

29 MINUTES

FROM WEMBLEY

**The Inside Story of Coventry City's
1980/81 Season**



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Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Introduction	9
The Cast	11
Welcome to Coventry City Football Club	13
Pre-season 1980/81	40
The Goal That Never Was	50
Farewell to ‘Hutch’	71
From the Abbey to the Connexion	84
Bodak’s The Name, Goals Are My Game	98
And They All Run to Little Danny Thomas	110
Seats For All At Highfield Road	149
Just How Good Could That Team Have Been?	161

Welcome to Coventry City Football Club

THE 1970s established Coventry City in Division One of the Football League. Promoted to the top flight in 1967, they were managed by Jimmy Hill who led the 'sky blue revolution' and took the club from Division Three to Division One upon his arrival in 1961.

Hill's sudden departure to *London Weekend Television* prior to the opening game at Burnley saw the appointment of Noel Cantwell as manager. The Sky Blues finished one place above the relegation zone in 1967/68 and 1968/69 before an unbelievable sixth place in 1969/70 ensured qualification for the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup.

Tenth place in 1970/71 continued the progress until March 1972 when, with the side 18th in the division, Cantwell was sacked and chief scout Bob Dennison took over as caretaker until the season's end. Jimmy Hill would return as managing director in 1975 and combined the role with presenting *Match of the Day* on BBC1 before, as a major shareholder, taking on the chairman's role in the summer of 1980.

In the summer of 1972, Gordon Milne, non-league Wigan Athletic's player-manager, was appointed as team manager with Joe Mercer, general manager at Manchester City, appointed to the same role at Highfield Road. Milne's playing career included seven years at Liverpool under the tutelage of Bill Shankly, one of the legendary Scot's first signings when he joined from Preston North End for £16,000 in 1960. Liverpool, it's hard to believe,

were in Division Two and Milne was part of the side who won the title in 1962 to return to the top flight.

Two Division One title medals followed as he played 282 times and scored 19 goals at Anfield while Sir Alf Ramsey awarded him 14 England caps during his time on Merseyside. A knee injury put paid to his chance of appearing in the 1966 World Cup finals and a year later he moved to Blackpool for three seasons before the move to Wigan, then in the Northern Premier League, and managed them from 1970 until his move to Highfield Road.

He recalled, 'It was my first big job in management as a young coach. I was 35 at the time and went there with Joe Mercer, Joe being the general manager and myself the first-team coach. Joe was the big appointment as he had the reputation having won the Division One title with Manchester City along with the FA Cup, League Cup and European Cup Winners' Cup in just six seasons while nobody knew who I was coming from non-league.

'I was the coach and picked the team each week while Joe was the link between me, the board and the media. To ensure our First Division status was vital and this rapport moved to the pitch and saw us through at vital times. Many big clubs including Manchester United, Tottenham Hotspur and Newcastle United disappeared into Division Two and we managed to avoid the drop.

'Every season we were always one of three tipped to go down but it didn't matter who we were playing whether we were away to Liverpool or home to Palace as every game was a cup tie to us. We developed a positive mentality and weren't in fear of anything as there was no point beating Liverpool and then losing the next week to Stoke City with all due respect to them.'

Shortly after they took the reins, Milne went back to Blackpool in the autumn of 1972 to sign Scottish winger Tommy Hutchison for £140,000 in a swap deal with striker Billy Rafferty. The signing would prove to be one of the best in Coventry City's history, and he reflected, 'I'd played in the same side as Gordon at Blackpool and when he finished there he went to Wigan Athletic where they did well and he stepped up to the role with Joe Mercer. I had a call from a guy called Tom White who was a mutual friend of ours and he asked me if I'd like to go to Coventry.

‘A year prior, Blackpool’s Tony Green had moved to Newcastle United and Bob Stokoe was then the manager at Bloomfield Road. Newcastle wanted us both but couldn’t afford a double deal because they’d just bought Malcolm MacDonald from Arsenal and both transfers were over £100,000. Bob Stokoe had told me I’d have to wait at least a year before something similar would happen for me and said, “If you stay here I’ll come in for you” as he knew he was moving on to take the Sunderland job.

‘A year is a long time in football, I could have broken my leg, lost form or similar so I decided to take the opportunity and move to join Gordon at Coventry. The only problem I did encounter was that we’d played Manchester City a year or so earlier in the cup at Blackpool and I’d spoken to their assistant manager Malcolm Allison after the game. Now he rated me but Joe Mercer, the manager, didn’t and wasn’t keen on signing me. Allison told me he’d soon be manager due to a pending takeover at Maine Road and would I join them when that happened. I mentioned this to Gordon when we met and he told me to leave Joe to him.

‘The last game I played for Blackpool was at Luton and before the game you receive your complimentary tickets. Bob Stokoe came round with them and announced he’d left two on the gate for Joe Mercer. As it happened I made a goal, scored one and signed on the Monday for Coventry.’

A unique selling point for the club was Bert Edwards, who was in charge of the youth team and recruitment. For Gordon Milne, Edwards was a huge asset to the football club. Milne said, ‘Bert had a wonderful way with parents and lads from all over the country came to us, from London, the Midlands, Scotland, all over the place. Even in those days big clubs were tempting players or parents with money but what we pushed was the fact they would probably get in our first team quicker than at Liverpool or Manchester United.

‘The opportunity would come sooner and we had proof of that with the average age of the side in the late 1970s/early 1980s. It was a young club progressive in its ideas with Highfield Road that was neat and tidy, right in the middle of town and big enough for the crowds we attracted.’

One of those from Manchester, full-back Brian 'Harry' Roberts, made the journey from Manchester Piccadilly to Coventry station. He said, 'I could have also gone to both Manchester clubs and Leeds but I wanted to move away from home and Coventry had a good youth policy which gave you a better chance to progress. It was Graham Paddon's dad [Graham left City for Norwich in 1969], up in Manchester, who watched me when I played for my school. He was impressed, called the club and it went from there. I'd played for Lancashire Boys where there were scouts everywhere and then I get spotted at a school match by a chap who was literally walking past! I got in a taxi at Coventry station when I stepped off the train and asked the driver to take me to "34 Catherine Street", the address of the club hostel located just behind the West Stand at Highfield Road.

'It was absolutely brilliant. You go through the hierarchy when you first arrive, the older lads like Mick Ferguson would play tricks on us but a year on that was me doing it to others. You got to live with lads from all over the country and everyone had a different taste in music. Graham Oakey was a massive Eric Clapton fan which he passed on to me and the social side was superb. You had your ups and downs but, on the whole, it was a fantastic time.

'I joined as an apprentice in 1971 and Gordon Milne gave me my debut after I'd been on loan at Hereford United. When I signed professional forms it was touch and go, they weren't certain as to whether I'd make it or not and it was a last minute decision to sign me. They sent me to Hereford managed by John Sillett and I had five games for them which was a world apart from Coventry but an experience I really enjoyed in the Third Division. John was keen to sign me but Gordon said "no" and then shortly afterwards I made my debut at Tottenham in a 4-1 defeat in April 1976.

'I wore the number seven shirt but played at right-back and played my first ten games away from Highfield Road due to an awful winter which saw no game at home for ten weeks. We went from mid-January to early April playing away from home so I finally made my home debut in April the following year. I was almost a regular and no one knew who I was, nobody recognised

me at Highfield Road! In a way it made things easier for me, the type of player I was, more of a destroyer than a creator. The emphasis in away games is more on the opposition to break you down and this suited my game.'

Droitwich-born Graham Oakey was in digs with Roberts, Jimmy Holmes, Alan Green and Alan Dugdale when he joined the club. 'The club hostel around the back of the West Stand was a ten-bed house where all the apprentices lived. Bert Edwards was great with me, I was small when I joined, nine stone, and Bert used to take me on special training exercises to add some strength, he was a huge help to me. I was a right winger at first then gradually moved back to full-back in a similar way to Danny Thomas in later years,' he remembered.

From Newcastle, centre-forward Mick Ferguson held off overtures from a number of top-flight clubs to join the Sky Blues. Looking back, he said, 'Christmas 1969 I was 15 years old and invited down to Coventry City to meet Jimmy Hill, the scout who brought me to the club was Bob Dennison who later had a spell as caretaker manager in 1972. There was interest from my hometown club, Newcastle United, Manchester City and Sunderland.

'Joe Mercer and Malcolm Allison at Manchester City drove down to our street in a Rolls-Royce to meet my family, it was quite a moment given the fact that nobody in the whole road had a car. I was offered a three-year professional contract by Coventry at 17, it was a real family club, we lived in the club hostel and it was a fantastic time.'

Tommy Hutchison had stepped up from Division Two at Blackpool with his move to Highfield Road. 'Coventry was my first big club and going into Division One we were in the bottom three at the time which was a similar scenario when I moved to Manchester City with Bobby McDonald,' he commented.

'Colin Stein had just signed for Coventry and the two of us hit it off immediately. We went on a long unbeaten run, 13 or 14 games, the crowd loved the football we played and they lifted me. I never really got the pleasure out of scoring goals it was more in setting them up for colleagues but I just loved going out on a Saturday afternoon, it was tremendous. When they signed Terry

Yorath, Ian Wallace and Bobby McDonald at the same time in August 1976 they were about to sell me to Norwich City. I went there and spoke to John Bond but I couldn't work out why I was going there.

'I don't think Jimmy Hill rated me and thought of me as a luxury player. From joining in 1972 I missed very few games and rarely got injured so I was always available for selection. In my time you were substitute because you couldn't get in the team, you weren't on the bench to be brought on to change the game. There was no squad rotation and you didn't want to miss a game because you might not get back in the team. The majority of our players at Highfield Road were on appearance money and you were getting an extra £25 to play the game so with two games in a week you were doing well.

'When I came back from the 1974 World Cup with Scotland I was on £90 a week. The managers had to keep you on as lower money as possible, it wasn't a case of rewarding a star player as there was no freedom of contract then so if a club wanted to keep you then you stayed put and couldn't leave to join another club. If they wanted to get rid of you they did, it was all very simple.

'Ninety pounds a week wasn't a great amount in 1974 especially when I came home from the World Cup in West Germany and found out what the other players were on! We played Zaire in the opening game and went to swap jerseys with them at the final whistle. They told us they couldn't as they only had one kit per player. Everyone remembers the famous clip when one of their players burst out of the defensive wall in their group game against Brazil before the referee blew his whistle and cleared the ball down the pitch before Roberto Rivelino had run up to take the kick.

'To play for Scotland while I was playing for Coventry was like winning the lottery without buying a ticket. Players from Coventry, Birmingham City and West Bromwich Albion just didn't get picked for Scotland. You had to be with Rangers, Celtic and the top teams in England and, in my case, more so, as there were so many wingers to choose from including Willie Johnston, Jimmy Johnstone, Bobby Lennox and Willie Morgan so it was

testament to the way Coventry were playing at the time. I won all 17 of my Scotland caps while I was at Highfield Road.

'All the kids at Coventry who played in the youth team made their way into the first team. Jimmy Hill was way ahead of his time as the training ground was superb and we had meals together after training which very few clubs did. We had the hostel at the ground where players from Ireland, Scotland and all over the country stayed and was like an academy.

'It was always part of the players' remit as if there were any Scottish lads there Ron Wylie would ask us to go and speak to them to make them welcome and it was the same with Jimmy Holmes and the Ireland lads. I'm certain that's why a lot of the players chose to sign for Coventry City as they were looked after and made to feel welcome from day one. A lot of the young players when they left Coventry went on to do even better at other clubs. It gave them an excellent education in the game and big match experience at a young age which they wouldn't have received at other clubs.'

Gordon Milne took sole control of first-team matters in 1974. In one of the first games of 1974/75, Graham Oakey made his first-team bow at Highfield Road. Oakey said, 'I made my debut at 19 in a 2-2 draw with Manchester City and their side included Mike Summerbee, Rodney Marsh and Colin Bell. I first trained with the club at 14/15 years old and joined as an apprentice straight from school after being on trial for six months when I'd go and train every Sunday at the club.

'After playing in the youth team I progressed to the reserves at 17 and played the whole season, 42 games, in the Central League, the reserves league of the time. I signed as a professional at 18 after two years as an apprentice. The season prior to my debut we'd been on a pre-season tour to Singapore and played in a competition along with Derby and Everton. Mick Ferguson and I were the youngest on the tour and I played three or four games over there then came back for the new season and got my chance early September at right-back in place of Peter Hindley.

'My team-mates that day were Bill Glazier, Chris Cattlin, Dennis Mortimer, Larry Lloyd, Alan Dugdale, Brian Alderson,

Colin Stein, Willie Carr, Tommy Hutchison and Mick McGuire, a really fine side. To receive the Player of the Year award at the end of that first season, voted for by the supporters, was fantastic and I've still got the trophy although I maintain Tommy Hutchison should have got it! In 99 appearances I never scored but I'm sure I made a few. At that time Anfield was a fantastic place to play as an opposition player, they had Kenny Dalglish, Keegan, Souness at various times and they were a special side. Arsenal also had a good side with Alan Ball, Malcolm McDonald and Charlie George.'

In the early part of the 1970s the first manufacturers' logos began to appear on football shirts. Leicester-based Admiral took advantage and set about making their mark. Leeds were the first club to wear Admiral before the England side, thanks to Don Revie, adopted a red-and-blue-striped sleeve with yellow logo, a big change from the plain white shirt.

Manchester United quickly followed suit and, in 1975/76, the Sky Blues were next in line. The 'tramline' design was hugely popular as the logo also appeared on shorts and socks as Milne's men wore the design for the first time in a league match when Derby County visited Highfield Road for a 0-0 draw in August 1975.

In 1976, managing director Jimmy Hill began his American adventure when he landed a lucrative £25m contract to raise the standard of football in Saudi Arabia. He decided to use much of that money to invest in the burgeoning North American Soccer League (NASL) which was becoming hugely popular and successful due to the arrival of the likes of Pele, Franz Beckenbauer and George Best.

Hill was encouraged by NASL commissioner Phil Woosnam to speak to Roger Faulkner, an English broadcaster and promoter in the US. Woosnam had successfully arranged for Pele and the New York Cosmos to play at the Pontiac Silverdome, Detroit, with the idea of launching a team to play there. Jimmy subsequently became co-owner with Faulkner of Detroit Express, who joined the NASL in 1978. Their home ground had a capacity of 80,000. Birmingham City's Trevor Francis was the first major signing and

played alongside Ipswich Town's Alan Brazil in the inaugural season.

Aside from the European adventure of 1970, a further highlight of the decade was a seventh-place finish in 1977/78. During the course of the season 75 goals were scored in 42 league games, 21 by Ian Wallace and 17 by Mick Ferguson. Ferguson said, 'Playing alongside Ian Wallace we knew what the other was doing, he could read the space and would often benefit from my aerial ability which was my real strength. He had the ability to get on the end of things and inside the penalty area he was alive to any opportunity that presented itself.'

'We knew we weren't the world's best strike partnership but both knew how to score goals. We had a supply line in Tommy Hutchison and he would go down the line then double back and beat his man again and again. He was a brilliant player who had so much ability and we knew when he would release the ball and the timing of his crosses worked so well for us. It was the same with Mick Coop on the right side as he had the ability to drop balls into the box from distance and was a great passer of the ball.'

'The whole squad of that era contributed, it was a good fit, the balance was right and we worked well together. Aside from this on the pitch, off the pitch we all got on really well and there was friendship throughout the group.'

Nottingham Forest's title win in 1978 was secured with a goalless draw at Highfield Road in April. Peter Shilton's save from Mick's point-blank header is shown time and time again. For Shilton, speaking in the documentary of Daniel Taylor's *I Believe in Miracles: The Remarkable Story of Brian Clough's European Cup-Winning Team*. He said, 'It's the save that people remember me by. I don't know how I got to it. It was just a reaction, all that hard training, going for everything. Ian Wallace had got to the byline and chipped the ball across goal. I was at the near post and had to go back across the goal as Mick Ferguson came in and bulleted his header from about four of five yards out.'

'I managed to turn it over the bar and it was made even more dramatic because of the way Mick sank to his knees and put his head in his hands. I put my hand on his shoulder to commiserate

and people, to this day, still come up to me to say they were there that afternoon.'

For Mick, however, there was a simple explanation for the miss, 'It was a poor header, three or four feet off the ground at a good height for a goalkeeper. If I had headed it down it would have given him no chance at all, it was just at the right height for him to turn it over the bar.'

There were full international honours during 1977/78 for Wallace and Jim Blyth with Scotland and Terry Yorath along with Don Nardiello for Wales. Ipswich's 1-0 FA Cup Final victory over favourites Arsenal vetoed the Sky Blues' spot in the following season's UEFA Cup. An Arsenal win and City's seventh-place finish would have seen European opposition at Highfield Road for the first time since Bayern Munich's visit in November 1970. Roger Osborne's 77th-minute winner and subsequent faint summed up Highfield Road's hopes at that point of hosting the cream of the continent. March 1978, however, had seen the introduction of young centre-forward Garry Thompson, whose first senior goal for the club came in a 4-0 steamrolling of Wolves.

He remembered, 'Years ago I was one of the best players in my school team, Kings Heath Juniors. We played this game against another school and there was this kid playing for them, everything I'd do he had an answer for. I ended up trying to be aggressive against him but being a lot bigger than me he had the answer to that side of the game. For the first time I'd met someone who was better than me in every area.

'I went to secondary school shortly afterwards and walked into the same kid and it's Paul Dyson. We became best mates and were always together then Paul ended up being signed by Coventry. They asked him if there were any other decent kids in his team and he mentioned me so they came and watched me playing for Warwickshire, our county side, in the same team as Paul. My feeling was they took me to keep Paul happy as they knew he was going to be an excellent player, he really was a fantastic footballer. I didn't care that I was seen as the makeweight as I'd got a chance at a professional football club. I trained with lads in the youth

sides and that summer we both spent the holidays training at the club with the apprentices and did the entire pre-season.

‘They played reserves against the first team when I was on the bench watching the game at Highfield Road one day and Jimmy Hill was doing the commentary. With 20 minutes to go Bert Edwards told me to go on and as luck would have it I’ve picked up the ball and smashed it into the net. Jimmy Hill cries out, “And that’s a fine goal by one of our up and coming talents...what’s his name, what’s his name” and a voice piped up “Garry Thompson”!

‘I ended up playing for the reserves on the Saturday at the age of 15 and everything went on from there. I owe a lot to Paul as without him I wouldn’t have got a sniff. When I first joined Coventry the apprentice dressing room of young professionals comprised Les Sealey, Harry Roberts, Graham Oakey (who was in the first team by then but used to hang around with us) and Don Nardiello among others but Les was just the loudest man I’ve ever met. He was always shouting and hollering and, heaven forbid, if you tried to beat him in training he’d run after you.

‘Peter Bodak always used to chip him and then he’d chase him round the pitch, he hated it. Les and Danny Thomas had a fight one day and Les ended up commentating on that! I was in digs with him and Val Thomas, Danny’s brother, one by one they moved out and bought their own houses but Les used to come back and visit the little old lady that used to look after us. He’d come back to see her, he was a real kindly soul and always brought her a gift. He had a heart of gold and was a real lovable character.’

The same month saw the arrival of 17-year old central defender Gary Gillespie, signed from Falkirk. Gillespie had recently been appointed Falkirk’s captain in the Scottish Second Division becoming the youngest club captain in British football having played just 22 games for them.

Gillespie recalled, ‘I’d just started playing for Falkirk in my debut season, 1977, when I had an opportunity before Coventry to go to West Bromwich Albion where Johnny Giles was manager. Falkirk turned it down and then a short while afterwards I got called into the office of manager Billy Little who told me Coventry

had made an offer and they had accepted it so would I like to go and talk to them?

'They'd made an offer of £40,000 with £35,000 in add-ons if I played so many games. Bert Edwards, who was mainly involved in the youth setup at the time came up to Falkirk and I travelled back down to Coventry with him to have a look at the place and went on trial initially. I then did a bit of training at a time when Tommy Hutchison was there, Ian Wallace, Mick Ferguson, Mick Coop, big Jim Holton and it was a big occasion for me.

'I'd been working in a bank for six months after I'd left school and was only playing part-time at Falkirk. The whole thing was a massive step up for me but a great opportunity to play for a First Division club and it didn't take much persuasion to sign. I was 17 and played a game behind closed doors while on trial then signed in March 1978. It was fantastic for me as I only lived in a small village at home and thought Coventry was the biggest metropolis in England at the time.

'I lived in Keresley on Brownhill Green Road and moved into digs with Arthur Anstee, the stadium manager of Highfield Road, two doors down from Ray Gooding and Frank McGrellis. I was there for a couple of years and it was a great time growing up. Prior to my stay Graham Oakey was their lodger and he, like me, won the Player of the Year award during his time at the club. I know Arthur was especially proud of this.'

The following season, 1978/79, saw debuts for home-grown talents Paul Dyson and Andy Blair. Dyson made his first team bow at 18 years old prior to Christmas 1978 in a 3-2 win against Everton at Highfield Road, and said, 'I was scouted for Coventry by Jack Hastings, now he was 70 or 80 back then and used to walk everywhere. I played for Birmingham Schools and the West Midlands County side and was then signed on schoolboy forms. When I was an apprentice we were playing in the Floodlit Cup when I did my ankle ligaments in a game at Highfield Road and was out for nine months.

'Even now I can still recall seeing my sock swell up when I got caught in the net and someone landed on me. Then when I was 17 I had a back injury when we were playing a tournament in

Dusseldorf and it started playing up. They stood me up in front of a hosepipe and sprayed freezing cold water on my back to try and fix it but it was no good and I had to go into traction for another lengthy spell out of the game.'

Blair appeared in 25 league games during the course of 1978/79 to replace injured captain Terry Yorath, the Welsh international in his final season at the club. 'I was lucky enough to get selected for Warwickshire, as it then was, as the boundaries changed a few years later to West Midlands. Warwickshire included Birmingham and Coventry so I got into the squad which also included Paul Dyson and Garry Thompson,' said Blair.

'I was small at the time and my teacher, Roger Jaques, had to fight my corner to get me into the squad. For the first game I was substitute and then an ever-present, at 15 years old that's where Paul, Garry and I played in the same side. As a result of that the scouts started to appear at matches and I got offered a trial at Coventry and they then luckily signed me on as a schoolboy. At 16, Paul and Garry were offered apprenticeships but I wasn't and I think I was the last one to be taken on that summer.

'The club asked me to go pre-season training with a view to maybe signing but as it turned out they signed me because I worked my socks off to get an apprenticeship. I was a bit lucky to be taken on as they had doubts about me and I'd turned down Jaguar and Rolls-Royce apprenticeships at the time not realising what a mistake it could have been if I hadn't been taken on at Coventry. This was the summer of 1976 where we all signed along with Gary Bannister and were the four from that group who went on to play for the first team.

'You took each hurdle one at a time as you just didn't know any different. I lived at the hostel on £16 a week of which £6 went to my parents. From where we lived I used to catch two buses on a Monday morning if I'd been home for the weekend and we had a great time there, it was hilarious in the club hostel. It was instrumental in the discipline required to be young professionals, ahead of its time, and was all part of being an apprentice professional.

'My two youth coaches, Ernie Machin, who was there for three months, and Colin Dobson I would credit the most for my development at the club. I signed professional forms in mid-to-late 1977 when luckily for me it was a "yes". I made my debut on Saturday 28 October 1978 against Birmingham City I've never looked at any books or stats with regards to this and it was the best day of my professional life. We'd been beaten 7-1 at West Bromwich Albion the week before in the brown kit and, bear in mind, I'd hardly ever trained with the first team.

'In those days, Central League reserve games were also played on a Saturday afternoon and the day before Gordon called me over and said, "You're playing tomorrow, son." I didn't even give it a thought and just assumed it was for the reserves. I said something like, "Yeah, okay then," and he followed up with, "You're playing for the first team." I was in a daze. It was the best 24 hours professionally in my life, the excitement was unprecedented and I never experienced anything like it ever again.

'I replaced Terry Yorath, but it was the emotion and adrenalin of representing the first team having barely trained with them! Honestly and truthfully this was the best moment of my professional life. I had a good run in the team to start with helped by great colleagues around me who guided you along. As a player you don't know how managers think behind the scenes and you don't know the things you know now at the time. In one of my first games I marked Arsenal's Liam Brady at Highfield Road. He was one of the best midfield players at the time and was world class in everything he did that day. Terry Yorath was a very, very good leader of our side and was a huge help to us all as we were making our way in the game.'

Andy's point was echoed by Brian Roberts. 'Yorath's experience was vital among a side with the emphasis on youth and Terry was a real inspiration in and around us. He was my captain when I broke into the first team and a fantastic guy. We were playing on an icy pitch and in those days the referee would come into the dressing room to check your studs rather than on the pitch. We'd all have rubber soles on but then as soon as he'd left the room we'd put the studs on.

‘In those days they were a cork stud and you’d get a pair of pliers and take the top layer off so you’d have three nails sticking out of each stud. This came from Terry’s time at Leeds. We weren’t doing it to injure anyone it just gave you extra grip on the ice. You learnt so much from him on and off the pitch.

‘We were up against Liverpool and Graeme Souness crocked me, I was carried off and thought I’d broken my ankle. As I’m leaving the pitch Terry came over and said, “Don’t worry son, I’ll sort him out.” I watched the highlights later on *Match of the Day* back at the hostel and saw Souness get crunched by Terry. He’d lead and protect us and was such a good guy.’

One of the most important acquisitions was the signing in September 1978 of left-sided midfielder Steve Hunt from New York Cosmos for £40,000. So how does the NASL’s Most Valuable Player in the 1977/78 final against Seattle Sounders, with one goal and an assist, end up at Coventry City? His team-mates at New York Cosmos that day included Pele, Franz Beckenbauer, Carlos Alberto and Giorgio Chinaglia yet Hunt took the plaudits on his final game in the USA before his return to the Midlands.

He explained, ‘I was homesick, that was the main part of it as I’d gone out there at the beginning of my career rather than the end, which most people did back then. I hadn’t really proved myself in England and could have stayed and earned loads of money out there or I could look to make the move back home. Gordon Milne and Ron Wylie came over to see me play and I was suspended! I saw them in the tunnel before the game and told them I wasn’t playing in the game but, shortly afterwards, for a £40,000 transfer fee, I went back home to Birmingham.’

As part of the deal to bring Hunt to Coventry the whole squad travelled to the Big Apple for a friendly fixture against the Cosmos. Mark Hateley retains his memorabilia from the occasion to this day. ‘We played at the New York Cosmos as part of the Steve Hunt transfer and ate at the top of the World Trade Tower,’ he said.

‘I’ve got a Union Jack and Star Spangled Banner signed by Franz Beckenbauer and Pele from the game. Steve Hunt was a great guy and a fabulous crosser of the ball; we had a great

trip over there.' For Brian Roberts the game opened his eyes to the way the USA deliver a show when it came to their sporting events. 'Steve Hunt was a real star at City, that was a fantastic trip when the whole squad went and it was the first time a lot of us had encountered the razzmatazz of the NASL. You got to the stadium and there were fans outside the ground in station wagons having picnics, hours before the game, it was a real event.

'I was playing number two at the time and as you came out on to the pitch there were all the cheerleaders. You then have to go to the middle of the pitch and wave to the crowd and there's a big screen showing you all. It did feel really awkward as it was just so unlike what we were used to in Division One! I met Pele and had a good game then afterwards we ate at the Windows of the World restaurant at the World Trade Center. We were there late afternoon and witnessed New York by afternoon, evening and night. It was an unbelievable place. Warner Brothers owned New York Cosmos at the time and also Studio 54, the best nightclub in the world and told us we could go. Gordon and Ron said we couldn't but all we wanted was to take a look inside, we weren't bothered about having a drink, just wanted to savour the experience but it wasn't to be, unfortunately.'

The game of the season came in March 1979, a 4-3 win over Manchester United at Highfield Road. With Mick Ferguson injured, Garry Thompson continued in the number nine shirt and partnered Ian Wallace up against Gordon McQueen and Martin Buchan. Thompson said, 'We beat Manchester United 4-3 and I played really well against Gordon McQueen. For the year leading up to my debut I was in and around the first-team squad and loved being amongst all the players even though I was their whipping boy. Footballers take up where they leave off, I'm like that with Paul Dyson, Andy Blair and Peter Bodak. We used to call Paul "Jack the Giant" as he used to have sideburns, the 'tache, all the stuff we were trying to grow.

'Alan McNally is one of my best mates, I won't see him for six months and then we'll carry on like we were at Villa. This is why the Legends Days are so good at Coventry. Last year I saw Ian Wallace and Barry Powell and all they did from the moment

I sat down was give me stick. When I was a kid at City that's all they did and they've gone back 30 years. I'm like, "Hang on lads I'm a grown man now!" I think they call it character building. Andy Blair and I were the first to get a footing in the squad along with Ray Gooding then Gary Gillespie, Danny Thomas and all the lads joined us.'

Just over a week later, after scoring the equaliser in a 1-1 draw at Villa Park, a training-ground accident saw Thompson out of the game for nearly a year. He looked back, 'The last goal I scored before I broke my leg in March 1979 was at Villa with a bullet header. We had the day after the game off then went in on Friday for training and, as we were out of the cup, Ron Wylie decided we'd have a practise match with no game on the weekend. There were a couple of trialists on show and one was up against me and he's trying to impress.

'I'm trying to get the game done before the weekend before I'm out on the town and chased a ball down the channel. I could hear him coming and managed to knock it past him then next thing I know I'm on the floor and Jim Holton was telling me not to look at my leg, so, naturally, I looked at it and passed out. The pain hit me and they couldn't get me to Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital by ambulance so had to put me in the groundsman's estate car. He drives me there, so I'm in my kit on a stretcher in casualty where people are walking by and I can hear, "Is that Garry Thompson? Would you mind signing this?" and I was in agony!

'I'd snapped my bones in three places and they were going to put a pin in it but Mr Aldridge, the sports surgeon, forced them to do it another way to help me. They couldn't operate straight away which gave him time to work his magic, so then I had the operation and was out for 11 months. I thought as soon as the plaster came off I could train again and get ready for matches, but how wrong could you be?

'George Dalton, our physiotherapist, was magnificent with me. He kept saying my leg was going to be like a twig and I'd have to rebuild the muscles and learn to walk again. My Mum and Dad thought it was career over but, the way I think about it

now, I was so lucky because there weren't that many options for me and I had to play football. George's own career was ended by injury. He was a very good footballer when he trained with us so, when I broke my leg, he really took care of me and was superb.

'I couldn't thank him enough and all George had was the sponge and two machines in the treatment room, the electric currents and the ultrasound, that was it. He worked miracles down the years with players and if it wasn't for him I would not have played until I was 37. I owe him a lot.'

Garry's praise for Dalton was echoed by Paul Dyson, who spent prolonged periods in the treatment room with ankle and back injuries during his teenage years. 'George was a real character, we all had a lot of time for him and he tended a lot of us through our respective injuries. He used to drive us to the hospital in his Morris 1100 and had a great left foot. He'd played left-back for Newcastle United before his own career was ended by injury. There were the two machines in his room and he used to have ice cubes on sticks in his freezer.'

By contrast, Tommy Hutchison was very rarely in the treatment room, 'I never saw much of George as I was always out on the pitch and never injured! He was a smashing lad, George, very old-school. He suffered no fools and could always tell if a player was injured or not. In our days broken legs did finish careers, along with knee ligament injuries, and George rehabilitated so many players at Coventry. There was no squad rotation as you wanted to stay in the team and play every week because if you didn't someone else would step in to take your place and you wouldn't be able to get back in.'

For Andy Blair, being surrounded by seasoned professionals off the pitch was a huge help to the side. 'George was a great physiotherapist, a terrific calming influence and a great man to have around. Gordon and Ron were chalk and cheese as people, and the backroom staff also included John Sillett who was with the youth team. These were experienced professionals, good people, working with us.'

Along with Hutchison, one man who also spent hardly any time in the treatment room was Mick Coop. In all his years at

City the worst injury of note was a pulled hamstring, so his time with George was minimal. He said, 'George really was a lovely man who worked injured players very hard in the gym to get them back on to the pitch. He was very quiet but did his job well and garnered a lot of respect off the playing squad. I can't speak highly enough of him.'

A 3-0 win over Wolves on the final day of the 1978/79 season saw the number nine shirt frequented by another debutant, 17-year-old Mark Hateley, who had started his career under the tutelage of Brian Clough at Nottingham Forest. Hateley's father, Tony, had joined the Sky Blues in 1968 from Liverpool for £80,000. Tony appeared 20 times and found the net on five occasions during his 12 months at the club.

Mark used to watch his dad play at Coventry as a six-year-old, sat in the stand with a bag of crisps, glued to the action. He takes up his own story of how he arrived at Highfield Road. 'It all started after I did a pre-season at Nottingham Forest with Brian Clough. I was 15 at the time and it was the year before I left school. Being tall I coped well, could do all the running and soon got a few games under my belt. The next season I'd left school and did another pre-season with the likes of John McGovern and the soon-to-be European Cup-winning squad.

'It went well for me and I'd arrived at the point where I had to knock on Brian Clough's door and see if I was going to be offered an apprenticeship. I knocked, walked in and before I could even sit down he simply told me to go and get a job with the council as I would never make a footballer. Right there and then, at nine o'clock in the morning. That was my first setback and I was physically sick. I went straight across to Coventry where Gordon Milne watched me play and within five minutes offered me a two-year apprenticeship which I signed straight away. Danny Thomas and I signed professional forms in November 1978 on the same day, as we both had our 17th birthdays in the same month.

'It was an absolute gem for any young player to be coming through the ranks at Coventry at that time and it was just a shame the board didn't want to back the ambition of the managers in the later years of our time at the club. We had a great young

side there that, kept together, could have gone on and done some wonderful things. I moved into the club hostel when I signed my apprenticeship and then moved into digs when I turned professional, just a couple of minutes walk from Highfield Road. I was in a group with Danny Thomas, Garry Thompson, Tom English, Peter Bodak, David Barnes and Steve Jacobs [amongst others] with a fantastic camaraderie.'

Steve Jacobs hailed from West Ham, was a Hammers fan, and lived close to Upton Park. He along with many others was spotted by Derek Woods, the club scout based in London. Steve said, 'I'm sure Derek was also responsible for bringing Les Sealey to the club. We had a Sunday morning side, an excellent team, myself, Nicky Phillips, Steve Whitton, Kevin Cooper, Cliff Mead and Tony Mercer. We all came to the club via Derek and would train on a Thursday evening on a cinder pitch in Bromley-on-Bow. It was a Coventry City training night in the East End.

'Derek eventually took over our Sunday side, as he wanted to keep us all together, and we went up to Coventry in the school holidays before we all signed en masse as apprentices. We all stayed in the club hostel and were looked after by Bert and Joan, two lovely people. To say they did well to calm us London lads down was an understatement! Gordon Milne helped me to settle in, being away from home, and along with Ron Wylie they gave me my chance. I signed professional after a year as an apprentice doing all the jobs as we joined the first-team squad.

'I went into digs with Clive Haywood and then Steve Murcott, who was commuting from Birmingham each day. He got fed up with the driving so, when Clive moved on, Steve and I decided to share digs and then David Barnes joined us shortly afterwards and we all lived in Tile Hill North with our landlord, Alf, his wife and their family. Prior to our arrival Don Nardiello and Graham Oakey had stayed with them. I ended up staying there until I left the club in 1984.

'A few years ago I travelled back to Coventry to surprise Alf at his 80th birthday. I'd kept in contact with the family after I left and walked in with my wife after the party had started and he was in tears when he saw me. The whole family were City fans

and I'd help them out with tickets for the games. Their youngest lad used to iron my suit for me on a Friday night before a game for which I'd give him a couple of quid! They were lovely people and I'm still in contact to this day.'

The summer of 1979 had seen big spending at Highfield Road. In came club record signing Gary Collier, a centre-half from Bristol City for £325,000. He would appear just twice in sky blue before the middle of September and departed in the spring of 1980 for Portland Timbers of the NASL for the staggering fee of £365,000, an amazing profit for the club. Collier had been a Sky Blue for just nine months, played matches at Stoke City and Liverpool, conceded seven goals and never ran out at Highfield Road.

The Bristolian is still spoken of very highly in the West Country. He exercised 'freedom of contract' which was introduced in 1978 when the Professional Footballers Association (PFA) announced a player's right to move at the end of his contract would be fully recognised. Combined with Norman Hunter's retirement, these were key factors in the Robins' relegation to Division Two in 1980.

Managed by former Sky Blues assistant manager Alan Dicks, Collier's departure irked him so much he signed six of his squad on 11-year contracts to offset any further departures and maintain control. Bristol City were annoyed they hadn't been able to cash in on a player they had invested time and money in, and Coventry were not the club many at Ashton Gate saw as his future destination.

After relegation the best players had to be sold and by 1982/83 the team lined up in Division Four. They were 10 minutes from folding when eight players tore up their long-term contracts for a combined compensation of £58,000 to save the club and have ever since been known as the 'Ashton Gate Eight'.

Along with Collier, Everton centre-half David Jones was bought for £250,000 from Everton. They would play together only once, on the opening day of the season at Stoke City, when City lost 3-2.

In his second full season at the club, Gary Gillespie collected the Player of the Year trophy. He was not selected for the opening

game of the season at Stoke but quickly replaced Collier in the number six shirt and missed just two league games all season, alongside first Jim Holton and then Paul Dyson. There were debuts in 1979/80 for Tom English, Steve Whitton, Danny Thomas, Nicky Phillips, David Barnes and goalkeeper Steve Murcott.

After a brief taste of first-team action the previous May there were further outings for Mark Hateley, 'Coventry gave me everything and provided the chance and opportunity to develop. I played left-wing most of the time with Garry Thompson, Mick Ferguson and Ian Wallace around and it was hard to get them out of the side. A lot of young lads played in different positions in that era and a lot of this was due to the ability of the coaches. During training sessions we were encouraged to play in other roles, they were ahead of their time when you see the coaching nowadays.

'When I joined AC Milan they were exactly the same; the ethos in training was similar and you have to take your hat off to Gordon, Ron Wylie and then Dave Sexton who was a great coach. They showed us all the ropes, developed our games and were terrific with the younger players.'

Danny Thomas came to the club via his brothers who were training with City at that time. He explained, 'I had an older brother, Val, who was on trial at Coventry four years older than me and went on to become an apprentice. I also had another brother in between the two of us who was on trial and they asked if he had any other brothers who could come over for trial. It all went from there.

'Every time I went over to train I would meet up with Tom English and Garry Thompson, who was a couple of years older. The scout who used to collect me from where I lived in Worksop, Nottinghamshire, came down from Newcastle each time and in the car when I got in was Chris Waddle, also on trial in the school holidays. Chris wasn't offered an apprenticeship as they said he was too small – at the time he was 16 and 5ft 4in tall.

'However, the next time I saw him he was 6ft 1in and a fantastic footballer and when I signed for Spurs in 1983 we became teammates. Bob Dennison was then chief scout at Coventry and he co-ordinated my arrival at the club.

'As Mark mentioned, we signed professional forms on the same day in November 1978. My full debut came against West Bromwich Albion in the League Cup, September 1979, we lost 2-1 at The Hawthorns and I wore the number four shirt in midfield. Three days later I replaced Steve Whitton, making his debut, in a 1-1 draw with Spurs at Highfield Road for my league bow.

'I began my career as a midfielder player and we were playing up at Maine Road when Gary Gillespie was injured so Mick Coop moved to cover him and then I dropped to right-back. Was it a natural switch? I played right-back as a midfielder player! My instinct was to go forward, almost absent without leave if you like! It was a good switch in some respects because whenever I was going forward I was moving on to the ball, whereas in midfield I'd receive the ball with back to goal. This made it easier for me as my natural momentum would take me forward.'

In that same season, Jimmy Hill brought John Sillett back to the club to combine coaching the youth sides with scouting duties. Sillett had been part of Hill's revolution and played in the 1964 Division Three championship-winning side. After retirement he became youth coach at Bristol City before his first managerial role at Hereford United in 1974. Two seasons later he took them into Division Two and stayed at the club until 1978.

'I was mainly brought in to work with the youth teams, almost the third team if you like, lads such as Steve Jacobs, Peter Bodak, Mark Hateley, Tom English and Danny Thomas,' he said.

'Ron Wylie worked with the first team squad and Gordon, while I worked with the younger lads. Bert Edwards and I worked together a lot of the time and he was responsible for a lot of young players joining the club. He had a great scouting policy in place and the scouts were good at their job which wasn't always the case. If there were any players he wasn't sure about he'd pass the scout to me to deal with.

'I had a different approach to coaching, I used to want them to enjoy their work and not have a routine in place. I wanted to keep it varied. If I had to crack the whip I did but, on the whole, I had good groups of players who were keen to learn and progress. To see those players develop as they did was superb and I had a

great deal of pride that something had been achieved. He was fantastic, Gordon Milne, ahead of his time.

'I learnt a lot from him; he was the type of man who wouldn't rush into things and panic, he'd find a solution. I was also scouting the first team's opposition and would report back to Gordon and Ron Wylie. When I'd go to a game my match programme would be covered with notes I'd made. I'd assess what formation they'd adopt, did their wingers hug the touchline or did they tuck in close to the central midfield players? If they tucked in it would create space for us to overlap down the wings so Brian Roberts and Mick Coop could take advantage.

'I'd look at various signals for free kicks and corners and what it all signified. Then you had free kicks around the penalty area, what little moves did they have to try and create an opportunity? The obvious one was to spot strengths and weaknesses in individual players and how we could capitalise on this with our game plan.

'I'd go home and write up all of my notes then, on the Friday before the game, we'd sit in the office and every piece of information would be discussed in preparation for the following day. They would speak with the players Saturday lunchtime in the pre-match chat to ensure they were in a position to use the information to our benefit out on the pitch. Nothing would fluster Gordon, he was very calm and collected, very professional and extremely thorough.'

On a famous day at Highfield Road in December 1979, Mick Ferguson scored all four goals in a 4-1 win against Ipswich Town, no mean feat against their central defensive pairing of Russell Osman and Kevin Beattie. They were flanked in the full-back positions by Terry Butcher and George Burley with Paul Cooper in goal. The fixture also saw Ferguson have stitches inserted into a knee wound at half-time, while Bobby Robson had tried to sign the big number nine two days prior to the fixture.

Mick became the first Sky Blues player since 1959 to score four goals in a league match and no other player would repeat the feat in the eventual 34 years spent in the top division. He reflected, 'My goals are a great memory for me, especially the

four against Ipswich. Bobby Robson had commented in the week prior to the game, "If this boy scores against my team I'll sign him." After we won 4-1 I walked past him in the corridor and heard him asked if he was going to be true to his word. His reply was, "No comment." I've still got the goals on video at home, there's no footage to be found elsewhere but it's a moment I always remember.'

There was further spending in the spring of 1980 to bring Cologne's Belgian international winger Roger Van Gool to the club for £250,000. Van Gool, 29, had tormented European champions Nottingham Forest in the previous season's semi-final at the City Ground and had pedigree after four years in the Bundesliga and two campaigns prior with Belgian side Bruges. He had spent his time in Germany as one of their two foreign signings alongside Yasuhiko Okudera, who became the first Japanese footballer to play professionally in Europe. Along with Van Gool, he netted at the City Ground in the 1978/79 semi-final first leg. Footage of Van Gool features along with Mick Ferguson's header in the same Nottingham Forest documentary on their European Cup and league title success. His opening goal in the first leg and subsequent miss to make it 3-0 before half-time allowed Clough's men to level the tie at 3-3 with the away leg to follow.

He said, 'We played too defensive at home in the second leg and they scored with a header from a corner with 25 minutes left. We thought we were already in the final after the 3-3 draw but in football it doesn't always work out as planned.

'I played three seasons at Cologne as a regular where we had a very good team and won the Bundesliga in 1978. I then picked up an injury and we had just the two foreign players, so when I was in hospital and out for six months they bought Tony Woodcock from Forest to make it three. Our coach, Hennes Weisweiler, left for New York Cosmos at the end of the season and asked me to go with him as he needed a winger. I promised him I'd go but two weeks later I started training again after my serious injury and an agent called me and told of the interest from an English team, Coventry City, who were in the top division. I told him I'd

promised to go to New York so he asked if I'd signed anything to which I replied I hadn't and asked me to talk to Weisweiler.

'We spoke and he said, "Roger, go to England, go and play in the top division, you can always go back to America." At that time I was nearly 30, so I met the agent and went to London where we saw Jimmy Hill and Gordon Milne and I signed the contract.'

Ian Wallace, for the third season running, was leading scorer for Milne's men, his partnership with Mick Ferguson again proving highly fruitful for the City faithful. With the continued development of Gillespie, Dyson, Hateley, Blair, Gooding, Garry Thompson's return from a year out with a broken leg and the goalkeeping rivalry between Jim Blyth and Les Sealey, Milne's team displayed plenty of promise.

It was the continued progress of the side that Andy Blair remembers, along with playing for his home-town side, 'The fantastic camaraderie of that young group of players, the bond we all developed, was tremendous. I was playing for a club I didn't support as a kid as even though I went to watch Coventry all the time, Leeds United were my side growing up. I used to talk to Terry Yorath about them and must have driven him crackers the amount I used to ask. My ideal midfield player was a cross between Billy Bremner and Johnny Giles, the perfect combination in my eyes.

'I watched Coventry from the mid-1960s and used to stand on a stool when it was all standing as I couldn't see! I'd never miss a game through to the mid-1970s at Highfield Road. To get trials for, and go on to play for, Coventry City – it couldn't get any better for me. They were my home-town club and for a young lad I don't think it gets any better than that.'

Thompson returned to training from his 11 month lay-off as Roger Van Gool joined the club. He remembers, 'Every day, Ron Wylie would come into training and say, "What's going on, the sick, the lame, the lazy, the Thompson." He'd talk about me as if I wasn't there! I'd say, "I'm actually here, Gaffer!" Every time I was injured he made my life a misery, reverse psychology if you like to get me back playing as quickly as possible. And it worked.'

Brian Roberts also looks back at the clever way Milne and Wylie utilised him in the team, 'Gordon Milne was canny, along with Ron Wylie, I was in and out of the team for a while so I'd go and see Gordon who'd tell me I was doing well but that Ron thought I needed a rest. I'd then go and see Ron who'd say he was for picking me but it was Gordon who thought I needed time out!

'Gordon Milne's team talks were legendary as he'd come out with all of these sayings, "I can take you out the house and into the orchard and I'll point out where the apples are but it's up to you to go and grab them." I said to him once in a team meeting that, "You could take a horse to water but it must be led!" He was a good guy, Gordon, and I enjoyed playing in his sides.'