



Neil Fitzsimon

A DEEPER SHADE OF BLUE

Eddie McCreadie's
Blue and White Army
and a False Dawn

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LOOKING BACK after all these years, you can't say that the signs weren't there for Chelsea Football Club. The crushing blow of going out of the FA Cup to Second Division Orient in the 1972 fifth-round tie at Brisbane Road had been a humiliation. Having thrown away a two-goal lead in that game was bad enough, but just one week later Chelsea, who had been massive favourites to lift their third trophy in as many years, surprisingly lost the League Cup Final 2-1 to a Stoke City side that eventually finished the season in the lower half of the First Division, which was nothing short of a disaster for the Blues. The air of invincibility that had enshrined the players and supporters was gone. The sunshine and blue clouds that had shone over Stamford Bridge had now been replaced by the threat of a storm that would last for a quarter of a century with only brief glimpses of the light that had shone so brightly.

Yet in that summer of 1972, I, like many other Chelsea fans, thought that that defeat to Stoke was merely a blip. I remember getting a brochure sent to my home from the club, outlining the plans for the brand-new East Stand and the total redevelopment of the Bridge. At the time it looked

great. I had gone to the last home game of the 1971/72 season when we had beaten Stoke, of all teams, 2-0. It was a routine win. What we all would have given to have had that result at Wembley against the same opponents just a few weeks earlier.

After that victory there was a pitch invasion as loads of kids wanted to celebrate our win that night, and also to take a last look at the beautifully quaint East Stand before the bulldozers came in the following day. It was a shame that they were demolishing that historic edifice. It had been designed by Archibald Leitch, the great Scottish architect who was responsible for some of the finest stands ever built in this country, but time, as they say, moves on and the board had decided that a three-tier super-stand was the way to go. It was, in retrospect, a project that almost put the club out of existence.

On the spur of the moment that night, me, Steve Gallagher and Wally decided to join in with the masses crowding on to the pitch. So, for the one and only time, I trod the hallowed turf of Stamford Bridge. To be honest, I was quite surprised at the dip in the penalty area at the Shed end, compared to the level of the ground towards the touchline. From where I used to stand on the terraces in front of the tea bar, the pitch always looked to me like a perfect playing surface. Somewhere among the melee, Wally had found a tennis ball. What it was doing there, God only knows. He quickly got in goal at the Shed end, and then threw the ball to me.

This was it. This was my chance to score at the legendary Shed end. I duly smacked the ball past Wally, high into the roof of the net. My celebrations were cut short by Steve shoving me out of the way and saying, 'My turn!' But before he could take his once-in-a-lifetime shot, a groundsman had spotted us and in no polite manner told us to fuck off! We were then chased off the pitch. I left in a high state of excitement after

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scoring at the Shed end, while Gallagher was extremely pissed off that he had missed his golden opportunity.

There was another invasion at the opening game at the Bridge in August 1972. Every time Chelsea scored at the Shed end that day, thousands of kids would run on to the pitch. Seeing that me and Gallagher were now going to the games with a bunch of blokes who were in their mid-20s, we thought better of joining in; not wanting to appear as a couple of snotty-nosed 17-year-old kids. I remember after that game, there was a warning in the programme that the reduced boys' admission prices would be scrapped if this behaviour happened again. Instead, all boys would have to pay the same as the adults. They needn't have worried and there would be no more pitch invasions that season. In fact, the only exodus would be the crush of people trying to get away from what they were watching on the pitch.

Another thing I remember from that Stoke game was that the comedian Harry Worth was sitting opposite me on the train up to Euston. Harry was famous for being a bumbling, loveable fool in his TV series where, in the opening titles, he performed an optical illusion of standing sideways next to a plate glass shop window and lifting one leg and one arm, so that the reflection would look like he was doing a star jump. Hard to imagine, I know, but that is what passed for entertainment in those days. Harry, it must be said, looked far from loveable that day on the train. The people in our carriage had obviously recognised him, as I had, but Harry had a look on his face that seemed to say, 'Fuck off and leave me alone.' And so the journey to Euston passed with the usual, natural English reserve, of embarrassment and total silence.

This was also the day that I had decided to wear my Royal Brogues complete with Blakeys fitted in the heel.

Blakeys were the height of fashion in those days. They were supposed to be heel protectors for your shoes. They consisted of a horseshoe-shaped strip of metal that you hammered in to the heel to stop the wear and tear of everyday use. However, that was not the reason why blokes of my age wore them. They produced a lovely clicking sound with every step which seemed to add a certain swagger and bravado to the youths of that era. Of course, I was also wearing the obligatory thin, luminescent socks that were de rigueur in those days. It was, in hindsight, a terrible decision.

By the time I had walked from the platform on to the concourse at Euston, my new Brogues were bloody crippling me, but somehow I struggled on. How, I do not know, as my journey to the ground that night included a walk from Pimlico, near Victoria Station where Steve lived, followed by another excruciating trek back after the game. It must have been youthful bravado and bluster that carried me through. How I got through the pain barrier to actually rifle that tennis ball into the net at the Shed end, I will never know.

On the walk back to Pimlico that night with my thin, pathetic socks offering no protection whatsoever, I could barely hobble across the road. At one stage, Gallagher and Wally raced ahead of me and got to the other side of the main drag in front of the Royal Chelsea Pensioners' home, when I stupidly tried to follow them. I was then caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. I had no choice – I had to run for it. It was complete bloody agony. And then to top it all, I slid on the metal Blakeys and turned my ankle over. Gallagher and Wally found this extremely funny, while I was lying on the pavement clutching my ankle, but suddenly a beam of sunshine appeared in my cloud of darkness; perhaps I wouldn't have to go to school tomorrow, but, hang on, wait a minute. No school meant

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not being allowed out to play football down the fields with my mates the following night.

So, in truth, that was the only reason that I hobbled into school the following day, with my ankle heavily strapped up by my mum. Though my ankle was still sore and tender after school, nothing would stop me from making my nightly pilgrimage to the fields. So, in the end, that teenage folly of trying to impress my mates with my brand-new shoes had cost me dearly. The painful experience I had endured that night meant that that was the only time I ever wore my Royal Brogues, and let me tell you, at the time, they were bloody expensive. My poor mum, who had forked out for them, was repaid for her kindness by my throwing them into a cupboard, never to see the light of day again.