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HOW DO I LOVE THEE? LET ME COUNT THE WAYS



It's not often I can look in the mirror and consider myself 'lucky.' Being a Leeds fan carries a certain weight of disenchantment, a burden that we all share, like a ruck sack full of stones that the army wear on assault courses to replicate the conditions of real combat. When my Dad took me to my first game in 1978, he passed me the ruck sack and said 'Wear this son, and prepare yourself. Being a Leeds fan is not a normal ride, you must carry the cargo of incompetence, farce, injustice, rank misfortune and shattered expectation.'

I thanked him and walked tentatively towards my fate; trusting and gullible like a lamb to the slaughter. A lamb with an Arthur Graham pin badge and an attraction to Bovril. I was blissfully unaware of what heartache, disillusionment, anger and helplessness the rest of my life would take on. Ever since, as I've walked home from games, I can see fellow fans carrying the same blessed and oppressive baggage. Shoulders slumped in a resigned acceptance of doom as they slope up Wesley Street or Lowfields Road, grown men bickering with their kids as cats scurry out of their path in fear; a tray of discarded chips is kicked in frustration, splattering curry sauce over someone's front wall, family life ruined for another Saturday night.

Of course it has not always been like that. In between the throbbing pain of the tediously mediocre are peppered moments of undiluted magic. There has to be, or we wouldn't still be here. Moments where the rain stops, and we burst into heaven, kissing the cotton clouds; we throw off our luggage and

our shackles of attrition and rejoice in a few minutes of naked, leaden-free liberation. For every misplaced Sean Gregan pass there's a flying header from Ian Baird; for every miscued Duberry clearance, there's Sheridan gliding passed a defender and making the net bulge from twenty-five yards. Okay, maybe it's not a one-for-one ratio, it's more like for every five piss-weak Paul Beesley tackles there's a Viduka pirouette and finish from an impossible angle, but you get my drift.

We are owed, we are Leeds United's creditor. Big time. It's almost like we are stock-piling years of discontent to cash in for one minute in the sun. There is a discernable imbalance, but we don't question it because the highs are worth the many lows. We will put up with sub-standard bourbons and custard creams because every now and again a Tunnock's Caramel wafer comes along. It will happen, you just have to be patient. But for how long? And is it worth paying £580 plus Bates tax for a Tunnock's Caramel wafer?

Nonetheless, over this last summer, I have finally considered myself 'lucky.' The insufferable torment of following Leeds has finally repaid me. The arse end of the wretched 2011/12 season had left me in a confused void: bereft of all emotion, I felt no anger or despondency, I felt nothing. The 2012 model of Leeds United had beaten everything out of me. I was a single-celled amoeba: shapeless, formless, nothing.

'Retained list Wednesday' ripped the rotting guts of the squad away, leaving a pathetically-empty carcass on the operating table, pointless as a post-mortem on a hedgehog that's been mowed over by a Stobart lorry. Jason Pearce arrived as a false dawn that life could be breathed into the inanimate form, but all hope that Warnock wasn't being 'sold a pup' in Venables/Ridsdale fashion was quickly dispelled by the 'Joel Ward' affair. Never before has a player of such inconsequence and minor talent caused so much anguish and gnashing of teeth; well, maybe not since Kevin Nicholls anyway. But there was nothing left of my club. No fight, no spirit, no hope.

Just as we reached rock bottom and TOMA began its heart-stopping melodrama of violently contrasting emotions, I was afforded the opportunity to escape. I could avoid the daily humdrum of refreshing F5 on Waccoe, feverishly awaiting Arabic translations and feeding on the frenzy of yet another ITK loser. Being in the deeply intolerable position of having to second-guess what Ken Bates was going to do, as a blanket silence shrouded the situation in doubt and paranoia, was as gut-wrenching and uncomfortable as being blind-folded and not knowing if you were being led into Scarlett Johansson's bedroom with a bottle of Bombay Sapphire, or to Piers Morgan's dinner party, with only an Ed Sheeran CD for entertainment.

But in May, as TOMA began its perpetual maelstrom of emotions, ranging from the fluffy opulence of visions into the Promised Land to a windowless pit of despair that even Ben Fry couldn't put a positive spin on, I began work on a book. Not just any book, but a book on Leeds United's 100 Greatest Players.

Immediately I could wallow in nostalgia, immerse myself in sock tags, nylon shirts and colossal hairstyles, and remind myself why I put up with all this insufferable shite. I could spend hours searching through Andrew Varley's website and marvel at the collars on Tony Currie's Admiral shirt, ruminate over whether Paul Madeley wore the peacock badge or retired when the smiley was still in vogue, and sympathise with Carl Shutt over his greatest moment in Barcelona being permanently scarred by the most revolting away kit.

It was my job, for a brief, halcyon period, to eulogise over Neil Aspin and Bobby Collins, to study the

baffling enigma of Eric Cantona and try to do justice to David Batty and Billy Bremner in 1,000 words. I unearthed some brilliant quotes, and learnt things about the pre-war players who helped build the club from humble beginnings, long before John Charles took it to another level. And I was able to remind myself why I have an unceasing desire to do harm to Harry Kewell.

This all helps, when back in the real world we've gone from 'Bates has cleared his desk at ER' to 'due diligence will take at least a month' all within the time it takes Duncan Castles to sap any optimism that may have emitted from the Leeds fans' torture chamber. This was all in a period when there was so little official information that the soothsayers were convinced the whole thing was a fabrication designed to disenfranchise us even further.

The book, therefore, was a very welcome distraction from the present, although a stark reminder did come in the form of an e-mail from Tanya Arnold of



BBC Leeds who kindly informed me that she'd love to cover the book launch for Look North, but the BBC were still unfortunately banned from Elland Road, even on non-matchdays, so they couldn't. Cheers Ken.

One thing that other club's fans often criticise or even ridicule us for is living in the past. The main point being that we are clinging to the Revie era and that is the only reason we are a big club, or more accurately, the only reason we 'think' we are a big club. I can't believe, in truth, we are that much different to any club whose present is a much dimmer place than its more celebrated past, and let's face it, that applies to the majority of professional football clubs. Furthermore, why is it such a fucking problem anyway? At least we've got a past that is worth celebrating, and at least it's within living memory for some of us. Not only that, we've won the league title more recently than Liverpool - and yet we are the ones accused of clinging to past glories?

What working on this book has put into sharp

context for me is that Leeds' history goes way further back than Don Revie. That's a statement of the obvious of course, and I knew all this, but what I mean is that the list of celebrated players does not begin with John Charles, and it's an insult to suggest it does.

We had international players in the 1920s like Willis Edwards and Ernie Hart, and top clubs like Arsenal were creaming off our best players, such as Wilf Copping, as long ago as 1934. Strikers like Tom Jennings and Charlie Keetley had absolutely phenomenal goal-scoring records that dwarf the achievements of the strangely-lauded modern players such as Ross McCormack and Davide Somma.

A wallow in nostalgia for three or four months can do wonders for TOMA-related anxiety levels, because it re-enforces the defence mechanisms: it reinvigorates, and instills a desire to hang in there because of the past and in spite of the present. For me, it has been not only an excuse to indulge myself in the rich legacy our club has created, but it has revived my flagging love for the club, and allowed me to see past the Pouilly Fumé-infused ambience of 'sickpots' and 'Sheik Rub-a-Dub'.

I heartily recommend a little nostalgia to anyone. Just put some time aside and click on You Tube clips from MyBallsAreSquared, rummage through your old programmes, hey, even read my book when it comes out! Trust me, it's cathartic. We need to re-charge every now and then, nothing beats plugging into our glory days for finding the strength to carry on; and, fuck me, we deserve it.

As TOMA rumbles on, remind yourself that the club is bigger than Ken Bates and that one day we'll get it back. Bates might dominate everything Leeds United-related at the moment, and the last eight years may seem like a lifetime, but it wasn't always like that. There was a glorious club before him and there will be again. It is easy to forget that we put ourselves through this because of Carlisle away, the Liverpool 4-3 win, and 6-1 at Sheffield Wednesday; not so we can get half-price tickets for Flamingo Land and an astronomical court bill from Melvyn Levi.

Before our chairman squeezes every last drop of life out of the club, and wrings it dry so that anything we felt for Leeds United is washed down the grating into the murky sewers of forgotten dreams, spend some time with your memories. They are very precious, and he can never take them.

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