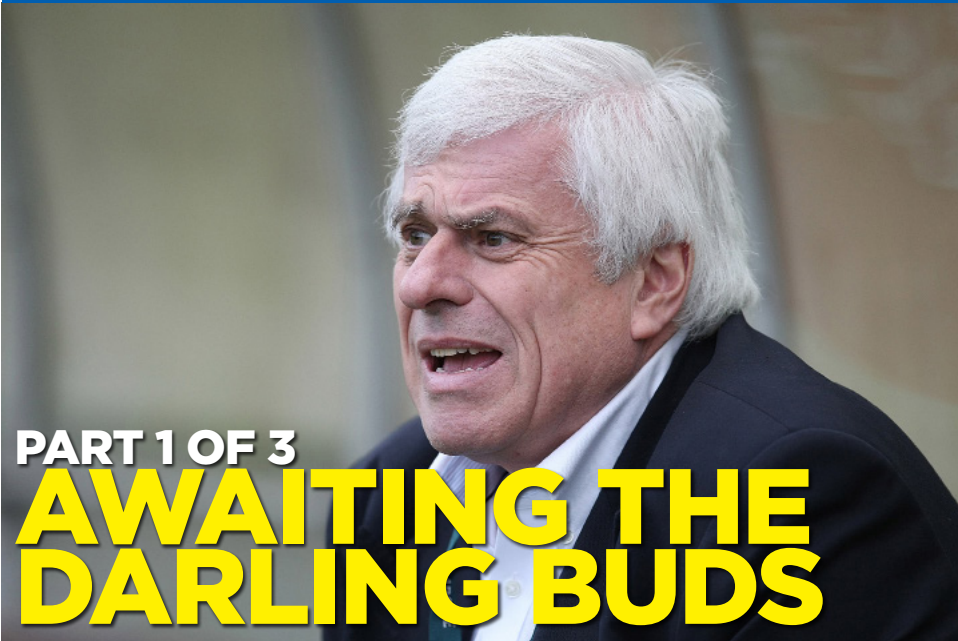


DREAMS ARE JUST DREAMS: THE RIDSDALE YEARS



PART 1 OF 3

AWAITING THE DARLING BUDS

As a child of the seventies, cutting my teeth on the Wilderness Years of the mid-eighties, my only first hand experience of success was Howard Wilkinson's three-year period of perceived over-achievement; in between times I've stood on the Kop, amid a mixture of pained anguish, rampant elation and nagging boredom and asked myself many searching questions.



Words: Jon Howe | @jonhowe1971

Our 1992 League title winning squad was only ever recognised as being a lucky dip of miscellaneous components, a mixed bag of long ball merchants; over-physical and over-the-hill. Much like Revie's greatest ever Leeds team, the national perception at the time of our triumph, both from media and general football consensus, was of an ugly blight on the game. Straightforward success is not something Leeds United are allowed. Accordingly, every Leeds fan has a sizeable grudge against the rest of the football world: we stand alone in the last garrison and we fight our own battles. There is no question we have been dealt some bad hands over the years by the FA, UEFA, police, media and gypsies, and at some point you have to ask where bad luck gives way to Doubt, Suspicion and Paranoia. We attract the less glamorous side of football, glamour doesn't suit us, we don't embrace it, we don't seek it. We irritate the establishment and we take what's thrown at us.

Who else but Leeds United would have touched George Graham in 1996? Put out to pasture by Arsenal after getting caught up in an illegal bung scandal, found grazing idly in a field chained to a fence; ragged, forlorn and lost. Appointed the day after Howard Wilkinson was sacked in September 1996, Graham was everything we dreaded from the off. Infamous at Arsenal for a defensive unit drilled to relentless perfection of the offside trap, Graham set about doing everything he could with the meagre offerings he had inherited to copy the blueprint of that era of cold, clinical professionalism. To be fair, there was little else he could do. Having been League Champions four years before, we had slumped alarmingly, and Wilkinson's annual attempts to refresh and re-invigorate the squad had led anything special that we had once had to gradually ebb away, culminating in the sales of both Gary Speed and Gary McAllister in the summer of 1996. In short, the plot was well and truly lost and the squad that Graham was blessed with reeked of careers in decline, expensive and unfulfilled promise and a once flourishing youth system suffering from a natural fallow period.

The season 1996/97 had not promised much, and the first few weeks did not disappoint in that respect. Once Graham took over, even he recognised that the unbelievable spectacle of watching Ian Rush and Mark Hateley toil fruitlessly up front was a folly that no club of our stature should expect to put up with for more than the last eight minutes of a 4-0 home defeat. Tony Yeboah was no longer going to frighten defenders, other than with his sheer rotundas bulk, and we were reduced to the humbling, cheap and seedy experience of actually quite liking



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Lee Sharpe. It was dour. Safety was not only first, it was the only contestant. I recall several games where we played three centre halves, two "wing backs," who were just full-backs with no real attacking intention, and three "holding midfielders," just for a bit of added protection. Basically the opposition's half was foreign territory to all but two players, one of which was Brian Deane (no disrespect Deano, I love you, but these were desperate times).

But Graham came to do a job. We were relegation fodder, we needed to avoid defeats, and that's what we did. It wasn't pretty, but neither was Nigel Winterburn, and it worked for him. To see a rainbow, you have to put up with the rain, and yes, it rained a lot in 1996/97. But we survived, with the only danger being the very real prospect of gnawing our own fingers off with the sheer tedium and frustration of it all.

Graham seemed to revel in his own media persona. He was a dour Scotsman, and plenty of them had become legendary managers in the game. However in season 1997/98 he began to surprise us all by making more than a passing reference to attacking football. A certain Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink was just a bizarrely-named nobody when Graham plucked him from the obscurity of the Portuguese League, but he quickly became a massive favourite and our most prolific striker since Lee Chapman. Pre-season had seen a youngster from the previous season's FA Youth Cup winning team called Harry Kewell play quite regularly up-front. Kewell immediately looked the part, and showed brash and unrestrained talent that even Graham couldn't ignore. The brittle and injury-ravaged body of Rod Wallace suddenly



managed to fuse itself together, and a run of games brought a consistent scoring spree that everyone had forgotten he was capable of. He and Hasselbaink caused problems wherever they went, and Lee Bowyer was just a bag of raw energy and began to look the player that Wilkinson had forked out a record fee for.

From nowhere it was looking good, all positive. There was talk from Assistant Manager David O'Leary of bleeding more youngsters from the Youth Cup Winning team, but Graham was still too cautious for that. For all the new-found attacking freedom we still had solid foundations, with the likes of Wetherall, Radebe, Molenaar, Haaland, Hiden and Halle becoming identikit Graham protégés. Results showed a definite upwards trend with impressive home wins over Manchester United, Newcastle and Chelsea, a 4-3 last minute classic against Derby when we had been 3-0 down, and a euphoric 5-0 away win, live on Sky, also against Derby, where every goal had something classy about it. We even reached the quarter final of the FA Cup, losing 1-0 at home to Wolves on a day when I can categorically state that I officially "fell out" with the FA Cup. Never again would I get sucked into the romantic imagery of a jaunt to Wembley. The positive nature of things was topped off with the biggest prize we could expect in our own little world: a UEFA Cup place. Nobody saw this coming, but we gleefully took it and it was fully justified for a campaign of



rich entertainment from the most unlikely source: George Graham. We forgave him the mind-numbing monotony of the previous season, we forgave him Pierre Laurent; George was ours and he had proven himself once again, against the odds and in the face of media cynicism, to be a top class manager.

Off the pitch it all looked rosy as well. The club, now owned by the Caspian Group, bought back Elland Road from Leeds City Council and plans were drawn up for a long overdue Leeds Arena to be attached to a re-built West Stand complex. The public persona of Leeds United was gradually improving and the unprecedented sentiment of national sympathy was almost vested upon us when the entire first team squad were involved in a near-fatal plane crash at Stansted Airport on March 30th 1998. The thought of our talented squad being revered in the same terms as the Busby Babes was an unlikely but interesting prospect, and we will never know how that could have transpired, but the chilling nature of the events brought the club and its fans even closer together.

The UEFA Cup campaign had just begun the following season when rumours started to surface that George Graham was being pursued by Tottenham to become their new manager. It was natural to immediately dismiss this as idle speculation because Graham was onto a good thing at Leeds, and he knew it. We plucked him off the scrapheap and gave him a purpose in life, he had put together an accomplished squad with loads of youngsters we kept being told were just waiting in the wings to explode into the first team, and it was Tottenham; they would surely never expect Graham to be accepted by their own fans? It was a ridiculous

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pot, the kids we all thought we knew by now but strangely didn't recognise. Woodgate, McPhail, Smith, Robinson, Jones, Harte. He chucked them all in at once, in a nonchalant act of impudent mis-confidence, but it worked. Graham had long talked about it but O'Leary did it, with immediate dividends. In tandem with Hasselbaink's ruthless consistency, Kewell's blossoming majesty and Radebe's serendipitous authority, the "new" Leeds continued the upward curve. Suddenly we played with no fear, and whilst showing acceptable naivety with some results, the raw nature of the team and the management made that thoroughly acceptable.

The unexpected breath of fresh air that had swept across our landscape was recognised by Ridsdale and O'Leary and the positive PR went into overdrive. O'Leary was pictured in the Olympic Stadium in Rome giving the away fans the Leeds Salute after a valiant 1-0 defeat, which eventually led to our UEFA Cup exit. We felt flutters in our collective stomachs; at last a manager showing genuine empathy with the fans. After this he confirmed Eddie Gray as his assistant manager: more brownie points with us. As if feeding on this frenzy of mutual kinship, Ridsdale and O'Leary cooked up the ultimate in their "Leeds Fan Acceptance Strategy."

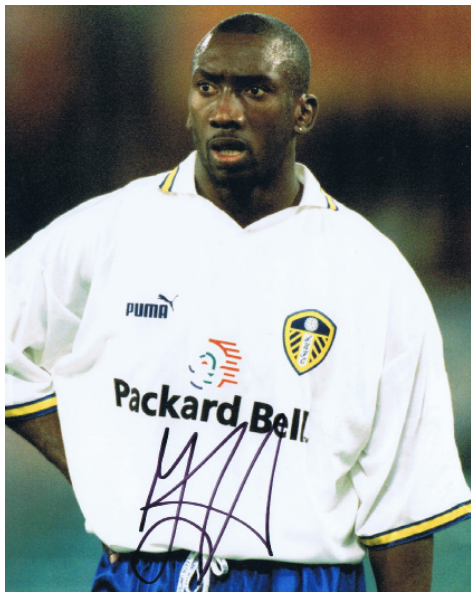
Friday November 28th 1998, and I'm sat in my car on the roadside, waiting for an estate agent and the delivery of the keys to my first ever house. On the car stereo comes the Five Live Sports news to announce that David Batty has handed in a transfer request to Newcastle and demanded to be sold back to Leeds United. In the days before 100 page threads on Waccocoe and frenzied Twitter speculation, this was a bolt out of the blue. For any Leeds fan of my generation it just doesn't get any better than that: 'demanded' to be transferred back to Leeds United. All the wrongs of the events of 1993 had been put right, the earth was back on its axis, Batty did love Leeds after all: everything was right, all was positive.

Leeds seemed to breeze through the rest of the season on a wave of optimism and almost goodwill from the national media. I recall a home game against Middlesbrough where, although we only won

notion for so many reasons, but it gradually became a viable concept. With a creeping, progressive dread, dismissive gave way to disdain, which gave way to doubt, which gave way to incredulity, which gave way to sheer anger and hopelessness. Before we knew it the big bad wolf in London had stolen our George in a brazenly public courting of bilious distate. Overnight he became the biggest villain in British football: even the national press couldn't believe the sheer audacity of Graham giving up such a promising position to leap straight into the Lion's Den, but he did, he really did.

We were left with an empty, vacuous feeling, and no amount of compensation could make up for the loss of such a top-class manager; so much promise appeared to have gone to waste and we were back at square one. David O'Leary was promoted from being Graham's assistant manager, and not a single pulse was racing at the prospect of the Arsenal connection being continued. As if to compound the misery our equally public courting of Martin O'Neill at Leicester had spectacularly failed, as if we needed a reminder that we didn't have the persuasive attraction, the financial clout and the unavoidable allure we once did.

In what was seen as a cheap PR exercise O'Leary immediately threw the youngsters into the



Leeds ahead of a queue of other clubs with exciting reputations, and confirmed that truly we had arrived.

The season 1999/00 started and continued in a heavenly manner. We topped the table in September and were never out of the top two in the run up to Christmas. The football was exquisite and all the summer signings made an impact, not least Michael Bridges who simply oozed quality. Harry Kewell was blossoming into a world class player, and we just seemed too lucky to have him. A ten-game straight winning run took in progress on all fronts. A fantastic run in the UEFA Cup swept us to the semi-finals, and endorsement and recognition of our blueprint duly arrived on an epoch-defining night when five Leeds players started for the England Under-21's

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2-0 with goals from Smith and Bowyer, the coverage on Match of the Day was rightly representative of an era-defining match. We had torn Middlesbrough apart, and the quality of football, the natural exuberance on show was breathtaking, and clearly the home-grown element of the team was what the press were taking a liking to. You knew the viewing nation were secretly jealous as they watched their own foreign imports gesticulate their way to mediocrity. The season continued with immense away wins at Newcastle (3-0) and West Ham (5-1) on the way to UEFA Cup qualification, and a special last home game where a 1-0 win against Arsenal denied them the title and made a statement of intent for the future. We were being recognised, and looking back through the breathless passage of the previous nine months there was disbelief that not only had we not suffered from the loss of Graham, we had actually prospered in so many unexpected ways.

So it continued. Hasselbaink didn't like all this positivity in his world of personal angst, and a nonsensical wage demand did not fit in with our burgeoning team spirit, so he fell out with Ridsdale and was sold to Atletico Madrid for a £10 Million profit. While this was met with furrowed brows for a period of time, Ridsdale further enhanced his stock with the fans by signing a steady flow of young English players, the likes of whom we had never dreamed we could be able to attract. Bridges, Huckerby, Mills and Duberry all came to

This was a seemingly unstoppable ride; all positive, all encompassing. The quality was there, the right personnel were there, the spirit and energy was there, the results were there.

We ended the millennium on top of the Premiership: it was tight because we relied on a couple of slip-ups, but we made it. December 31st 1999: Leeds United were the best team in the country. Stop the clocks and look at that. What a statement. This was it. Read that everyone. We were nervous and reluctant to say it but it was undeniable now; we were a force, and what a way to show it. Enter the 21st Century: watch us go. [TSB](#)



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