



An Alternative Take on Twelve Turbulent Years at West Ham

Kirk Blows

Foreword by Julian Dicks

INTRODUCTION

‘Redknapp was always going to be a tough act to follow’

THE summer of 2001 represented a major watershed in the history of West Ham United – for one obvious reason.

Harry Redknapp had managed the club for the past seven years, guiding the team to three consecutive top-ten finishes – not something the Hammers make a habit of – and a place in Europe in 1999.

That was always going to be difficult to sustain and in the 2000/01 season, during which star defender Rio Ferdinand was sold to Leeds United for £18m, West Ham struggled and could only finish in 15th place.

Redknapp did well to bump the figure up to what was, at the time, a British transfer record, but in retrospect that was the beginning of the end for the Hammers boss, who was severely criticised by chairman Terence Brown for the way he had been spending the club’s money.

When a meeting took place to discuss the budget for the following campaign, the chairman and manager clashed – with disputes about the quality of recent signings, how much had actually been spent (with Brown including the value of contracts) and, supposedly, quotes that had

recently appeared in the press – and a proposed new four-year contract for Redknapp was ripped up and replaced with a P45. And so on 9 May 2001, West Ham released a statement claiming the two parties had ‘agreed to part company’, although Redknapp would emphatically insist to this writer that he was ‘pushed’ out the club.

Brown used his annual report to highlight spiralling costs and ‘expenditure [that] cannot be justified’ under Redknapp, who described the attack as ‘disgusting’ when later discussing the matter at his luxury home on the Dorset coast.

Redknapp had succeeded Billy Bonds as manager in 1994 amid suspicions that he had cynically engineered events, to such an extent that the former close friends stopped talking to each other. And therefore some believed it was perhaps fitting that he should leave the club in similarly controversial circumstances.

The West Ham fans had always seen Redknapp, who had emerged from the club’s youth ranks to spend seven years as a first-team player, as one of their own and they loved his Cockney wit and Arthur Daley-style wheeling and dealing when running the show.

His achievements at Upton Park have perhaps, in the eyes of some, dimmed slightly with the passing of time and his four-year spell in charge of bitter rivals Tottenham Hotspur, for obvious reasons, did little to improve his image in the eyes of many Hammers fans.

But he was always going to be a tough act to follow in 2001 and his departure from West Ham triggered a sequence of events that represent an undeniably turbulent, occasionally triumphant and often traumatic 12 years for the club.

In that time the Hammers have recruited six of their 14 permanent managers, had four different owners,

appeared in three winner-takes-all play-off finals, endured two relegations, enjoyed as many promotions and played their part in one of the most epic FA Cup finals of all-time.

Add in the seemingly never-ending saga of the Carlos Tevez affair, the battle to win control of West Ham, the collapse of chairman Bjorgulfur Gudmundsson's financial empire and the tussle for the keys to the Olympic Stadium and it's fair to say there has rarely been a dull moment down Upton Park way over the past decade or so.

It is all in stark contrast to the club's history of having represented stability and steadiness, but it's a reflection of the new millennium times and how football has changed – with the financial pressures to remain competitive in the Premier League proving the dominant force – that West Ham have had to do whatever it takes to keep up with the Joneses.

In strictly playing terms, however, the Hammers have generally personified unpredictability, and perhaps that sense of never quite knowing what to expect next is what makes supporting the club such an exciting and frequently exasperating experience.

Evidence of that has certainly been provided over the past 12 years, which have been chronicled in this book from the point of view of a series of weekly columns produced for the local press, namely the *East London Advertiser* and *Barking & Dagenham Post*.

Combining critical comment, in-depth analysis and opinionated assessment, supplemented with reflections and observations from the present day, the material presents an alternative history—if you will—of West Ham's fluctuating fortunes since 2001 from the perspective of somebody who began supporting the team in the late 1970s and then first wrote about them in the mid-1990s

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when editing *Hammers News*, the club's official monthly magazine.

When working for the local press, the concept of constructing an opinion column originated from the desire to express personal views or address topics that couldn't necessarily be accommodated through straight news reporting.

Most events provoked a passionate response from somebody who cares about the club, while others demanded a touch of diplomacy. Sometimes extreme views needed to be aired, at other times a voice of reason was required when elsewhere people were reacting hysterically.

Throughout the entire period, however, there has always been the need for honesty – whether that has resulted in columns that readers agreed or disagreed with.

As they say, football is a game of opinions – and we should all be thankful that West Ham, whatever they're doing, just never stop inspiring them.

Kirk Blows

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SEASON 2001/02

‘Yeah, we’ll take that, thanks very much’

HARRY REDKNAPP had gone and West Ham’s hopes of landing ‘first choice’ replacement Alan Curbishley (according to managing director Paul Aldridge) and Manchester United first-team coach Steve McClaren hit the buffers when the former decided to stay at Charlton and the latter thought his management ambitions would be better served at Middlesbrough (which said it all really).

Neither man seemed to be the most charismatic on earth, but the Hammers managed to hand the job to somebody who appeared to have even less of that particular commodity.

The fact that Glenn Roeder then compared himself to a horse (Foinavon) for being the ‘last man standing’ hardly inspired confidence and made some people wish the 1967 Grand National winner had got the job instead.

The former Watford and Gillingham manager, who had been on the West Ham coaching staff for two years, also quoted his old QPR boss Terry Venables when saying, ‘If you’re going to regret something, regret doing it rather than not doing it.’

That simply encouraged the view that we would all end up regretting that Roeder did indeed do something – decide to take the job.

One hundred fans apparently accepted the club’s offer of a refund on their season tickets, while Trevor Brooking joined the board as a non-executive director.

Former Hammers striker Paul Goddard was appointed as Roeder’s assistant while Ludek Miklosko replaced Les Sealey – who soon died from a heart attack at the age of 43 – as goalkeeping coach.

Frank Lampard junior was sold to Chelsea for £11m with the midfielder complaining that he couldn’t remain at Upton Park following the departures of his father Frank and uncle Harry, which made him rather unpopular with the West Ham faithful – something of an understatement – for the rest of his career.

Hammer of the Year Stuart Pearce and fellow defender Igor Stimac also quit the club for Manchester City and Hajduk Split respectively,

while foreign flops such as Kaba Diawara, Davor Suker and Christian Bassila would also figure no more.

David James arrived in a £3.5m move from Aston Villa but was ruled out until Christmas after suffering a knee ligament injury when clashing with team-mate Martin Keown in England's 2-0 home defeat to Holland before the domestic season had even begun.

The club broke its transfer record twice with the signings of Don Hutchison (£5m from Sunderland) and Tomas Repka (£5.5m from Fiorentina), while Sebastien Schemmel looked rather better value for money when turning his loan from Metz into a £465,000 move.

It was the start of a new era, but fans went into the new season with a high degree of scepticism.

WOW, SO FAR SO GOOD (30 August 2001)

It is early days but few who have witnessed the two West Ham games so far this season will disagree with the suggestion that there appears to be a new spirit of determination within the camp.

Plenty of fans might have viewed the opening fixtures with great trepidation and not many would have predicted much of a return from games against potential championship-chasers Liverpool and Leeds.

Yet a fully deserved first point was gained on Saturday as West Ham ended the 100 per cent record of Leeds with a goalless draw, while only the clinical finishing of Michael Owen deprived the team of a similar reward in the 2-1 defeat at Anfield.

Both performances have confirmed that the team is certainly playing for Glenn Roeder and the new boss deserves credit for that.

It is conceivable that the negative publicity surrounding the appointment of Roeder and predictions of possible relegation have served as a motivating force.

Or maybe Glenn himself has pinned a few press cuttings on the dressing-room wall to invoke a fighting response from his troops.

Fans also believe there is greater organisation on the pitch with players seemingly more comfortable within Roeder's 4-4-2 formation.

Central defenders Rigobert Song and Christian Dailly have impressed in the two games, while Sebastien Schemmel and Trevor Sinclair both posed a threat to Leeds down the right flank on Saturday.

And while striker Paolo Di Canio will always be a maverick, Roeder has insisted that Joe Cole's talents will be deployed in a more disciplined way.

As has been said, it's early days but the signs against top-quality opposition are that the Hammers are determined to prove a few people wrong this season.

Kirk now says: Indeed they did, although it wasn't all plain sailing and it didn't take long for serious doubts about Glenn Roeder's appointment to emerge, especially for those who never backed the decision in the first place.

ER, SO FAR SO NOT SO GOOD (20 September 2001)

Sinking to the foot of the Premiership table, a Worthington Cup exit at Second Division Reading, four games without a goal, Tomas Repka sent off on his debut ... it has not been the best of times for West Ham.

New manager Glenn Roeder stressed the need for a good start to the season and, despite his men showing early promise in games against Liverpool and Leeds, he now stands alone as the only Premiership boss without a win under his belt.

Roeder will feel as if he has not had much go his way so far.

New goalkeeper David James has been ruled out until Christmas, while injury has also deprived him of striker Frederic Kanoute for all but half a game.

Paolo Di Canio has also missed games through injury as Roeder seeks to integrate new signings Don Hutchison and Repka into the side.

And with the visit of Aston Villa being deferred to a later date, the Hammers have now seen the postponement of two Upton Park games at a time when a few extra points makes all the difference to the table.

There will be those, however, who feel that Roeder was too inexperienced to be handed the responsibility of solving the team's problems and the club is in exactly the position we all feared.

Roeder will insist he should only be judged once the new signings have settled in and his top strikers have returned to the side.

In Hutchison and Repka he has recruited players of quality and it is hard to imagine the team struggling for too long if all the key men are fit and available.

A victory against Newcastle on Sunday is now imperative with uninviting trips to Everton and Blackburn next on the list.

Results in those three matches are likely to determine what kind of season West Ham will have.

Kirk now says: West Ham did indeed pick up their first win of the season with a 3-0 success at home to Newcastle, but their fortunes were to get worse before they got better.

FORTUNES ALWAYS JEKYLL AND HYDE-ING (4 October 2001)

Paolo Di Canio wandered over to the distraught West Ham fans at the end of Saturday's 5-0 defeat at Everton and offered a gesture of apology for his side's abject second-half performance.

At least the Italian had the courage to face the suffering contingent, which is more than can be said for several others who quickly disappeared from view, too embarrassed to applaud supporters who deserve much better.

Not that Hammers fans would have built their hopes up too much before the match.

After all, West Ham had lost 12 of their previous 14 games at Goodison Park.

Joe Cole was still unavailable with a foot injury and record signing Tomas Repka was missing from defence through suspension.

Yet the Hammers were actually the better side during the early part of the game.

But after again failing to make possession count, they fell apart in catastrophic fashion against one of the Premiership's more ordinary teams.

Glenn Roeder described his side's defending as 'diabolical' and that is just one of many adjectives he could have used.

Don Hutchison's own goal when clashing with goalkeeper Shaka Hislop to put Everton 2-0 up was farcical.

Thomas Gravesen was then given the freedom to run from the halfway line for the third, Steve Watson was generously allowed two efforts for the fourth and Christian Dailly was dreadfully at fault for the fifth, scored by Thomas Radzinski.

Repka will be welcomed back but the Hammers are still in need of another quality central defender to play alongside him.

On paper the likes of Di Canio, Hutchison, Michael Carrick, Trevor Sinclair and Frederic Kanoute should have goals galore in them.

But the Hammers have failed to score in five of their seven matches so far – a worrying statistic.

Roeder has referred to his side's Jekyll and Hyde week following the 3-0 win against Newcastle just six days earlier.

And fans will be seeking immediate evidence as to which character reflects the true nature of West Ham's prospects this season.

Kirk now says: And just when you thought it couldn't get any more embarrassing ...

THE BUCK STOPS WITH ROEDER (18 October 2001)

Glenn Roeder has been in football long enough to know that if results don't change, his position as West Ham's manager certainly will.

While any team playing five of their first seven games away from home is going to be disadvantaged, the fact is that results such as those at Everton (5-0) and Blackburn (7-1) are totally unacceptable.

Roeder is quickly realising what an unforgiving business football management can be.

His first big buy, goalkeeper David James, was crocked before making a single league outing and his most recent signing, defender Tomas Repka, has been sent off twice in three matches.

Roeder watched his side claw defeat from the jaws of victory to crash out of the Worthington Cup to Second Division Reading on penalties.

And now winger Trevor Sinclair has slapped in a transfer request, reflecting the dispirited mood of the club's star players since the £18m

sale of Rio Ferdinand – certainly the turning point in West Ham's fortunes.

Roeder won't publicly admit it, but he feels handicapped by some of the players he inherited from former boss Harry Redknapp.

To be fair to Redknapp, he bought the likes of Svetoslav Todorov, Rigobert Song, Christian Dailly, Titi Camara and Ragnvald Soma at a time when the club was only prepared to invest up to £2m on any one player because of the uncertainty about the transfer system.

He also needed to bolster a squad desperately short on numbers.

None of that quintet has done enough to command a regular first-team place, leaving Roeder woefully short of options.

But that does not excuse recent performances and, while Roeder will feel badly let down by his players, the ultimate responsibility lies with him.

Kirk now says: The 7-1 defeat at Blackburn was undoubtedly the low point of Glenn Roeder's first season and it was tempting to put the boot in, but it was important to show some objectivity towards the manager.

PRAISE WHEN IT'S DUE ... WELL, A LITTLE ANYWAY (25 October 2001)

Glenn Roeder and his West Ham players deserve immense credit for the character shown in securing the 2-0 victory against Southampton.

Any side taking the field after conceding 12 goals in two games is going to be short of confidence.

But all parties showed the necessary resolve to gain three crucial points and a vital boost to morale – not that the Saints provided the toughest of tests.

The issue of character is a key one.

One former Hammers defender spoke off the record last week about how much he feared for the club's future because of the lack of players prepared to take on responsibility.

He also questioned Roeder's leadership abilities.

However, Roeder is showing himself to be an honest, decent man with principles and values. There is no doubt he has shown dignity while under pressure.

But he also needs to exude authority and the confidence of the supporters is undermined when he admits to finding the contrasting nature of West Ham's performances 'mystifying'.

After making that comment in the programme for the Southampton game, he reiterated the view in his post-match press conference.

Roeder may well be perplexed by the team's Jekyll and Hyde nature but admitting it in public is hardly going to inspire fans who want to believe the manager knows what is going on and is in control.

The win against Southampton will at least have shifted the media focus away from Roeder, who has received the backing of the board

as well as support from various parties unlikely to send former boss Harry Redknapp a Christmas card.

However, fans will find it hard to buy into the wave of sympathy towards Roeder that has been growing recently, with the club's problems more than evident when the appointment was made.

With that said, there is the suspicion that the board totally underestimated the scale of the task facing Redknapp's successor.

Kirk now says: Roeder was often too honest for his own good when talking to the press, a duty he generally looked uncomfortable with.

ROEDER AND REDKNAPP TRADE 'PUNCHES' (1 October 2001)

It would be nice to think that not too many West Ham fans have been taken in by the games played by the national press in recent weeks.

Having presided over those big defeats at Everton and Blackburn, manager Glenn Roeder allowed his frustrations to extend to the point where he publicly questioned the quality of the new recruits last season.

He was entitled to do that, of course, with none of the players brought in following the £18m sale of Rio Ferdinand – with the possible exception of Rigobert Song – doing anything to suggest they merit regular first-team places.

But the papers then conveyed the message to former boss Harry Redknapp that Roeder had been critical of the squad he had inherited as a whole.

Provoked into a response, Redknapp rightfully defended himself by pointing to the success of bargain signings such as Paolo Di Canio, Frederic Kanoute and Trevor Sinclair, as well as the development of youthful talents like Joe Cole and Michael Carrick.

It quickly degenerated into a Redknapp versus Roeder bout with punches being traded on a daily basis as the press stoked the fires.

The reality, of course, is that both men were absolutely right in what they were saying.

Roeder would prefer quality to quantity – as seen in his own signings – while Redknapp did an excellent job of wheeling and dealing to raise his own transfer funds.

That often meant taking gambles on players and, as Redknapp frequently admitted, when you're rolling the dice you don't always win.

Neither man was really attacking the other – but that was the way in which their words were presented by the media.

It sells newspapers and makes great entertainment for the mass populace – but Hammers fans can hopefully see things for what they really are.

Kirk now says: Oh dear, a journalist being critical of the media ... but there are times when the national press spin a story a certain way and those closer to the club feel obliged to set the record straight (or at least try to).

NUMBER'S UP FOR HARRY (15 November 2001)

West Ham fans will have been astonished by the contents of chairman Terence Brown's annual report last week.

Make no mistake; his statement presents a strong attack on the performance of former manager Harry Redknapp – especially in the transfer market.

To highlight recent failures such as Gary Charles and Davor Suker while overlooking the successes (Eyal Berkovic, Slaven Bilic, John Hartson, Trevor Sinclair, etc) during Redknapp's seven-year reign will emphasise the feeling that the board are trying hard to justify his departure.

It also ignores the conditions in which the manager had to work that involved taking gambles on out-of-favour players elsewhere and often generating his own funds.

Fans will particularly raise their eyebrows at the amount the club claims to have spent in the transfer market since 1994 – nearly £79m against a figure of just over £62m clawed back through sales prior to the departure of Frank Lampard.

It is fair to say that most supporters would struggle to think of how £55m was spent while the fact is that Redknapp's net expenditure during his last three years was nil.

This is at a time when the likes of Chelsea, Leeds and Liverpool have spent around £75m each.

Even if fans accept the published figures, that still only represents a deficit of just over £2m per year – about enough to purchase a Third Division player's toenail clippings.

The club may have the eighth highest wage bill in the Premiership but to rigidly judge performance against that and suggest West Ham should be qualifying for Europe every year is a touch harsh.

The salary level reflects not just squad quality but also the club's commitment to tying their best young players to long-term contracts to ensure there is no exploitation of the Bosman ruling.

That is more of an investment with monies being recouped when the club ultimately decides to cash in (as they did with Lampard and Rio Ferdinand).

The report rightly takes pride in the international recognition afforded the likes of Joe Cole and Michael Carrick, yet Redknapp will feel disappointed that it fails to acknowledge the role he played in reviving the club's youth policy.

And to make the point that West Ham had just finished 13th in the Premiership when Redknapp was appointed and only finished 15th last season – as if to suggest the club has gone backwards under his management – hardly displays a great appreciation of the environment in which the club operates.

It is also a rather negative message to want to project.

Some will therefore feel unsurprised that a frustrated Redknapp was reluctant to continue working in such unforgiving conditions.

And it doesn't bode well for current manager Glenn Roeder if he is to be judged by the same criteria.

Kirk now says: With West Ham struggling, it's clear that Terence Brown felt compelled to present a case against those mourning the departure of Harry Redknapp, who he believed had squandered much of the money received from the sale of Rio Ferdinand to Leeds. Fans might be a little more sympathetic to his thoughts than they were at the time.

JERM WARFARE (22 November 2001)

'This could crush him,' said a colleague when Jermain Defoe took the field as a 76th-minute replacement for hat-trick hero Paul Kitson at Charlton on Monday evening.

The 19-year-old's substitute appearance had the locals at The Valley foaming at the mouth despite moving West Ham closer to paying another instalment of the £1.4m 'compensation' fee set by a tribunal after the striker legged it through the Blackwall Tunnel two years ago.

Charlton have never forgiven the Hammers for luring the youngster away from the club that invested in his early development with manager Alan Curbishley complaining on Monday that the south Londoners had not been adequately compensated.

The fact that Defoe scored against his old team in the 4-4 draw would not have improved Curbishley's mood – or that of the home crowd.

The irony is that only the very smallest percentage of the Charlton support – if any – would ever have seen Defoe play in their colours with the youngster making not a single first-team appearance for the club.

But Glenn Roeder's decision to throw Defoe into the fray showed much belief in the teenager's character.

It is understandable that some might have feared for the young striker as he entered the arena to a crescendo of abuse.

But Roeder has already confirmed his intention to handle his valuable asset with care and he would not have exposed the player to such a hostile environment if he did not have total faith in the England Under-21 star's ability to deal with it.

Said Roeder, 'When you know Jermain as well as I do, you know that people booing won't bother him. If anything it would fire him up. He's got fantastic character and I'm sure he enjoyed his goal.'

Almost as much as Hammers fans did watching the smiles being wrenched off the faces of those barracking the youngster as he smacked in what could – and should – have been the winner.

Kirk now says: Never mind Charlton's grievances, Defoe would become even more reviled by West Ham fans following his poorly advised (and poorly timed) efforts to leave Upton Park in 2003.

FERGIE PAYS THE PRICE ... ONCE AGAIN (13 December 2001)

Glenn Roeder looked happier and more relaxed on Saturday evening than at any time since taking charge of West Ham in the summer.

But when you have just watched your side complete a deserved victory at Manchester United, of course, you can afford to smile.

'I had to laugh,' he said after the shock 1-0 win, 'when I heard Aston Villa boss John Gregory saying he was down to the "bare bones" when they played us the other night.'

'They had a £9.5m striker in Juan Pablo Angel on the bench alongside £3.5m David Ginola!'

Roeder's substitutes that night cost a mere £1.5m in transfer fees as he struggled to name a full squad of 16 names.

Subsequently, he must have been shocked to see Sir Alex Ferguson omit the likes of David Beckham, Juan Sebastian Veron, Ruud van Nistelrooy and Andy Cole from United's starting line-up on Saturday.

Ferguson claimed that some of his men were 'tired' but, unless another reason for their exclusion comes to light, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that he thought the Hammers would pose little threat.

Certainly that's the message that would have been sent out to the United players that were selected, which might explain their complacency in a match they needed to win.

The resting of such attacking talent was especially hard to comprehend given the loss of key defenders plus Ryan Giggs to injury.

But it served to give the Hammers hope – and they duly responded by making United pay for their apparent arrogance.

Kirk now says: It's funny, but West Ham's second victory at Old Trafford in 2001 – courtesy of Jermain Defoe's second-half header, which brought a first win in six games – has almost been forgotten compared to Paolo Di Canio's winner in an FA Cup tie 11 months earlier.

CLARET AND BLUES ON THE BOOZE (27 December 2001)

Given recent events, many might be sick to the back teeth of reading 'soccer out of control' stories.

The press have predictably used the Lee Bowyer and Jonathan Woodgate controversy at Leeds United as a platform to stick the studded boot into the belly of any footballer guilty of indiscretion.

And with that in mind, it has to be said that the activities of certain West Ham players at the club's Christmas party represent a case of spectacularly poor timing.

Glenn Roeder recognised the point, going out of his way to remind his players of the dangers of letting their hair down a touch too much.

Not even in this columnist's hedonistic days as a rock journalist does he remember urinating against a bar (although there might have been a few other places ...).

Whether Hayden Foxe can actually remember doing so is another question.

The defender was not the most likely candidate when trying to guess the identity of the culprit despite the Australians having a reputation for enjoying a tinny or ten.

There were at least three other names in the current squad that sprang more readily to mind.

But let's not get too carried away here. The danger of overreacting and lumping all misdemeanours together in a bid to present an image of football staggering out of control is that the lines of distinction get blurred.

Of course, alcohol appears to be a common denominator and what Foxe did is hardly the greatest of public relations exercises.

But let's try and keep things in perspective.

Kirk now says: Not for the first time, West Ham players were reported to have over-indulged themselves with their festive frolics, with Hayden Foxe on this occasion earning the club some unwanted headlines. That's what happens when Glenn Roeder tells people to be on their best behaviour.

NO-GO FOR DI CANIO (7 February 2002)

Given the farcical nature of Paolo Di Canio's aborted move to Manchester United, we shouldn't be too surprised that the saga has continued to generate gossip despite the deal dying.

The Italian responded to the news of United dropping their interest by claiming he'd had no wish to leave West Ham in the first place and that it was the club's board that had been looking to push him out.

'They want to sell me,' he insisted, pointing his thumb in the direction of the directors, just because the Hammers had intimated that a figure of £3.5m would be enough to secure the striker's services.

Surely Di Canio's ego isn't so fragile as to be so fatally wounded by the idea that – like all players – he has his price.

Throughout the whole scenario manager Glenn Roeder's line has been that the club could not deny the 33-year-old's desire to finish his career on a glorious high with a batch of medals in his back pocket.

Fans might not share such a generous attitude towards granting the player's – and United's – wishes, but the fact remains that Di Canio offered not a single word of dissent when the move was still a possibility.

Indeed, it was strongly suspected that his agent had been prematurely sounding out the terms of contract with the Old Trafford board and was unhappy that only an 18-month deal appeared to be on offer.

If Di Canio really didn't fancy the move, he had plenty of opportunities to say so.

And West Ham could not have been that keen to cash in on the striker, given that they rejected United's only offer.

While most supporters are pleased that Di Canio remains a Hammer, many will also be aware of the bigger picture.

The player's contract expires in the summer of 2003 and unless it is renewed he will be worth exactly nothing.

Even if he does sign an extension, his value on the pitch might also be negligible given that he will be 35 next year.

Fans have questioned what kind of replacement the club could have bought for £3.5m but, given that new faces are still badly needed, that figure represents £3.5m more than will be available next summer.

Both Roeder and the board are well aware of that, of course, but that doesn't justify Di Canio's insecurities – or what some may perceive as his mind games.

Kirk now says: It seems strange to be arguing a case for Di Canio being allowed to join Manchester United, but it's worth pondering how West Ham's prospects would have been improved the following season had the club cashed in on the Italian maverick. Knowing the Hammers, they probably wouldn't have spent the money anyway.

HEADING DOWN THE RIGHT ROED? (14 February 2002)

The news of manager Glenn Roeder signing a new three-year contract with West Ham generates several interesting talking points.

The new agreement certainly adds weight to the belief that Roeder was offered only a one-year deal last summer.

If that was the case, it hardly displayed great confidence in the club's new appointment when it was made.

And if the club wasn't totally convinced, you can't blame the fans for having had major doubts either. As to whether Roeder has won the complete faith of the supporters remains a moot point.

A healthy home record, good purchases in David James and Tomas Repka, plus a growing confidence in front of the media all help his case.

But a dreadful away record, which includes a Worthington Cup defeat to Second Division Reading, leaves the Hammers still vulnerable to the potential threat of relegation with an upper mid-table position the best that can be hoped for.

Roeder has undoubtedly impressed behind the scenes, making changes that only the staff and players can fully appreciate.

He has certainly conducted himself in a dignified manner.

But you can't help feeling that Roeder has enjoyed a generous honeymoon period with certain parties still blaming former boss Harry Redknapp for all the current woes.

Managing director Paul Aldridge has praised Roeder's 'judicious spending' and 'encouraging results'.

A safe buying policy may save embarrassment but it is unlikely to produce the kind of player profits the club has so heavily relied upon in recent years. No speculation, no accumulation, as they say.

As for positive results, we can only assume the directors have been selective in which ones they considered – or maybe some of them only attend home games.

Kirk now says: The shock victory at Manchester United inspired a five-game unbeaten run, including draws against Arsenal and Liverpool, which eventually saw Roeder being rewarded for West Ham's upturn in fortunes. The folly of giving the manager a bumper three-year deal would be exposed the following season, of course.

INTERTOTO NO-GO IS A NO-NO (28 February 2002)

West Ham's decision to ignore this summer's Intertoto Cup competition may ultimately prove irrelevant given that clubs likely to finish higher in the Premiership table have expressed interest in taking a place.

But most Hammers supporters will be disappointed that the club is automatically closing a door on a route into European competition.

Glenn Roeder has explained that the current squad lacks sufficient depth to sustain the length of campaign we would see if the Hammers kicked off in the Intertoto at the end of June.

He therefore feels that hopes of a successful Premiership season would be undermined with players burning themselves out or exposing themselves to extra risk of injury.

There is a different argument, of course. For a start, West Ham's first-team squad is actually larger than it was when the club successfully used the competition to qualify for the UEFA Cup in 1999.

The strong start to the following league campaign suggested the Hammers had benefited from getting into gear ahead of those that had prepared for the season with a batch of low-key friendly matches.

And given that West Ham will be playing a number of pre-season friendlies in July anyway, just how many extra games are we really talking about?

It goes without saying that anybody involved in the World Cup finals would automatically be excluded from the squad – as indeed would any player that Roeder feels needs sufficient rest from a tough season.

But there are plenty of peripheral players – such as Ragnvald Soma, Richard Garcia and Hayden Foxe – and youngsters that could be used to get the club through the early rounds with Roeder dangling the carrot of more regular first-team football if they sufficiently impress.

It is not too much to ask, especially with players continuing to earn fantastic salaries every week throughout the summer for doing nothing but keeping themselves in reasonable shape and getting a suntan.

Surely the benefits of potentially playing in the UEFA Cup outweigh the few negatives.

Kirk now says: West Ham fans love their trips abroad and we'll never know how different the 2002/03 season would have been had the team warmed up with some competitive European action.

BEWARE A CRASH IN TV CASH (28 March 2002)

The threat to Football League clubs as a result of ITV Digital's hopes of renegotiating their current deal to avoid going bust has sent shockwaves not only through the Nationwide divisions but the Premiership as well.

Clubs are worryingly dependent on television revenue and some are beginning to realise that when that income is eventually reduced, they will be faced with major financial problems – and possible extinction.

To be fair to West Ham chairman Terence Brown, it is a scenario referred to in his end-of-year report before Christmas.

He made a special point of saying 'the growth of digital subscription television may be slowing' while expressing concern over the club's ever-increasing wage bill (£28.1m being the last published figure).

Turnover figures for most clubs are increasing but profits are not keeping in line – leaving clubs vulnerable if certain parts of their revenue were to take a turn for the worse.

There have already been reports of a possible player exodus at Leeds United in the summer if they fail to qualify for the Champions League and need to restructure their budget accordingly.

In this climate it is perhaps not surprising that West Ham are treading carefully, especially in the transfer market.

We are unlikely to see any major acquisitions before next season unless they have been funded by player sales first.

That will inevitably cause a sense of frustration for supporters, who are still a bit miffed at seeing just over half of the £18m received from the sale of defender Rio Ferdinand to Leeds 17 months ago paid in transfer fees for new players.

But with the club offsetting the rest against player contracts, they are clearly bracing themselves for the day when TV income starts to level off.

At least Hammers fans can take comfort from the fact that the club is being run on a relatively secure basis and its existence is unlikely to be threatened. But the margin for error is decreasing all the time.

Concerns about over-stretching finances could result in under-investment and eventual relegation.

It has happened before – in the late 1980s – remember.

So in walking along that tightrope, the club has to find the right balance.

Fans need to believe their club is showing ambition and have a genuine chance of competing for honours.

The reality, however, is that they will have to find reward in stability as the club rides out the turbulent times that may lay ahead for the sport in general.

Kirk now says: 'Concerns about over-stretching finances could result in under-investment and eventual relegation. The club has to find the right balance.' These words would prove prophetic and West Ham would admit the following year that they got it badly wrong.

KAN YOU BELIEVE IT? (2 May 2002)

As we know all too well, last week's disgraceful decision to disregard Frederic Kanoute's goal in the 2-0 defeat at Arsenal was not the first time West Ham have been victims of incompetence from match officials.

Yet it could almost have been anticipated that the benefit of any doubt was always going to go Arsenal's way.

Far better to deny West Ham, with relatively little hanging on their brave efforts, than risk costing the Gunners the championship.

It happened two years ago when Arsenal were allowed to score an injury-time winner despite the whole of Highbury – apart from the referee and his two assistants – spotting Emmanuel Petit's handball.

And now it has happened again, with it being claimed that Ashley Cole successfully cleared Kanoute's first-half shot – despite his foot being a good distance over the line.

As tennis legend John McEnroe would exclaim, 'The ball was in!!!'

Almost as astonishing was West Ham manager Glenn Roeder's insistence that he is against the use of video technology to clarify the accuracy of referees' decisions in such instances.

'I don't subscribe to stopping the game and using video evidence,' he said.

'I still think you have to have that little bit of excitement, mystery or romance in the game.'

Sorry, Glenn, but there was little romance hanging in the air as faces turned claret and blue with fury and frustration.

Roeder pleaded for the guilty linesman to admit his mistake but few Hammers fans will feel that offers any consolation.

The only crumb of comfort was that the decision would have brought little cheer to Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson.

But even that will disappear if West Ham fail to claim seventh place from rivals Tottenham, with fans being left to wonder what might have been had justice been done.

Kirk now says: Arsenal easily won the title and West Ham finished above Spurs, so the result at Highbury made little difference, but that doesn't excuse a terrible decision – one that strangely never gets mentioned when the merits of goal-line technology are debated.

JAMES SHOULD GET THE VOTE (9 May 2002)

The Hammer of the Year award will be presented at Upton Park on Saturday – with goalkeeper David James and defender Sebastien Schemmel the favourites to poll most votes from supporters.

James showed great courage and conviction to return from the knee injury that delayed his Hammers career following the £3.5m move from Aston Villa last summer.

Since November, the England international has been a model of consistency, not only producing great saves but also providing a

stabilising influence on the likes of Tomas Repka and Christian Dailly in front of him.

And while some say a goalkeeper receiving the award implies a mediocre season for the rest of the team, it should be remembered that Ludek Miklosko won the trophy in 1991 – a promotion season – while Shaka Hislop did so in 1999 when the Hammers finished fifth to qualify for the Intertoto Cup.

Frenchman Schemmel has won considerable support in his first full season following his bargain transfer from Metz last year, showing great commitment to the cause.

However, while he displays plenty of enthusiasm, his final ball when on the attack can let him down and it would surprise many if he were to follow in the footsteps of defenders such as Billy Bonds, Julian Dicks and Rio Ferdinand who have previously won the coveted award.

It has been a mixed season for many other Hammers players, with injuries affecting the likes of Joe Cole, Michael Carrick and Don Hutchison in midfield. Trevor Sinclair, meanwhile, has impressed while trying to gain a place in the England squad.

In attack, 19-year-old Jermain Defoe, who will surely win the Young Hammer of the Year award, has surged to the top of the West Ham scoring charts with 14 goals, despite not making manager Glenn Roeder's first-choice side.

It is an incredible feat for a boy with ... incredible feet.

Frederic Kanoute's 12 goals in 27 games is a far more consistent return than last season, despite being in and out of the side with injury.

But partner Paolo Di Canio has disappointed in front of goal, scoring just six times excluding penalty kicks.

Departing left-back Nigel Winterburn will be acknowledged for his efforts in his final season at Upton Park while fans will hopefully recognise the tenacity of Steve Lomas, whose return to the midfield has coincided with the team's recent good form.

But this writer's vote goes to James, whose form is sure to win him a place in Sven-Goran Eriksson's squad for the World Cup finals when named this week.

Kirk now says: Sebastien Schemmel won the award ahead of David James, who did indeed go to the World Cup, while Glen Johnson was named the Young Hammer of the Year by academy boss Tony Carr, despite not having yet made a first-team appearance.

HAMMERS IN SEVENTH HEAVEN (16 May 2002)

So West Ham finished the 2001/02 season in seventh place, making it the club's fifth most successful top-flight league campaign ever.

Few would have credited the Hammers with the potential to finish so high, whoever had been in charge this season.

But for Glenn Roeder to guide the team to such an impressive placing in his first year as manager deserves special praise.

Hammer Blows

Most West Ham fans would have eagerly accepted the chance to finish just one place behind big-spending London rivals Chelsea if it had been offered at the start of the season.

Or to end the campaign just four places behind Manchester United. Yeah, we'll take that, thanks very much.

West Ham's success has been built on the foundations of a fantastic home record, bettered by just one point by second-placed Liverpool and equal to champions Arsenal.

That means the 34-point gulf that exists between West Ham and the Gunners is purely down to the difference in away results – so there's plenty of room for improvement there.

And the fact of the matter is that more points have been thrown away rather than won in fortuitous fashion.

So there could have been even more on the board, although the 11 points that separate the Hammers and Chelsea says much about how far clubs need to go if they are to break into the top six.

But a huge amount of credit must be given to Roeder.

It was always going to take a few months for his influence to truly show itself in the side, but he admirably stuck to his principles and can be proud of his achievements.

The West Ham board will also feel that their judgement has been vindicated.

Few can doubt that to invest the responsibility of turning things around in somebody with such limited managerial experience was a huge gamble last summer.

For many (not least this columnist), Roeder simply didn't have the credentials to succeed Harry Redknapp in the Hammers hot seat.

But the new boss worked diligently to apply his philosophies and has gained the rewards.

He now finds himself in a similar position to the former West Ham manager, in that the onus will be on him to generate his own funds for new recruits and find players at bargain prices.

Despite what the club might say about Redknapp's less successful acquisitions, his gambling instincts generally paid off and Roeder may also be tempted to 'take a punt' as he seeks to stretch his limited resources to the maximum.

That is unless a player is sold for big money, as was the case with Frank Lampard providing the new boss with £11m last summer.

The one disappointment is that the club effectively qualified for the Intertoto Cup yet turned its back on the competition for the sake of trying to earn a few more Premiership points next season.

Does Roeder really have so little faith in his squad?

Kirk now says: It was right to congratulate Glenn Roeder on his achievements but it just goes to show that managers – like players – can be one-season wonders, as the Hammers would discover to their cost.

REFLECTING ON SEASON 2001/02

Best signing: David James (Aston Villa), £3.5m

Worst signing: Vladimir Labant (Sparta Prague), £900,000

Best result: Winning 1-0 at Manchester United in December

Worst result: Losing 7-1 at Blackburn in September

Final position: 7th in the Premiership, 53 points

Manager and rating: Glenn Roeder 8/10

Best thing about season: A top-seven finish – what's not to like?

Worst thing about season: Conceding 12 goals in two games at
Everton and Blackburn