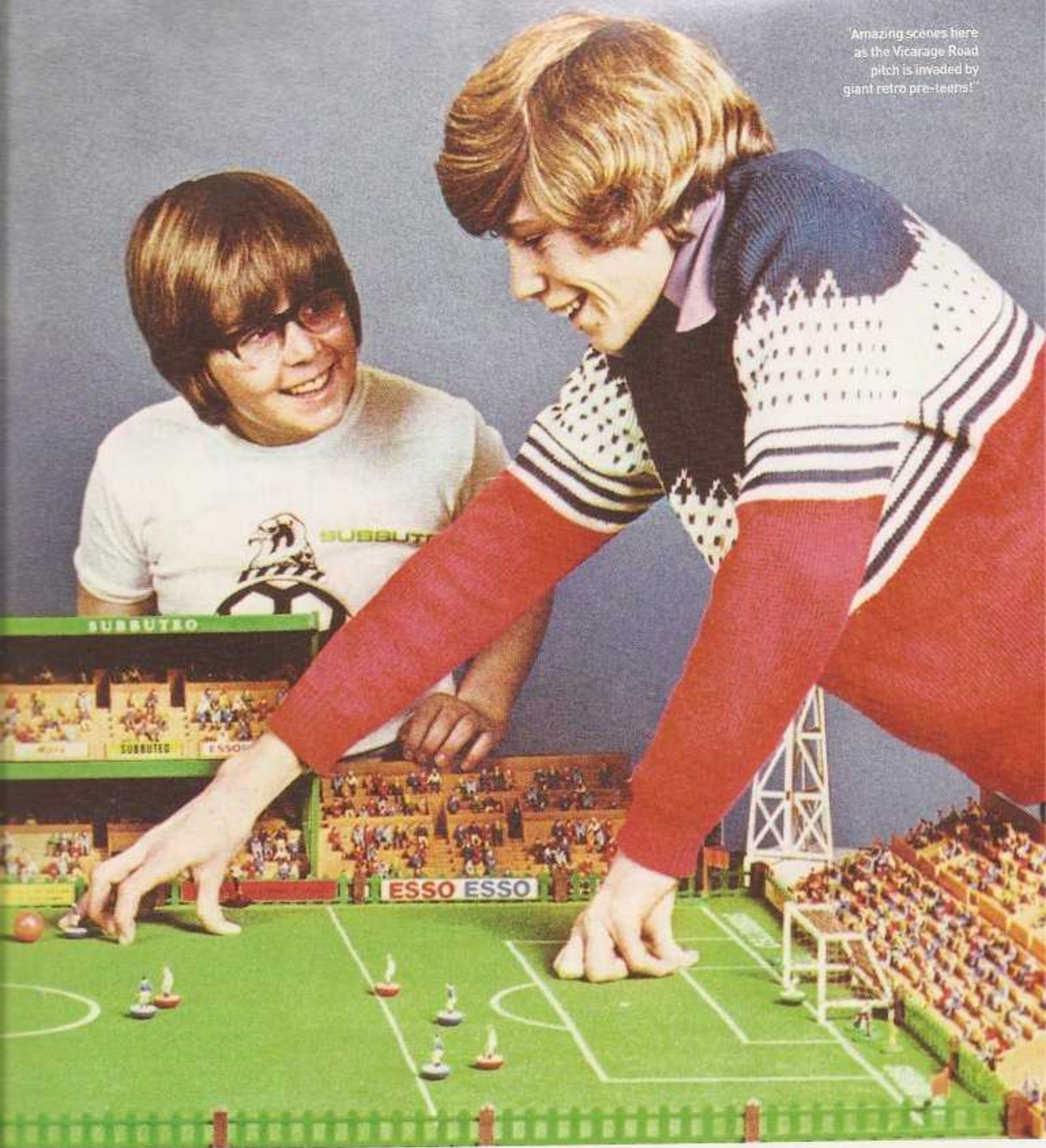


Iconic: a Brazilian Subbuteo figure

than 10 million enthusiasts worldwide. Even today, 60 years after an ornithologist from Tunbridge Wells invented the game, there are thousands of websites dedicated to the glory of Peter Adolph's little plastic men – and right across the globe, Subbuteo leagues are still running.

Since the very first cardboard teams were made in 1947, Subbuteo has had pop songs written in honour of it and TV shows made about it and was even used in one of Sir Stanley's team talks. Adolph himself died

Amazing scenes here as the Vicarage Road pitch is invaded by giant retro pre-teens!



In 1994, but his heartfelt and lifelong romance with Subbuteo saw him threatened with a lawsuit from Stanley Matthews and challenged to a duel by an angry Belgian, while his creation fought off competition from computer games, DVDs and the advent of the internet and survived a stay of execution. The game, the teams and the accessories may have changed beyond recognition but Subbuteo is still going strong to this day. Not bad for a game named after a small bird of prey.

In the beginning

In 1946, Peter Adolph noticed something in the air. There was a palpable sense of relief in post-war Britain and a genuine desire to have fun again. Football was back and more popular than ever, while the shops were being filled with a growing number of games and toys. Adolph realised that if he could get in on the act, he could be on to something big. He was right. ▶



Other versions of table football already existed, in the shape of blow football, a magnetic version and a similar game to Subbuteo called Newfooty, but Adolph believed he could do better. His players were to be cut out of two cardboard team sheets and then slotted into 20 small lead bases. His goalkeepers were mounted on two rectangular brown bases with metal rods to control them while the goals were assembled from metal wire with a cardboard net. Playing pitches weren't included so the instructions advised recipients to "take the chalk provided and mark your pitch onto an ex-army blanket". Thousands would go on to do just that.

Adolph originally came up with the name 'The Hobby' (as in pastime, but actually named after his favourite bird, the hobby hawk) but on approaching various patent agents was told that the name was too generic. The Latin name for hobby hawk is *falco subbuteo*; Adolph not only took the bird's name for his company, he also used the Hobby Hawk's head for its trademark.

An advert was placed in *The Boy's Own Paper*, one of the first comics aimed at boys from 10 years upwards, and for the princely sum of seven shillings and sixpence (37.5p), you could order 'Subbuteo - The Game of Table Soccer'. The truth is Adolph only had a vague idea of how the game would work, but when £7,500 worth of postal orders (£200,000 in today's money) arrived in a matter of days, he cut short a business trip in the United States, returned to England, banked the money and set about delivering a product that fulfilled his original promise.

In January 1947 he took out another advertisement in *The Boy's Own Paper* to apologise for a 'manufacturing delay' owing to the deluge of orders, but six months later the very first Subbuteo sets were delivered by post.

1950s

As the new decade began, Adolph was desperate to build on his early success and uppermost in his thoughts was seeing off his nearest rival, Newfooty. That game had been created by William Keeling in the 1920s and, after the war, had been endorsed by Stanley Matthews. Recklessly, Adolph printed thousands of leaflets saying Matthews also endorsed Subbuteo - he hadn't sought permission from the England winger, but thought it worth the risk. Within days a letter arrived from Matthews saying if Adolph didn't destroy the leaflets

he would sue him up to the eyeballs. Thousands of the leaflets were duly dumped on the fire.

Another near catastrophe occurred when Adolph travelled to a trade fair in Belgium to see what the Europeans thought of his game. That none of the delegates spoke any English was the least of his worries, for when he returned home he received a letter from a Belgian solicitor. It stated that Adolph, while under the influence of alcohol, had paid too much attention to the wife of one of the delegates and that this man wanted to challenge him to a duel using swords. Adolph declined, but had to pay the delegate a sum of money that would satisfy his dignity.

Despite these setbacks, the success of the original Subbuteo advert had given Adolph the confidence to advertise in more comics and soon even more orders were pouring in. In 1950, he gave up his job at the Pensions Office to concentrate full-time on his new venture, moved into new business premises and hired two men - George Underwood and Ron Reader - to help with the marketing and production of the game.

While Subbuteo remained a mail-order business, more and more customers were making special requests to purchase teams in their favourite club colours and soon a wider range of kits was being offered. The first Subbuteo leagues were also being set up and organised by another Adolph creation, the Table Soccer Players Association, and soon these developed into an important tool for the growth of Subbuteo.

The original cardboard playing figures were replaced by flat celluloid ones and before long the first retail outlets began stocking Subbuteo sets. Then, in 1956, Adolph hired the services of the Medway Tool Company, an injection moulding firm, and, for the first time, Subbuteo had the luxury of its very own plastic moulded bases. It was the beginning of the big time.

1960s

The swinging '60s saw Subbuteo grow from a cottage industry that Adolph operated with his mum into a worldwide phenomenon. With the purchase of the Medway Tool Company, Adolph began making three-dimensional moulded figures for Scalextric and Dinky Toys, and these figures inspired him to produce a new range of 3D Subbuteo figures. Whereas the flat figures could be printed by machine, the 3D figures were a far more labour-intensive design. Everything from the hair, boots and socks had to be painted, so the Subbuteo outworkers scheme came into operation.

Home workers, usually housewives, were sent the kits and were paid £1 for every 4,000 figures assembled and £1 for every 1,000 figures they painted, a pitiful amount given the difficulty of the work. Adolph was later grilled on *The Jimmy Young Show* about these practices and the company was investigated by the Low Pay Unit, but no charges were ever brought.

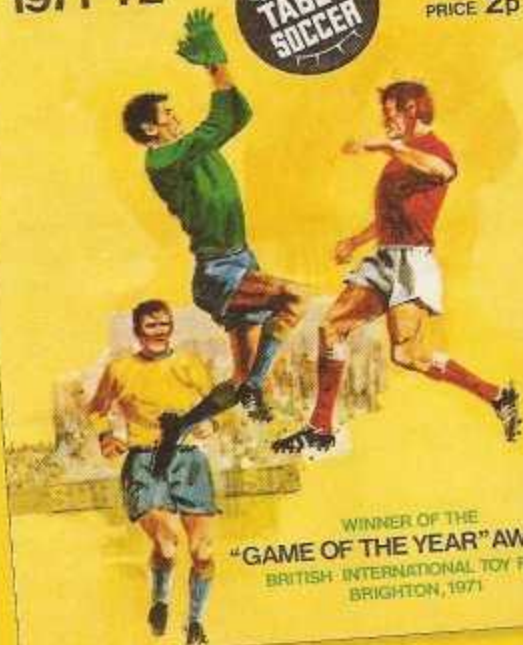
With a quarter of a million figures being produced every week by factories in the UK,

SUBBUTEO CATALOGUE

1971-72

SUBBUTEO
TABLE
SOCCER

PRICE 2p



WINNER OF THE
"GAME OF THE YEAR" AWARD
BRITISH INTERNATIONAL TOY FAIR,
BRIGHTON, 1971



Above Peter Adolph, Subbuteo inventor and enthusiast

Barcelona and Gibraltar, Subbuteo was going from strength to strength, with 55 teams available and the number of accessories, such as floodlights and scoreboards, was growing year by year. By happy coincidence, this expansion coincided with the 1966 World Cup in England.

In 1961, Adolph had hired Geoffrey Samson to head up a new sales team and the new employee was quick to see that the World Cup offered a unique marketing opportunity. For the tournament, Subbuteo produced teams representing each of the 16 competing nations and Samson persuaded shopkeepers around the country to give over huge amounts of window space for the massive displays. The high streets and shopping centres of Britain were a sea of Subbuteo green and the first TV adverts also appeared.

Bill Shankly used a Subbuteo set in one of his most famous team talks



EMPIRES, OFFSIDE, REX, FLICK TO NICK, LITTLEPLASTICMEN.COM

Sales figures were already on an upward trend before the World Cup, but Geoff Hurst's hat-trick, Nobby Stiles' dancing and Bobby Moore lifting the Jules Rimet trophy propelled Subbuteo to another level altogether. In 1963 sales amounted to £35,000; five years later the figure was £345,000.

In 1968, fearing his company was getting too big, Adolph sold Subbuteo to the toy-making company Waddington for £250,000 (£9m in today's money) and was retained by the company. By then Subbuteo had become a household name and was very much a part of the social and football fabric. Legend has it that the Liverpool manager Bill Shankly used a Subbuteo set to deliver one of his most famous team talks before a match against arch-rivals Manchester United. Starting with Alex

Clockwise from top left Options to buy; Chelsea's Tommy Docherty holds court; flick to nick; the full caboodle; Leeds's racial mix

Stepney in goal, he picked up the figure, said "he can't play" and then put it in his pocket. Carrying on through the whole team in the same fashion, he stopped when only three players were left. These three, he explained, were Denis Law, Bobby Charlton and George Best, and if 11 Liverpool players couldn't beat three men they had no right to wear the jersey. Shanks would later become an official ambassador for Subbuteo.

1970s

Apparently frustrated by his lack of control over the marketing and direction of his 'baby', Adolph resigned from Waddington in 1970, but it did little to hinder the growth of Subbuteo, which by now was selling in retail outlets throughout Europe. In August that year, Subbuteo held its first ever

international tournament, hosted at the Savoy Hotel in London, with teams from 13 different countries. Although not officially called the Subbuteo World Cup, it was played in the same year as the real thing in Mexico and was to all intents and purposes the inaugural tournament. Germany won, beating Belgium 2-0 in the final, and to add glamour to the event, Bobby Moore and Gordon Banks, back from Mexico, were on hand to present the trophy.

By the second Subbuteo World Cup in 1974, total sales for the game had reached £1.3m. You could get more than 300 different teams and buy a huge range of new accessories from throw-in and corner-kick figures to stadiums. There was no stopping the march of the little plastic men.

Subbuteo was always open to the occasional publicity stunt, but none was ▶



You could glue them back together, but they were never the same again

as successful as the one pulled at the 1978 Subbuteo World Cup. The tournament, hosted in London, included the first junior tournament and was won by an Italian-born Mexican boy called Andrea Piccaluga. So good was he that Jim Leng, Waddington's new marketing director, had Piccaluga's flicking finger insured for £150,000. The cost of the premium was dwarfed by the amount of press coverage it received.

1980s

Subbuteo was now well and truly part of British culture, as the lyrics of two famous pop songs confirm. In the Undertones' hit *My Perfect Cousin*, Feargal Sharkey laments that his cousin "Always beats me at Subbuteo, 'cos he flicked the kick, but I didn't know". More vinyl recognition came with *All I Want for Christmas is a Dukla Prague Away Kit* on Half Man Half Biscuit's 12-inch EP *Trumpton Riots*. The song dedicates a whole two verses to the beautiful plastic game.

Television also sought to tap into Subbuteo's popularity, with BBC Scotland commissioning six 45-minute episodes of a comedy drama based around the exploits of the fictitious Real Falkirk, the most successful Subbuteo club in the country. Despite some notable cameo appearances from the likes of Roger Lloyd Pack (Trigger in *Only Fools and Horses*), the show was ditched after one series.

By 1982, Subbuteo was at its peak, with an estimated seven million players around the world. Although that figure would decline thereafter, sales of the game were still increasing. The introduction of the astroturf pitch was a popular innovation, as was the launch of 16-man squads. The hideous noise of your centre-forward being crushed under foot no longer meant your team was deceased (of course, you could always glue them back together but they were never the same again). In 1987, Subbuteo won the prestigious Toy of the Year award for the third time in its history.



1990s and beyond

After all the glory, the 1990s was a tough time for Subbuteo. Retailers started to reduce the amount of shelf space dedicated to the game, while the world of football was changing and Subbuteo was struggling to keep up. Sure, every team now had three black players but while in the good old days Subbuteo could produce one kit to cover several teams, the advent of shirt sponsorship and more complex shirt designs meant tailor-made team-kit manufacturing was becoming increasingly difficult.

When American toy giant Hasbro paid £57 million to buy Waddington it was hoped Subbuteo could reinvent itself for a new generation of fans. For financial reasons, Hasbro slashed the number of teams available to just 46 and then just to Premiership teams. Production was reduced to a much smaller scale and the box-set produced for the 1998 World Cup had just three teams – Brazil, France and Italy.

The range was now unrecognisably slim, and with the advent of computer games, sales were falling. It came as little surprise

to most people when Hasbro announced in 2000 that they would no longer be making Subbuteo. Yet this was by no means the end of the road. Whether it was a genuine announcement or a cleverly manipulated publicity stunt to generate flagging sales and to secure some free PR, the news that Subbuteo would be no more caused uproar among the game's army of worldwide fans. National newspapers, TV and radio all covered the story and the outcry was long and loud. Finally, Hasbro relented, agreeing to continue with a limited range of sets, games and accessories and supply them exclusively to the Toys R Us chain.

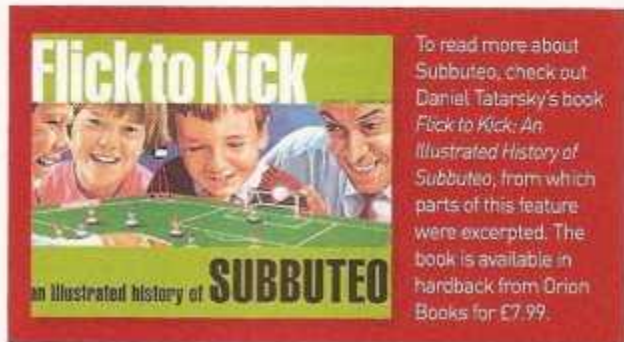
Hasbro relaunched the game in 2005, reverting to flat players with photo-realistic teams in the home kits of the G-14 clubs. With new, advanced bases, a 'dream team' stadium and collectors' skills sets, it seems that every effort is now being made to keep the dream alive. And for further reassurance that the legend continues, have a quick search on eBay, where you'll find thousands of Subbuteo items for sale, many of which are now collector's items. If anything, the internet has helped to spread the legend of Subbuteo.

A lifelong Queens Park Rangers fan, Peter Adolph died in 1994, aged 77. For his funeral in Tunbridge Wells, Waddington sent a three-foot-high floral wreath in the shape of a Subbuteo figure in blue and white hoops. His headstone has a simple engraving of a hobby hawk and the words 'Falco Subbuteo'. Without Adolph's passion, drive and commitment, millions of children and grown adults would have been denied the simple pleasure of flicking to kick – and for that we should be grateful.

As for my Subbuteo set? It's safely hidden away in the attic at my house in Stockport. I've yet to become a father, but when my wife and I decide to have children, I make no apologies for wanting a boy. I want to buy him a set of football nets, play football with him in the garden and for those cold and rainy days (of which there are plenty in South Manchester) I want to dig out my old Subbuteo set, unravel the beautiful green baize, dust down the goalposts and be Brazil again. I can't wait. ☺

With special thanks for help with pictures to www.littleplasticmen.co.uk

From top Running repairs on the walking wounded; nice stadium, mate; set-piece specialists



To read more about Subbuteo, check out Daniel Tatarsky's book *Flick to Kick: An Illustrated History of Subbuteo*, from which parts of this feature were excerpted. The book is available in hardback from Orion Books for £7.99.