

AMATEUR

Johnnie
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HOUR



Wembley Dreams in
Football's Lockdown Era

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Durham City vs Thackley AFC

18 September 2020

THE 5AM alarm scythes through me, taunting, reminding me of last week's news. It's only because I've left my phone on a cabinet out of reach of my bed, and with the painful screeching of Coldplay as the sound, that I drag myself out of bed to turn it off.

Before midday, we're up in Middlesbrough, the spiritual home of the Lowery family. Though my entire life has been spent living in London, I'm very much on the fence in the stereotypical 'north vs south' debate. There's been many an argument up at university, the cosmopolitan mixing place of the world, where I've been expected to fight my corner, to back up London and the south against the hordes of dirty northerners and their unintelligible arguments citing horrors such as talking to strangers on public transport. I can't bring myself to do it.

The north to me, specifically the rather unremarkable village of Eaglescliffe, is a happy place. I'm 21 years old now, but the days of running around manically with my

brother playing *Star Wars* on my grandparents' estate or getting a light ticking-off for repeatedly volleying a football into someone's car in Preston Park still seem like yesterday. Everyone has a story, and everyone will accept you for yours – well, almost. I remember playing football with one lad who didn't seem to have any mates on the estate. Over many days of bonding with him over a diet of predominantly football, I couldn't figure out for the life of me just why he had been shunned by the rest of the kids around him. That was until I eventually got invited back to his house for dinner, and spotted a Newcastle United shirt hanging on his wall.

This particular visit isn't going to be associated with childish freedom and joy, though. Last week's news. After many years of illness, Grandad has decided to stop his chemotherapy.

The whole world seems as if it is in chemotherapy at the minute, moving at the bare minimum speed required to survive. As if it wasn't already obvious, the journey up the M1 is a stark reminder of the state of play. I can't see the expressions beneath the countless compulsory face masks, but I can't imagine they're awash with optimism and beaming smiles. Even the previously simple task of getting a McDonald's breakfast is now run with almost military-style regimentation:

'Machine order only, please, sir.'

'Stand in the yellow circles while waiting for your order.'

'Don't forget to scan the QR code for track and trace.'

'DON'T BLOODY LEAVE THAT WAY. IT'S A ONE-WAY SYSTEM.'

To cap it all, the breakfast wrap isn't on the now-reduced menu, and I have to make do with a damp bacon roll and a

flatbread that seems to contain only the plastic cheese that comes with a kid's My First Kitchen set.

Of course, the Covid-19 pandemic is creating bigger problems than just affecting the McDonald's menu. The purpose of my trip up north is of course for family reasons, but I'm keen to see some football while I'm up there. The Northern League has a charm to it, with several historical old clubs and majestic stadia that would have fallen victim to property developers decades ago in London.

Despite my many family trips up to Teesside, the only football I've seen up there has been my dad's team, Middlesbrough. The matchday experience was always quite something for a young teenage boy. For a start, on the train into town, you had to buy your tickets actually on the train rather than before you got on. This was something I'd never seen before. Despite my constant advice, my dad never did stand very far down one end to try and avoid the £5 fare.

Then there was the pre-match drinking at Gilzeans, where complete strangers would point and laugh at me for drinking a soft drink in a pub rather than a lager. At no point did I go to Gilzeans over the age of 13. There was no furniture in the pub, the official story being that they needed all the space they could get on matchday, but everyone said it was to stop tables and chairs being used as weapons when fights broke out. Walking down to the stadium there was another bar with a haggard old woman standing outside, bellowing 'COME AND SEE THE STRIPPERS' at anyone who dared catch her eye. Many had the knowing look that suggested they'd been in before and found out that she in fact was the stripper. Thankfully, we never did go in ourselves to find out.

The match itself was invariably a limp draw against a side Middlesbrough should have been beating, with the atmosphere one of defeat and decline. I knew only a few of the players: Adam Reach and Richard Smallwood, because they'd become star players in my *Football Manager 2010* Arsenal side, and Nicky Bailey, because he started his career at the club I support, Sutton United. I once annoyed my dad's mate by going on about his non-league roots so much he went beetroot red and told me in no uncertain terms to 'shut the fuck up', before grumbling, 'He'll end up back there, he's so shit, you know.' To be fair to my dad's mate, he wasn't wrong. Nicky Bailey made a hero's return to Sutton in January 2016. Just five years or so after lauding him as my idol at Middlesbrough, I passed out in Sutton's club bar after a drinking competition with the man himself.

One of my more recent trips to the north-east was to see Sutton play, in an FA Trophy fixture away to Spennymoor Town, then of the league below us. We'd actually been knocked out in the previous round, but Bromley's secretary failed to reach the high standards of his club's players and left one of their loanees unregistered. Bromley were kicked out for fielding an ineligible player, and at less than a week's notice we were reinstated. The trouble was, our manager had already booked a holiday for that weekend, so we travelled up there with one of the first-team coaches in charge. With a series of injuries, we made the particularly harsh move of bringing two academy players on the long trip up north with us, and then leaving them on the bench the whole time. Our best player by a country mile was teenage emergency loanee goalkeeper Karlo Ziger from Chelsea, who made a string of excellent saves to keep the

score down to 3-0. We cursed the Bromley club secretary all the way home.

Grandad is much happier now he's stopped his chemo, and for a good few hours the idea of football leaves my head completely. His life must have been hell for the last few months, the side-effects of treatment combining with the social isolation that lockdown naturally brings. Beaming, he tells us of his plans to finally go out again next Friday, showing the enthusiasm of a student drowning in the delirium of their first week of proper partying. It might only be a trip to the Blythholme Social Club in Stockton, but I genuinely share that enthusiasm for him. To be honest, I'm amazed at how stoically the man has dealt with everything over the last few years; always the stiff upper lip and the warm smile, whatever may be going on in the background.

He's not a football man, Grandad, but he always entertains it, whether from myself or my dad. A few years back, he even allowed himself to be dragged down to watch my beloved Sutton United at home to Boreham Wood on a cold and miserable Tuesday night in November, the only goal coming as the wind carried a corner over the line without anyone else getting anywhere near the ball. To honour his commitment, I moved away from my usual terrace spot to sit in the main stand with him for the only time in ten years of supporting Sutton.

'What time are you leaving tonight, Johnnie?' breaks me from my trance. Not content with just sitting and talking, my dad and I have been put to work painting Grandad's fence, which is as old as the house itself, a badly kept secret really, looking at it. Despite being hopeless at anything

practical, I'd gotten myself into the zone: an artist, the fence my canvas. Splashes of orange therapeutically covering up the age-old blemishes, I can drift off to a world pre-coronavirus, pre-cancer, pre-whatever is bothering me. The words from my dad, who I didn't even realise had gone off for a break, bring me back round again. In a couple of hours' time, I can take a slightly different style of break from the trials and tribulations of life – a trip to watch Durham City vs Thackley in the FA Vase.

The train journey into Durham is notable for a classic ticket inspector vs pissed teenagers encounter. If you ask me, some ticket inspectors really do bring it upon themselves. This guy clearly gets a buzz out of catching people out: the 'Oh, unfortunately, you seem to be sitting in the wrong seat, sir. That's a £1,000 fine' while sporting a manic grin type. This time, it looks like easier pickings for him. A group of lads, well endowed in aftershave and misplaced confidence, are on the train without tickets. You can see the excitement in the inspector reach boiling point as he mentally calculates how much fine money he'll be getting, as if he's on commission and can treat the wife and kids to a new toaster or something equally dull.

But it's not game over, not yet. First, the teenagers pretend to have each other's tickets. This is a classic but is hardly going to work on such an experienced busybody, no chance. There's more to come, though. First, they claim not a single one of them has a card on them to pay, despite the fact they're clearly heading out into town. 'Well then, you can pay later, when the fine doubles,' offers the inspector, that grin returning as he senses he's won. 'Names and addresses, please.'

‘Last name Oxbig, first name Mike,’ replies one of the group without a second’s hesitation. It takes the inspector a bit longer, but the smile’s been wiped out as his face burns red. The others follow with perfectly rehearsed fake names, and even a couple of fake addresses for good measure. The kid masquerading as Mr Oxbig has even invested in a fake ID for his alias. As the rest of the carriage looks to hold back its sniggers, the inspector knows he is beaten and makes a hasty exit to look for some softer targets. As the teenagers sit crying with laughter, I can’t help but crack a triumphant smile on their behalf.

Durham is a place I’m well acquainted with, and I still honestly can’t decide if I love or hate it. Rolling in on the train over the viaduct and glancing out the window, the idyllic scenery never fails to catch the eye. The cathedral takes centre stage, perched majestically on one of the many hills of which the place is comprised, but everywhere you look is a work of art. From the splendour of the cobbled streets to the serenity of the Wear winding through the centre, you might argue the beauty of the place is uncharacteristic of the north-east. But it isn’t just the look of the place that’s out of character; in fact, the whole city feels almost an affront to the region.

Durham, in its simplest terms, is a student area, and having graduated a few months ago I’m already well into the stage of hating students. Yes, it’s jealousy, but the way they stroll around with no real regard for the locals or the local area irks me somewhat. Exeter University has given its host town the reputation of ‘Surrey-on-Sea’ due to the hordes of middle-class mummy’s boys and girls who attend there, and Durham is probably even worse. In the darkest

days, otherwise known as term time, you can't go into a pub for fear of hearing about somebody's 'gap yah' or a family dispute centred around the fact Daddy only bought some spoilt brat a Fiat 500 instead of a Mercedes Benz. In 2017, Durham University hit the news when the rugby club held a 'miners' strike' event, imploring students to dress as either miners or Margaret Thatcher's government, with the Facebook invitation reading, 'We want flat caps, filth... a few working-class-beating-bobbies wouldn't go amiss.' It genuinely amazes and, to be honest, slightly disappoints me that more of these pricks don't get set upon by the locals.

It's early in the student year, but there's no shortage of them around as I get off the train. You can tell who they are more often than not by the clothes and makeup they're wearing, and failing that, definitely the accent. One girl staggers along a steep cobbled street in ridiculous high heels, mascara running down her face, smoking a cigarette with a look on her face that reads, 'Oh God; the north is, like, sooooo disgusting.' I try to shoot her back a 'Shut up moaning and get a proper job' look that I've been briefly developing, but it still needs work, and I hope she doesn't mistake it for flirting as I move swiftly in the opposite direction.

For all my criticism, I have to admit I always enjoyed my visits to Durham to visit mates who are studying there. The college bars are exclusive to students, but this doesn't really bother you when it's barely over a pound a pint and there's a pretty girl sat in the corner you can talk to. And then there are the nightclubs. I spent three years at university in Coventry, and not a single night out came close to the ones in Durham. Something seemed to happen every single time

I visited; my personal favourite being having to drag a mate away from the Evensong event at Durham Cathedral, as someone else had previously told him this was an 'evening gathering of people to piss' and he had suddenly become quite desperate to relieve himself. Luckily, we made it to the morning without a future court order to worry about.

On this occasion, however, there is no real time to reminisce, as Durham City do not actually play in Durham. Instead, I have to jump on a bus to the nearby village of Willington.

Willington is certainly not a student area; indeed, it is hard to think of anywhere more different to Durham, despite the 20-minute bus journey between the two locations. The former lifeblood of the village in the colliery now lies hidden, covered by dust and earth, almost like a dirty secret. Much of the rest of the village is frozen in time, rugged but homely. Like many other similar County Durham villages, Willington is a former pit town, and sprang up rapidly in the late 1800s as Brancepeth Colliery became a site of increased economic value. Migrants travelled en masse from Ireland and Cornwall, as famine and the failure of tin mines respectively left people seeking a new life. Conditions were poor, and the owners of the mine were said to have treated workers incredibly harshly. The evidence, an indelible mark on the history of the village, can be seen in the village churchyard which contains the graves of many of the 162 men and boys who died working there. One disaster in 1896 killed 20 in one blast, the youngest just 14 years old.

There are more upbeat elements to the history of the village too, and certainly significant ones. The Rocking

Strike of 1863, in which miners protested against the mine owners not following new payment rules, is widely believed to be the first time coalminers ever laid down their tools in protest. The strike started in late October and lasted for over two months, before a series of evictions forced the miners back to work in order to survive. Many went through incredible hardship, with starvation not uncommon, in a move that helped lay the groundwork for future trade union movements.

The football ground itself has its own history, harking back to a now bygone era. Willington AFC were generally successful in the interwar period, but it was not until after the Second World War had subsided that they had their greatest success. The legacy of an FA Amateur Cup win in 1950 can still be seen today: the main stand at the ground was built from the proceeds of defeating Bishop Auckland 4-0 at Wembley in front of a crowd of 88,000. Situated right in the middle of the village, the ground has been scaled back in recent years, but it is easy to see just how large it would have been back in that era. Indeed, a crowd of 10,000 turned up at Hall Lane to see Willington play Bromley back in 1953. The large grass banks behind the goals cover up where large cinder terraces used to lie, enabling that large crowd to pile in back before health and safety was such a concern, or even considered at all. I somewhat doubt that much space will be needed for the Durham City game tonight.

To describe Durham City's recent history as volatile would be an understatement along the lines of describing the Cuban Missile Crisis as a simple miscommunication. Things were looking bright back in 2009 as the Citizens

won promotion to the Northern Premier League Premier Division, the highest level they had played at since their Football League days of the 1920s. With significant financial backing, the plan was to keep the club moving up the pyramid, perhaps returning those Football League glory days and bringing them in line with the likes of Hartlepool and Darlington. However, their business model included playing on an artificial pitch, which had been installed in 2006 as plans to climb the football pyramid were about to come to fruition. This fell apart very quickly when the Football Conference, the next promotion up from the Northern Premier League, turned around and said artificial pitches would not be permitted in their league.

Deeming this as too much of a stumbling block to any hopes of further progression, the main sponsor behind the club pulled out immediately. The achievement of playing in the Northern Premier League quickly turned into farce, as Durham had to draft multiple academy players and students in to fulfil fixtures. With results along the way including a 10-0 hammering at Boston United and three 7-0 home defeats, they finished the season with a grand total of 0 points and a goal difference of -141. They did briefly stabilise in the division below, but after two years they decided to resign for financial reasons and dropped back into the Northern League, where the brief journey into potential glory had started.

At this point, though, the problems had only just begun. Former Newcastle United favourite Olivier Bernard bought the club in 2013, promising big things, including producing players for the England squad. Instead, a dispute

with the landlords of their New Ferens Park ground saw Durham made homeless in 2015, with relegation to the tenth tier of English football following a year later. Things got progressively worse still as they finished bottom of this division in 2019 and had amassed just eight points when the 2019/20 season was suspended due to the Covid-19 pandemic in March. Their opponents for this FA Vase tie, Bradford-based Thackley AFC, could not be more of an antithesis to Durham – they have played in the same division since 1982.

The keen demographer, or anyone with any observational skills whatsoever, would note something slightly unique about the Durham side that lines up tonight. A quick glance at the 2011 census shows 96.6 per cent of County Durham's population is white, a figure that rises to 99 per cent in the Willington ward. However, Durham line up with just one white player in the starting XI, a highly cosmopolitan line-up for the Northern League.

Durham, in their fantastic red and black crossed shirts, are the underdogs for sure tonight, and confidence doesn't seem high among the locals.

'Who do you think's going to win, Daddy?'

'I think the blue team, 3-0, son.'

The game kicks off a couple of minutes late, owing to the fact the penalty spot needs painting on properly, and I find myself quickly getting into supporting the home side. They look clearly second-best in all aspects, but a couple of early chances on the break give a degree of hope to the 100 or so home supporters scattered around the ground. Four league games into the season, Durham have lost all four yet are somehow still the league's top scorers. It's easy

to see why, too, as they seem to favour attacking flair over defensive solidity, making for an exciting match.

They're the classic underdog in more ways than one, as the players look almost a bunch of misfits. The central midfielder has a gut that betrays his level, while several of the players look to not even be old enough to be out of school. The match programme bemoans the lack of 18 absent players, mostly through injury, but also including one who has just left and moved to Andorra to seek Champions League football. Yes, really.

Thackley, by contrast, seem to fit the role of pantomime villain very well. Immaculately drilled and looking professional throughout, they are well trained in the dark arts, knowing when to stay down for a few seconds longer than needed, or when to surround the ref if a decision is slightly controversial. The young Durham right-back, who doesn't look older than about 16, is the main target of their protests after two fouls inside the first ten minutes. The quickest the Thackley number six runs all game is up to the referee to demand a card after the second one. Thankfully, the referee holds off, but there is a reason the fouls keep coming from the home side. They simply can't keep pace with the visitors; there's a clear gulf in class just waiting to become more evident.

The resistance is finally broken after 25 minutes and ended altogether when Thackley get a second goal five minutes later. The way the second comes about aligns perfectly with the reputation I've created in my head for the visitors, as there is more than a hint of controversy about it. A recovering Durham player is tripped off the ball as the Thackley winger surges forward, leaving them a man short at the back. The ball is

squared, and midfielder Seb Scaroni is able to walk it in after rounding the keeper, a goal which looks to be almost taking the piss. I'm furious, despite only having been supporting Durham for half an hour, and join the accusations towards the ref of being a cheat, a wanker, and far worse.

It doesn't get any better for the home side. The brief chances they'd had on the counter are now drying up. The Thackley centre-back, now with little to actually do in terms of defending, refocuses his energy from shouting at the ref to giving all the generic clichéd encouragements to his team-mates doing all the work. 'Still 0-0, lads, let's keep going, BLUE HEAD,' all while being at least 30 yards from any action. He gets a shooting opportunity at one point, though, clearly bored of staying back, but the effort poses more danger to a black and white cat perched on the grass bank behind the goal than it does to the Durham net. The shot barely misses the cat, but it seems unperturbed, staring back as if daring them to have another go. Instead, Thackley make it 3-0 before half-time.

With the game now over as a contest, my mind wanders to other matters. How far away are the toilets from where I'm standing? How can the bus company get away with charging £4.80 for a 20-minute journey when it's less than a third of that in London? Has anyone ever spent a full 24 hours in a 24-hour Tesco? Sadly, the answer to the first of these questions is about as far as physically possible, so I have little time to ponder the economics of north-east public transport or the endurance of supermarket shoppers as I head towards the clubhouse. As I stand at the urinal, something quite bizarre for somebody from London happens. The bloke pissing in the urinal next to me starts

talking to me. What do I do? I'm not used to this at all. Luckily, all he's doing is moaning about the performance, and there's plenty to go by on that particular topic. 'Aye,' he agrees with one of my comments, 'and they were shite at Easington last week too.'

With this slightly odd conversation over, I head off in the opposite direction out of the toilets to find a new vantage point for the second half. Only two Durham fans stand behind the goal their side are due to attack, with the vast majority leaning towards the Thackley end. I can't help but admire the optimism of those two fans, as the action is almost certainly going to largely be concentrated a good distance away from them in the second half. It's not an optimism I share, and I reluctantly move around to join the crowds down towards the other goal. At least the cat should be safe now.

It's not uncommon at non-league football for a cloud of steam to rise from the direction of the tea hut as the ovens are put out, so when I notice some haziness five minutes into the second half I think nothing of it. Weirdly, though, I glance back over a couple of minutes later and it's still there. Then I spot the fire.

Great orange flames lick up the back garden of one of the houses that backs on to the ground, and people start to watch that rather than the game.

The smoke gets thicker as the fire gets angrier, and I find myself coughing and it gets into my lungs. The players, though, get on with the game as though nothing is happening. I hope everyone's OK. It doesn't look good.

After five more minutes of watching the fire, the Chinese whispers reach my section of the ground, and it's

good news. The fire is not a house fire, but a large bonfire. The angle of the fence means it's hard to tell this, and all we can see on the far side is the flickers of flame and evil clouds of black smoke floating in our direction. These reports from the other side help me settle down and watch what's left of the game, though the smoke still continues to rise in plumes into the night sky. Quite as to why this household has opted to light a massive bonfire on a Friday night is anyone's guess. Perhaps they've been inspired by the recent Dennis Nilsen documentary and have finally got round to burning all the human remains underneath their kitchen floor. Whatever the reason, it doesn't make for great viewing conditions for those downwind of it.

There's little to report in terms of on-pitch action. The mouthy defender is now screaming 'relax' at regular intervals to try and help his team, in possibly the least relaxing tone I've ever heard. It works, though, and his side get a fourth and final goal with ten minutes to go. The lone Durham striker collapses to the ground as this goes in; the reaction you would expect from a player whose side have just conceded a stoppage-time goal in a cup final rather than a goal that does nothing but embellish the scoreline. As the crowd start to file out, and the bloke next to me hurriedly tries to do a headcount before they leave, Durham finally get a good chance. The left-back, a rare bright spark in a poor performance, runs past three defenders and finds himself in on goal. Sadly, he looks as surprised as anyone at the ease of what has just happened, and his shot is scuffed at the goalkeeper, who could throw a towel over the ball. Shortly after, the full-time whistle puts Durham out of their misery.

After the game, I have the pleasure of talking to the Durham City manager, the former Celtic man Didier Agathe. Make no mistake – Agathe is a big-name manager even at a ground that has seen Malcolm Allison briefly take the reins at Willington in 1984. Agathe’s career highlights of a 2003 UEFA Cup Final appearance and a man-of-the-match performance against Barcelona the following year seem a far cry from the surroundings here. So, what was it that made him come over from his home island of Réunion to take the job?

He explained, ‘It was good to come to learn and improve myself before going on to bigger clubs. I don’t want to go to higher clubs before this experience, so that’s why I came here. I don’t know a lot about the FA Vase, but I know the final is at Wembley. It’s obviously exciting to play these games. I hate losing games, but I’m more concerned now to find my full squad.’

He’s incredibly humble; the first thing he says to me is a thank you for taking the time to come and watch his side play. As we stand and chat, the recurring theme is frustration over injuries and absentees, and there is still a hope that his side can climb the table and have a strong season. As I leave the ground and walk across the estate back to the bus stop, I can’t help but hope they go on to have a good season too.

Three weeks later, with his side still rooted to the bottom of the table, Agathe leaves his job at Durham City.