

DREAMS ARE JUST DREAMS: THE RIDSDALE YEARS



PART 3 OF 3

**APOCALYPSE
SOON**

The week after the court case had finished Ridsdale fined Bowyer and Woodgate for their original misdemeanour of being drunk in a public place, i.e., breaking club policy. Woodgate accepted his fine, Bowyer didn't, and the whole thing dragged on a little more. Shortly after, while everyone's head was still in tatters, out of nowhere O'Leary released a book entitled "Leeds United On Trial."

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The United boss bluffed his way around the controversy by saying the book was an account of the Champions League campaign, which it probably was, and that he had no control over the title, which he possibly didn't. But all in all - what an incredibly naive, cheap and tawdry thing for a seemingly honourable and intelligent man to do. Surely he didn't need the money or the publicity? By all accounts the news went down like a lead balloon in the dressing room, and everything about the book reeked of desperation, a cascading public image, and a good thing gone badly wrong.

A controversial FA Cup exit away to Cardiff continued the sour taste, and this was followed by a winless run of ten games, throughout which it still seemed inconceivable that we wouldn't gain Champions League qualification, as four places were now available rather than three. But inconsistency was rife and the final nail in the coffin was a timid 1-0 home defeat to Fulham on April 20th. A fifth place

finish, that offered little, could not now be bettered.

We didn't know it then but this was the moment when the arse fell out of Ridsdale's world, and more pertinently, our world. The footballing equivalent of the death sentence, without the merciful release from the pain and suffering that follows. Subsequent years have brought frequent yearnings for that merciful release. What a picture Ridsdale's face must have been in the boardroom after the Fulham game. Did he confide in anyone what he knew would happen now?

Rio Ferdinand went to the World Cup with England in 2002 and was the only shining light, but any pride that could be taken from this for Leeds fans was severely dampened by the constant speculation that he would be moving to Man Utd. Our financial imbalance was now widely documented, and the transfer we finally got - £29.1m - seemed like the answer to all our problems. Bowyer had seemingly not forgiven Ridsdale and a transfer to Liverpool was agreed, which seemed an incredible waste after all the heartache we had gone through during the trial in trying to support him. Feelings were well and truly mixed, but eventually he turned down a £9m move and decided to stay. It was clear, though,

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that outgoings and a reduction of the wage bill were uppermost in Ridsdale's mind, and finally the unimaginable happened when O'Leary was sacked.

It was still a shock despite the obvious decline in fortunes, and finally we began to piece together how fractious the once idyllic Ridsdale - O'Leary relationship had become, and also how wildly we had gone off the rails. This was confirmed by the appointment of Terry Venables as manager, and the art of clutching at straws was mastered by fans up and down the country as we studied his previous sketchy managerial history. The velocity of our decline was put into sharp focus by the purchases only of Nick Barmby and Paul Okon. Clearly we were on our respective uppers.

Despite a promising start, Venables very quickly demonstrated the extent to which he was both out of his depth and out of touch with the modern game. He "retired" David Batty, fell out with Dacourt, lost to Malaga in the UEFA Cup, lost twice to Sheffield United in the cups, and we found ourselves furiously treading water in lower-mid table in the league.

Discontent was rife and the spirit of two years before was long gone. To be fair, the finances were now completely out of Venables' control, and the severity of the situation seemed to be changing every day. Cut price deals were made for Keane, Dacourt, Bowyer and finally and most significantly, Jonathan Woodgate.

Black Friday it was. Again, speculation was endemic for a while that Woodgate would be sold, but you just couldn't imagine that we would be forced to sell one of our own, who we had supported through a drawn out trial, hoping and praying that we could hold onto the most promising player to come through our academy in years - and now all the anguish was wasted. Right until the day he was sold Ridsdale had insisted it wouldn't happen, which he probably believed, but it showed how far things were out of control, and how finely balanced the finances were.

Venables was interviewed after a defeat at Chelsea and seemed comfortable that Woodgate would not be sold, yet the very next day he sat next to Ridsdale, ashen-faced at the Press Conference announcing the £9m sale to Newcastle. The picture was poetic in a sadistic kind of way. Venables clearly



was on the verge of resigning and memorably stated that Ridsdale had “sold me a pup” over the whole affair. Pups had indeed been purchased by the thousands from Ridsdale’s kennels, and head in hands was once again the only way to face life. This was truly character-building stuff: every day was a harsh realisation that, yes, things can get worse and most likely will. We could do nothing to stop this - just stand and watch the car crash unfold before our eyes.

The loan arrivals of Raul Bravo and Teddy Lucic did nothing to lighten the doom. Eirik Bakke and Seth Johnson were arrested for drink-driving in separate incidents. Stan Boardman was hired for a Christmas Function at Elland Road and was booed off the stage for his racist jokes, and in light of the court case, the media took great delight in reporting yet another PR disaster. You just couldn’t make it up. Home defeats were regular, and even the sight of Alan Smith bursting his lungs for Leeds United was not enough. No unity, no plan, no direction, no hope.

Ridsdale did the decent thing, the only thing. He sacked Venables and then resigned himself. With his parting words he told us we had “lived the dream.” What dream? Whose dream? This hadn’t been a collective wish. Nobody dreamt this. We all put our faith in the chairman because we had to, we trusted him because we had to - what other choice had there been? Only he was privy to the finances of the club and the PLC - we weren’t - we weren’t the ones to decide whether Fowler was affordable. He was a



successful business man, why wouldn’t we support all the signings he made? What had we known about the finances? Why would we let him hemorrhage the club’s future and just go along with it for the ride?

The “dream” continued with the appearance from nowhere of Professor McKenzie as the new chairman, despite no previous experience whatsoever in the world of football, and Peter Reid as manager. Reid immediately curried favour by picking Batty and staving off the evil spectre of relegation with fantastic away wins at Charlton (6-1) and Arsenal (3-2). There was massive relief and the collective opinion that at last we had bottomed out and could only improve from this point; but the finances told other stories as the figures continued to come to light. Stories ranged from between £80m to £100m in debt, and with loans of £60m taken out to buy players during the O’Leary era.

Reid sacked Eddie Gray and Brian Kidd and appointed Kevin Blackwell as his assistant, and sure enough any quality we still had in our ranks jumped ship as a result. The Harry Kewell farce that summer left a particularly bitter taste and found the Professor embarrassingly out of his depth. Kewell

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insisted he would only sign for Liverpool and hence they were only required to bid a paltry £5m, despite a queue of other clubs offering more. Furthermore, in a mystifying clause seemingly bordering on the illegal, £2m of this money was repayable to Kewell’s agent. So the club that was well and truly on its knees received only £3m for its’ most saleable asset, the asset it had nurtured from childhood and made into one of the best players in Europe. It was truly laughable, even in these devastating circumstances.

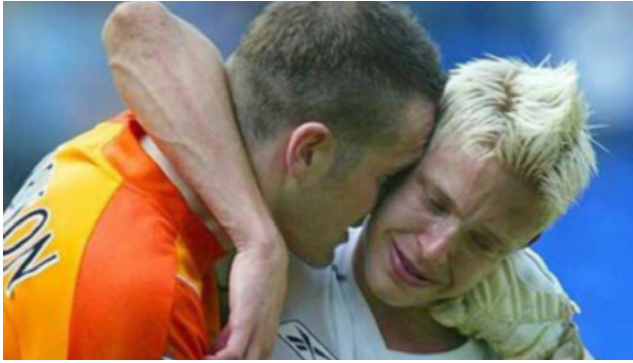
Unabashed, Peter Reid set about raiding the loan market, with ill-informed advice ringing in his ears. Camara, Sakho, Olembe, Chapuis, Domi, Roque Jnr and Pennant took the plunge, as fringe players for the last five years such as McPhail and Duberry suddenly had the opportunity to show us why they had only ever been fringe players. Our only permanent signing was Jody Morris, purchased purely for his irritation value, being Chelsea born and bred and largely untalented. Needless to say, he was arrested during his short stint with Leeds for an alleged sexual assault, thus justifying his appearance in this sorry tale.



A disastrous pre-season campaign was followed by the inevitable struggle. There was no unity, understanding or desire. Youngsters such as Milner and Lennon were thrown into a desperate situation, and we were on the wrong end of wretched decisions in the crucial early season. At home to Birmingham we were locked at 0-0 and on the front foot, but conceded a penalty. That summer had seen the farcical introduction of the annual “new” rule for the Premiership, and therefore as Robinson saved the penalty it was ruled to be re-taken for the goalkeeper moving off his line. Replays proved that he barely did, but the fact is I never saw another decision given that way again all season, nor since. The re-taken penalty was scored, by a different penalty taker, and we lost 2-0. At Liverpool, their opening goal was scored from a free-kick, with a “passive” offside player glaringly blocking Robinson’s path to the ball - the very opposite of passive. The goal was given and we lost 3-1; doubt, suspicion, paranoia.

It wasn’t until after Christmas that you realised we truly were relegation fodder, there for the taking. Every game was a further realisation that the opposition only had to play to 50% of their capability to beat us. Despite the sacking of Reid and the bullishly optimistic appointment of Eddie Gray the damage was done, and the expected unity factor did not work. The fans never turned on the players,





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and the support was unwavering, but there was a shocked disbelief at what we were witnessing. We ended the season with Matteo and Radebe in central midfield, full-circle from the George Graham era of solidity before invention, and quite some water had passed under the bridge in the meantime. Moreover, this time it didn't work.

Trevor Birch took over from Prof McKenzie and despite being realistic and talking the most sense we had heard amidst the maelstrom of cataclysmic news, he was purely there to negotiate the disbanding of the PLC and the sale of the club to the "Yorkshire Consortium," an amateur collection of pretend saviours.

By now I was sick of special reports on the local news, live from behind the East Stand. I was sick of Ray Fell representing not one Leeds fan that I had ever spoken to, sick of the same financial expert with not a single positive thing to say, because you knew he was right. You realised we had been truly spoilt, and that we should have known it. This was it for us, this was our lot in life. 1999-2001 was as good as it gets for Leeds fans, too good to be true, and it wasn't true, it wasn't Leeds. This is Leeds: turmoil, dissent, no unity, no cohesion, no ideas, no voice. Relegated.

Hanging onto the fraying rope that is the Premiership, swaying over the black watery abyss that is the Coca Cola Football League, with crocodiles snapping at our arse, and the crocodiles have guns. We don't just do straight, no-nonsense relegation, we do relegation with a twist, complete top-to-tail meltdown. Most relegated teams are just plain bad, but we can't even do that; we have to have

a multi-million, much-sought after, multi-talented squad devoid of morale, motivation and direction. It wasn't long before the vultures swooped to pick at our carcass, picking up bargains for millions less than their true market value.

The last home game against Charlton was like a party; a strange wake with laughter and beach balls and a sell out crowd. We let a 3-1 lead slip and drew 3-3 - it was quite symbolic. Mr. Leeds United Alan Smith was being forced to leave the club to fund our future and was chaired off the pitch like Nelson Mandela by thousands of happy fans. The following week he signed for Manchester United. This was Leeds United; only happy in the face of painful misfortune, revelling in our own demise with a twisted celebration of how far we had fallen.

The fans emerged from the wreckage as lone survivors. All the culprits, the contributors to our current miserable status, had long gone. No dirt on their hands, careers intact. They enjoyed the experience but they moved on, "sorry about the mess," leaving us to live with their legacy. We knew our place, we would enjoy it and return one day. Let's just watch the football now, free from the pressure and the strife of the frantic pursuit of Premiership survival. All positive. Any doubts? Any suspicion? Any paranoia? Plenty, and we love it. Dreams are just dreams. But be careful what you wish for, because you might just get it. [TSB](#)

