

David Batty – Leeds’ spit and sawdust superhero

You can usually look at someone’s choice of a sporting hero and instantly understand where they are coming from, regardless of the sport of choice or your club persuasions. Sporting heroes are often responsible for a specific act or for standing alone in their particular field, or were renowned as a regular achiever of outstanding statistics. David Batty was none of these.

It is a mystery to many football fans why Batty won two league titles, 42 England caps and was regularly picked by esteemed managers in the game such as Bobby Robson, Kenny Dalglish, Glenn Hoddle and Howard Wilkinson. Ask any Newcastle, Blackburn or Leeds United fan about David Batty and the eulogies will come gushing forth, but for the majority Batty represented the earthy, nuts and bolts brutality that hindered the game in the 1980s and led to England’s abject sterility under Graham Taylor in the pre-Sky early 1990s.

Leeds United fans revel in a knowing comprehension of Batty being far more important and symbolic than that. It wasn’t so much about what he did, but how he carried himself and the manner in which he did it, although any student of the game that understands the mechanics of actually playing it will identify that every successful team needs a ‘Batty’. He was an exponent of achieving the most with the minimum of fuss and the maximum of refinement. His endearment to fans of the clubs he played for, and undoubtedly his team mates too, stemmed from his attitude and core beliefs; an embodiment of the ‘side before self’ mantra that his mentor and first manager at Leeds United, Billy Bremner personified. In short, Batty was the sporting anti-hero; he did the dirty work, the trench housekeeping that was absolutely necessary, largely went unnoticed to the outer world, but was wildly appreciated by those without the mentality, valour and backbone to do it themselves. Furthermore, when he wasn’t there his absence would manifest in the failing of others and the team in general.

After lean post-Revie years, Batty’s arrival in the Leeds United first team towards the end of the 1980s was emblematic of a long-awaited resurgence in the club’s fortunes. This would find Batty exalted to immediate cult status among a jaundiced fan base desperate for new idols. Batty played up to this image and revelled in Leeds fans’ barbarous appetite for rancour and combat which, win or lose, had to be done with as many scattered victims as possible and was celebrated with Tetleys later and escapades in Jacomellis at kicking out time. In this respect Batty was the perfect role model; a blonde flash of mettle and conflict and even at 18 showing a disdain for reputation which would help to forge his own.

Some would put Batty in the same bracket as Robbie Savage or Dennis Wise; arch villains and wind-up merchants, but lacking in the finer elements of a footballer’s armoury. Batty was so much more than this. His ball retention with an economy of effort was faultless, his passing ability was vastly and frequently underrated and his general reading of the game was hypnotic. He blossomed the higher the level he played at. Sure, he could ruffle feathers like the more infamous irritants mentioned above, but he had the balls and the skills to back up his persona, none of which was calculated.

In his autobiography Batty explained his early attitude: “Billy Bremner had a cautionary word with me before a Zenith Data Systems cup tie at Millwall. He told me in the dressing room if I wanted to avoid having the notoriously nasty Den crowd on my back I should think twice about steaming in early in the game. The trouble was, even at 19 when confronted with advice from my hero, my stubborn streak still came to the fore. What did I do in response to the manager’s words of wisdom? I went straight in, in the first minute, on Terry Hurlock, one of the hardest midfielders to ever play the game....Bremner, I learned later, was cringing in the dug out. But I was unrepentant. I never had any respect for reputations as a young lad.”

Possessing an icon that was able to stand up to the heat of the battle and remain unruffled, in control, dominant and largely victorious was a huge psychological weapon that won many games and which Leeds fans thrived on, and much of the positive force that propelled Leeds United forward between 1989 and 1992 was forged from this.

I recall a pre-season meeting with Sampdoria in 1992 when Batty purposely decided before the game that he was going to 'enjoy' the return of stellar European names to Elland Road. He dug into the Italians from the off, shoulder-barging their right back over the advertising hoardings and grabbing Roberto Mancini by the throat as the big-name visitors became increasingly apoplectic at Batty's strong arm policing of the game. Throughout the melee Batty was remorseless and unflappable and his steely demeanour was only adjusted for a 'job done' blind-side wink to a grinning team mate. A hearty Batty challenge in the centre circle could reinvigorate a flagging crowd and energise the cause as much as a Lee Chapman hat-trick. Many celebrated the more eye-catching skills of Gary McAllister or Gary Speed's goals, or Gordon Strachan's charismatic leadership. I preferred the no-nonsense swagger, the spit and sawdust functionality and the unyielding "I've got this lads" governance of David Batty. He had our back. Always.

Strachan himself was also taken by Batty's unique idiosyncrasies as a player, saying: "David was absolutely fearless. This was underlined by his willingness to stand in our defensive wall for free kicks – one of my pet hates – and the fact that, when the kick was taken, I never once saw him flinch or turn his body away from the ball. On one occasion, I even saw him block a ferocious kick with his chest and then hold the position of his body to do the same with the follow up shot. One of the other lads looked at me and started shaking his head and laughing 'That's Batts – he's off his head isn't he?' he said."

Batty was certainly a one-off. Leeds born and so staunchly 'Yorkshire' in his dispassionate simplicity and lack of pretension he wasn't so much constructed from granite but from stale Hovis. It's not hard to see how fans from other regions never got that. He describes himself as a modern day misfit; he never owned a chequebook or a credit card, and throughout his career deposited his Premier League earnings in the same Leeds & Holbeck Building Society savings account that his Mum opened for him aged 13. His relationship with his Dad, his biggest critic, was as much a motivating factor as any riches he made from the game, as the pursuit of proving him wrong led to many heated debates between stands and pitch at Elland Road and every rutted schoolboy patch between Pudsey and Chapel Allerton. Batty would condition himself in the close season by helping his Dad on his dustbin round, and think nothing of it. Hard work, no frills, not receiving the accolades, nor expecting them. It was the Batty way.

Despite Batty navigating Leeds United through the most fantastic period I will probably ever witness, my favourite memories of him are in the shirts of other teams, something which was always a difficult concept to get my head around. For Newcastle he was involved in a midfield tussle with a Metz player during a UEFA Cup tie in 1996. The two opponents fell to the ground whereupon a sly right-hander was firmly planted into Batty's face behind the referee's back. Batty sprung to his feet with blood gushing from an eye wound but grabbed the ball to immediately take the free kick awarded in his favour. No histrionics, no trying to get the player sent off, just everyday rough and tumble in the course of an honest midfield battle. Two years later Batty stepped up to take a decisive penalty for England against Argentina in the France World Cup, he missed it and England were out. Despite never having taken a penalty in professional football before, Batty did his duty and afterwards there were no tears; his face depicted someone who had merely lost 20p on the way back from the paper shop. He later claimed he would have been more disappointed in himself had he not had the courage to take a penalty than he was for missing it.

This is where Batty's complex character further sets him apart from the modern day footballer. He never hid his disinterest in the game, and always viewed football as a job; something he happened to be good at, but not something he enjoyed watching or entertained the trappings of. His career was enjoyable and rewarding but merely a means to an end, and as a strict family man he earned his corn and retreated away to enjoy life once it was over. Some fans had trouble accepting Batty's apparent coldness as he matured as a person. But if qualification for supporting a player involves unilaterally aligning yourself with their mentality and motivations we would be a nation of mute football fans every Saturday afternoon.

What remains, for me, and forever will, is an emblem of the game I loved and the club I loved. A winner and a purveyor of values, ethics and understated style that did the most, without doing anything at all. Oh for another.