

DAVID SNOWDON

A FISTFUL OF DOLDRUMS

View From the
North East Hotbed
1977-1979



Contents

Full of North-Eastern Promise	9
The Unravelling	9
Feet of Clay; the Fall of a Messiah	12
Heartbreak Time (Phase One)	19
The Thinker-Man?	20
The Cruel Hope	23
A Woman Wept Silently	26
Post-Mortem and Inquest	28
Post Traumatic Daze Disorder	29
Any Further Business Gentlemen?	30
World of Sport Keeps Turning	32
The Green, Green Grass of England?	35
Deals, Bids and Bluffs in Summer Poker.	37
Back in the Saddle	39
Warming Up (or Not, in Sunderland's Case).	42
Signs of Premature Stagnation	44
Crash! Back to Reality	47
Old Stagers to the Fore	52
September Songs (but Roker Band Out of Tune).	53
Something Better Change	56
The Multilayered Football Cake	62
Lights Out; Everybody Out; Riot and Revolution	77
Never a Dull Moment	79
New and Old Faces Through Revolving Doors	82
December Days	89
Tidings of Comfort and Joy; or Humbug?	101
1978 and All That	105
The Desponds	109
Bunches of Fives	113
A Gloomy February	119
Getting Hitched	124
March(ing) Out of Step	130
Dull with Dreary Intervals (or Flatlining Football)	135
Men of Principle?	146

Big Finish (or ‘Pump it Up, When You Don’t Really Need it!’)	.149
Late-Blooming May-flowers	.158
Hive of Activity; But All Quiet on the Roker Front	.165
Sending the Snowball in Motion	.170
Ready for Another Go?.	.176
Fresh Start, or Repeat?	.182
One Step Forward, One Step Back.	.191
Wacky and Whacking Days	.202
No Let-Up in Heat	.209
The Phoney War Continues	.217
‘But in the End, You Could Not Deliver’ (Bye-Bye)	.219
Chasing the Impossible Dream.	.222
In Limbo Land Waiting for Plan B	.228
Tuning In to Plan C	.237
Going on the F-Plan Diet	.240
Assembling the G-Plan Kit	.245
Not Feeling Fine in 79	.250
Start-Stop; Stop-Start	.254
Big-Game Hunting.	.264
Creating a Piece of Folklore	.271
Sour Milk, and Alcohol	.275
On the March	.277
Hold the Line.	.291
Nerves that Jingle-Jangle	.298
Easter Egg Jarped.	.306
Jekyll and Hyde.	.313
Bravehearts	.321
Mopping Up	.328
Brisk Business (but Not at Roker Limbo-Land)	.330
Circus Still in Town (Send for the Clowns)	.337
The Seventh (Eighth or Ninth?) Choice	.339
Roker Review.	.345
Bad Case of Loving You	.349
Acknowledgements	.351
Bibliography	.352

*Doldrums: A period of stagnation;
a state of low spirits; feeling of
boredom or depression.*

*'It was the worst of times; it was
the best of times. It was a winter
and spring of hope; it was a winter
and spring of discontent. They
were seasons of darkness; they were
seasons of light.'*

(As Dickens may have put it if he had
written *A Tale of Two Seasons*)

*'A huge club. It was such
an exciting team. It was
a privilege to play for
Sunderland; and with that
comes expectation.'*

Gary Rowell 2024

*'The inane pointlessness of all this existence
[...] of going on & on & on; for no reason
[...] And I know that I must go on doing
this dance on hot bricks till I die.'*

Virginia Woolf

Full of North-Eastern Promise

A sunny Easter Saturday in April and Roker Park was heaving as 51,983 watched Bob Stokoe's Sunderland see off the challenge of fellow promotion-chasing Bolton Wanderers 2-1 to secure a long-awaited return to the First Division. Lustre was added to the achievement seven days later when the final Saturday of the 1975/76 season saw the team produce a perfunctory 2-0 victory over Ian St John's relegated Portsmouth to earn the title of Second Division champions. Optimism prevailed and all seemed set fair.

Yet, for manager Stokoe, the overriding emotion had not been joyous exultation but, instead, a massive sense of relief at avoiding failure. The Sunderland public had conferred a Messiahship on him after he had taken over Alan Brown's strugglers in November 1972 and led them first to safety and then on an almost unbelievable FA Cup run that culminated in a glorious 1-0 triumph at Wembley over the much-vaunted Leeds United, Ian Porterfield's strike denying Don Revie's favourites. But Stokoe had felt the intense pressure of needing to follow up that surprise and joyous feat with the promotion back to the top flight that a massive and expectant support craved. The pressure had begun to have an impact on his health, recurrent migraines inclining him to miss a handful of matches during the past championship-winning campaign. Looking beneath the surface of this apparent moment of success, there had been troubled waters.

The Unravelling

Storm clouds had been seeded in no small part almost a couple of months earlier by Stokoe's unfathomable decision to dispense with the services of respected and assiduous coach Arthur Cox and to bring in the more ebullient (but also abrasive) Ian MacFarlane from Manchester City. The

timing was also bizarre, Sunderland being well on course to attain their primary promotion objective. A bitterly disappointing home exit in the sixth round of the FA Cup to Malcolm Allison's Third-Division Crystal Palace when a semi-final place appeared theirs for the taking had cast a temporary despondency on the springtime run-in, but there appeared no need for any change in what had proved a winning formula. After experiencing a more than satisfactory working partnership with Cox, Stokoe now took it into his head that the two men were too similar (adopting a relatively understated, non-melodramatic manner in managing and coaching their players) and felt that a brasher personality would grate some beneficial sparks.

Chairman Keith Collings was moved to question Stokoe's wisdom in wanting to part ways with the accomplished coach who had played such a major role in both the club's 1973 cup triumph and the nearing return to the First Division. If the chairman was concerned about replacing a principal cog in the coaching machinery, then the players were positively dumbfounded and heavy-hearted. In the middle of March, a group of first-teamers arrived at the home of Cox to present him with an inscribed gold watch, an action that obviously moved their former mentor. 'That came out of the blue and gives me more pride than any cup final medal. I don't think I shall ever wear the watch. It means too much. I'm keeping myself fit in the hope that I can get a job quickly. Maybe I'll come back to Sunderland with a team of my own. I'd like that.'

Returning to the post-promotion goings-on at the club, the players barely had time to savour the afterglow before they were expected to set forth on a lengthy tour of Australasia, book-ended by visits to Tahiti and Singapore. That the club had committed to such a tiring trek appeared a misguided decision, ensuring that the squad would not benefit from an extended period of recuperation ahead of the

demanding task of consolidating their place in the top flight. Even a celebratory photo session at Roker was negatively impacted by the imminent trip and the special 'The Lads Who Won Promotion' squad picture that appeared in the *Sunderland Echo* suffered from a sense of incompleteness as Stokoe and young attacking midfielder Gary Rowell missed the photocall after both suffered reactions to the round of inoculations undertaken ahead of the flight abroad.

One man who would not have to travel was popular striker Vic Halom, who had been earmarked as one of the first of the faithful old guard to be chivvied out of the exit doors. No longer part of Stokoe's plans, Halom had been free to accompany Sunderland youth club Lambton Street Boys Fellowship to a tournament in Belgium, the in-demand centre-forward agreeing to a £25,000 move to Oldham Athletic on his return. Significantly, it had been left to Stokoe's assistant, Peter Doherty, to update the press, with the boss being reported as 'taking a break from the game'. Ultimately, it transpired that it was not merely the temporary malaise induced by the inoculations that was affecting Stokoe and the party of players that flew out to the Far East were overseen by MacFarlane, whose sphere of influence was fast expanding.

Could any other matters taint the taste of the promotion champagne for supporters? Well, the same week's newspaper headline would do for starters: '35% Rise at Roker Too Much.' The club had announced new season ticket charges of £32 and £30, which would mean that fans would be paying more than supporters at nearby St James' Park or Ayresome Park. The district secretary of the General & Municipal Workers' Union, Bill Porter, commented on such profiteering: 'Of course, they need money for new players, but I don't believe the working-class supporter should be extorted to this extent in order to get them.' In response,

Sunderland AFC secretary John Phillips made a startling claim: 'People have been asking if that's all they'll have to pay and have said they were surprised the prices had not gone up more.' (Had they indeed?)

From the professional preparation angle, the initial standard of opposition being faced thousands of miles away did not augur well for preparing players for the upgrade in standard to come in August, the team opening their tour with a crushing 5-1 victory over Pacific Games champions Tahiti in Papeete. The match had been played in draining temperatures up in the mid-80s and watched by a crowd of 5,000 (large by Tahitian standards). The reports coming through indicated it had been little more than a practice session for Sunderland, who had been far stronger than the opposition. In short, the team eventually concluded an undefeated tour in early June (six weeks after their final league match of the season), meaning some players had been playing competitively for almost 11 months.

Feet of Clay; the Fall of a Messiah

After a shorter summer break than usual, the players returned to training at the end of July. When pictured standing together in the gym, it could be seen that forward Mel Holden was sporting a beard even more luxurious than that of long-hirsute team-mate Roy Greenwood. Full-back Dick Malone and forward Billy Hughes had also returned with similar growth; a topic that would soon cause internal consternation.

The close proximity of the new season focused thoughts on the distinct absence of any squad strengthening ahead of the stiff challenge awaiting. Charlton Athletic rebuffed Stokoe's approach for Derek Hales and, as well as a forward in the mould of the departed Halom, Stokoe had made 'several enquiries' for a defender and midfielder. His lack

of progress had not received the glare it might have done as much of the North East media had been preoccupied by the big transfer story of the summer: Newcastle's controversial sale of fans' favourite hotshot Malcolm Macdonald to Arsenal for £333,000.

The squad returned from a three-game winning mini-tour of Sweden in mid-August and started to prepare for the final pre-season Saturday, when Roker played host to Dublin-based outfit Shelbourne. Having already rejected one of his victorious FA Cup team as being superfluous to requirements, Stokoe now seemed to be manoeuvring Wembley goal hero Porterfield out of the club, omitting the midfield schemer from the 14-man squad. A pedestrian 3-0 win over the Irish team did little to relieve uneasiness about a lack of reinforcements, with Stokoe offering no immediate hope in that area: 'The general state of the market has not been helpful, but if we can get the hungry feeling back into the hearts of the players then I'll still be confident.' It seemed strange to imply that, with the prospect of tasting First Division fare after a wait of five long seasons, the players might be lacking the motivational levels one might anticipate. It posed the question whether the arduous tour of Australia had created a partial sense of burnout.

A few days later saw the club's pre-season photocall, but the squad lined up without Greenwood after Stokoe deemed it 'important' that everyone appeared 'smart at the start of the season'. How a well-maintained beard was deemed to not be smart is a moot point. The boss had informed players that any bearded players would not be included in the official picture. Malone, Holden and Hughes went along with the manager's dictum but, strangely, Stokoe's decree had included long-time wearer Greenwood who, of course, was a beardie when Stokoe signed him in January. The disappointed player understandably declined to comply with

such a trivial and arbitrary directive and was banished from being in front of the media cameras, later commenting that he had been 'warned by some of the lads' when he arrived at the club that 'beards were frowned upon' but 'didn't take it seriously'. That the player's beard would not preclude him from team selection merely underscored the bizarrely inconsistent nature of the photo ban.

On a similar tack, former FA Cup-winning team member Dennis Tueart later recalled having incurred Stokoe's displeasure for turning up as part of the squad to pick up the team of the year award on the 1973 BBC *Sports Personality of the Year* show wearing an open-necked shirt. A stickler for such things, Stokoe had later upbraided Tueart for his casualness in not wearing a tie and told him that such things reflected poorly on the club. Tueart was subsequently dropped, with Stokoe telling the press that the forward had a sore throat. The fictitious (faintly droll) reason his manager had issued left the star in little doubt about what had prompted his omission and, overall, Tueart felt that it had been a display of pettiness and poor man-management.

On the eve of the new season, Stokoe had predicted that experienced Scottish centre-back Bob Moncur could have a positive effect on his team's bid to stabilise themselves in the top flight, citing QPR's Frank McLintock and Liverpool's Tommy Smith as examples of 'veterans' still imparting a significant influence long after many had said they 'were finished'. Stokoe said: 'You can never take the experience and professionalism away from men like these. The supporters got it right when they voted him [Moncur] our player of the year. They're not mugs. You can cite various examples of players who've been written off but still do great jobs.' It might be argued that Stokoe had been guilty of 'writing off' the influence that Halom and Porterfield could still have exerted. In a few short weeks, that list of experienced and

dependable servants to be similarly hastened out of the exit doors would more than double.

After the first two league matches finished goalless, Stokoe was declaring: 'There'll be no panic buys. What we've done, or haven't done, doesn't give me much cause for concern. We're going to have to get about a dozen under our belts before we can start to get an accurate picture.' Despite that assertion, two players, defender Jim Holton and attacker Alan Foggon, were drafted in from Manchester United after only six games. Moreover, neither player arrived in optimum condition to be thrust straight into a struggling first team. Scottish international Holton had recently battled back to fitness following bad leg breaks and Foggon had only signed at Old Trafford from a stint in the USA a few weeks earlier and had been discarded by Tommy Docherty without making an appearance.

Holton, after an initial one-month loan, would cost £85,000 and Foggon £45,000. Stokoe had reportedly been allocated further money for team strengthening and the bulk of it soon went on the signing of beefy Leicester City striker Bob Lee, a transfer that primarily took place because the 23-year-old had 'long been admired' by Stokoe's increasingly dominant 'assistant' MacFarlane (the coach having gone overboard on the player when talking to journalists the previous year). Although a hefty fee was expected to be laid out, the mooted figure of £120,000 was an underestimation. Perhaps taking advantage of Sunderland's increasing struggle, the deal turned out to be £190,000.

Ironically, the lower £120,000 sum would have been sufficient to bag Lee's strike partner Frank Worthington, who had apparently been considered. Worthington had just been fined a week's wages (around £150) and placed on the transfer list following some stinging criticism of his team. Securing the nous, flair and proven goalscoring ability of the

former England international, who was still only 27, would surely have proved the better deal for Sunderland. With lanky centre-forward Holden sidelined for several weeks following a cartilage operation, Stokoe pleaded his logic: 'We need someone with height and general physique to play up to.' Yet, that one-dimensional assessment overlooked that there were few better at leading the frontline than the wily Worthington with his subtle flicks and intelligent, incisive distribution.

Arguably, this may have been another instance that endorsed Tueart's view of Stokoe being uncomfortable about managing top-class, self-assured players who possessed a certain presence. Another factor appeared to be the increasing influence being wielded by MacFarlane, who Stokoe had apparently promised would be given his head to collaborate on team selection and recruitment when he joined the club. MacFarlane had been a number one himself, managing Carlisle United for a period between 1970 and 1972 (signing Stan Bowles from Manchester City during his tenure) and was a man with an imposing presence. While MacFarlane was obviously an experienced and capable coach, so was Cox, and Stokoe had by now come to inwardly acknowledge that he had erred in parting ways with the ideal foil whose blend of quiet confidence and calm authority had been tragically undervalued.

The final day of September saw Stokoe completing the signing of Lee, while his official assistant manager (an increasingly nominal title it seemed) Doherty travelled to Lancashire to wrap up the surprise £85,000 capture of Bolton keeper Barry Siddall. Stokoe had previously been making scouting trips to Partick Thistle to monitor Alan Rough and, incidentally, been impressed with the potential of Thistle's young defender Alan Hansen. While obviously considering drafting in a goalkeeper to eventually take over

from Jim Montgomery when the long-serving 33-year-old neared the end of his career, the swoop for Siddall appeared to signal an almost immediate changing of the guardian at Roker.

Stokoe's stipulated dozen game limit had been well and truly rendered meaningless, Sunderland having shipped in four players after completing only eight league fixtures. After months of transfer stagnation, Sunderland had paid out the best part of £400,000 over several hectic days, with Stokoe apparently believing that such expenditure went 'a long way towards proving to the fans that we're having a go'. Sunderland supporters were not convinced, some viewing the flurry of (predominantly) questionable transactions as exactly the panic buying that the manager had declared would not happen. The kitty was now quite bare and some balancing of books was even thought necessary, but that scarcely excused the bizarre decision a couple of weeks later to sell one of the club's existing top-quality players and, gallingly, to a rival in the relegation fight.

Bryan 'Pop' Robson only needed 30 minutes' discussion in London with Ron Greenwood and John Lyall before agreeing to return to West Ham in an £80,000 deal. The prolific forward had been Sunderland's top scorer in the past two seasons since his arrival from Upton Park and the crowd favourite appeared dumbfounded by his departure: 'I'm still shocked that Sunderland agreed to sell me.' Still only 30, Robson had enough faith in his own ability and fitness to know that he could score goals at the top level and one of the primary appealing aspects of the move back to West Ham was his intended role, Lyall astutely recognising that Robson's most effective position was up front. Stokoe had been mystifyingly insisting, following the arrival of expensive signing Lee, that Robson would only be deployed in a deeper attacking role or as an out-and-out midfielder. At

the same time, the very player Stokoe had been championing as the team's potential kingpin for that season, Moncur, was another feeling the effects of the manager's vacillation, the 31-year-old now being viewed as surplus to requirements and being allowed to discuss the vacant manager's role at Carlisle.

Had Stokoe lost his nerve? The manager had turned up for pre-season claiming to be feeling refreshed to tackle the challenge ahead, but subsequent events and decisions had belied that breezy assertion, suggesting that he was finding the task too hot to handle. The Ides of October came and the following day (Saturday, 16 October) a strained Stokoe fielded all four of his purchases against Aston Villa, proceeding to suffer with the rest of a disenchanted Roker crowd as the team laboured before coming a cropper, Alex Cromptley deftly chipping Siddall for the only goal. Although the media and fans did not know it, the aftermath had provoked an immediate reaction, the beleaguered Stokoe handing in his resignation, but being told to attend a special board meeting the following day. Sunday saw directors unable to elicit a change of heart, Stokoe asserting that he felt the players had ceased to respond to him and that he had gone as far as he could with the club. Thus, it came to pass that, only a few weeks after boldly declaring that the state of his team did not give him 'much cause for concern', part of the previous campaign's successful team had been sold or mothballed and now Stokoe himself was gone.

It was not until Monday evening that newspapers conveyed the news, with typical banner headlines of 'STOKOE QUILTS ROKER'. Another board meeting did not disperse until after 11pm, by which time the caretaker role had been assigned to long-time *eminence grise* MacFarlane. The onerous task on Wearside had proved one resurrection too many but, although Stokoe's

Messianic crown had slipped, one wonderful miracle was, for thousands of supporters, more than enough to render them forever grateful to the man who had walked on water in May 1973.

Heartbreak Time (Phase One)

It was no surprise to learn that erstwhile first-team coach MacFarlane had robust designs on making his caretaker position permanent. The board harboured other thoughts, but the managerless situation was allowed to drag on for almost two months as the squad became solidly ensconced in the drop zone. It was now that the opportunity to transform the late-20th-century destiny of Sunderland Football Club was tragically and irretrievably missed, the board managing to balloon the ball over an open goal from a yard out.

Concealed from the glare of press and public, contenders had been whittled down and interviews arranged. Decision day arrived. One man under serious consideration was former Burnley boss Jimmy Adamson, who was available after rejecting the managerial post at Sparta Rotterdam. Despite the early 1970s promise at Turf Moor having evaporated, Adamson retained a reputation as one of the foremost thinkers in the game. However, another, more mouth-watering, frontrunner arrived for his Roker Park appointment – Brian Clough. The club's former prolific centre-forward had been a high-profile ultra-successful presence at Derby County, but his star had waned and become tarnished with ill-advised stints at Leeds United and Brighton. He was now about a year into a new post at Nottingham Forest, but the top job at Sunderland, with its passionate supporters, was the one he had always coveted.

The precise details are muddy, but the interview with Clough proved a difficult one for some directors both to stomach and to retain a sense of much-needed objectivity.

Reminiscences from auxiliary staff at Roker Park (partly furnished to them by one director, in particular) were that Clough had arrived for his interview in a state of mild intoxication. It was also evident that the great man was brimming with an over-confidence that the alcohol simply amplified. It was felt that Clough believed the job was as good as his and that he merely had to turn up – an attitude that had obviously not sat well with the board. And yet, his faux pas was prepared to be overlooked by a couple of directors. Sadly, that was not enough and, in a split 3-2 boardroom vote, Adamson got the nod. This would not be the last time that such a heartbreakingly tight boardroom ballot rejected the services of the best man for the Roker hotseat (see *Give Us Tomorrow Now*).

The Thinker-Man?

Ashington-born Adamson had followed Sunderland as a youngster. He had eventually decided to reject the Sparta offer after visiting the Dutch club and noting a plethora of internal shortcomings. However, an overriding reason for the rejection was supposedly that he could not countenance living as part of a separated family. This proved extremely ironic, as his wife and daughter did not move to join him at Sunderland either, Adamson staying much of the time in the hospitality of Roker director Fred Stewart, and thus creating the very separated situation cited as a primary reason for turning down the move to the Netherlands.

Adamson took over at Sunderland as December dawned and there was not even a dead cat bounce as a run of successive defeats, which had started before he arrived, was extended to nine games and the team floundered in bottom place. Coach MacFarlane was one of the first casualties. Sustained attempts were made to land Burnley players Peter Noble and Brian Flynn but, with rancour existing,

the imposing figure of chairman Bob Lord was determined to ensure Adamson made no headway. A trio of former Burnley players did eventually arrive via indirect routes, defenders Colin Waldron and Mick Docherty coming from Manchester United and City, respectively, and Doug Collins from Plymouth Argyle, all for negligible outlay. However, while it was understandable that the new manager wanted to bring in his own people, the scale of the influx of former Burnley men smacked of someone unwilling to venture from familiarity and the policy did much to fuel a certain degree of resentment among the Sunderland fanbase.

Leaving his position as Burnley's reserve-team manager, Dave Merrington was certainly a valuable addition, a reliable aide who Adamson would lean on heavily as his assistant, as well as sharing coaching duties with the already-present Stan Ternent. Scout Dave Blakey was another early arrival, but there was a sense of Burnley overkill by the peculiar installation of their former commercial manager Jack Butterfield, who Adamson had even fallen out with at Turf Moor. Rather than being football-centric, Butterfield appeared to possess more of an entrepreneurial *modus operandi* which sought to diversify away from the bread-and-butter club merchandise and his approach ruffled many traditionalists (especially the SAFC Supporters' Association) by seeking to assume control of fundraising and by stocking club shops with an array of sports gear, including golf equipment.

Adamson, the putative 'thinker' had, arguably, prioritised a convenient sense of comfort in his new surroundings without considering the negative impression it fostered among supporters, with some sarcastically asking whether Adamson's next move would be to get the team running out in claret-and-blue shirts. Yes, allowance had to be made for the fact that much of the transfer funds had been spent before

he arrived, but there was an impression of trying to bring in players who were conveniently familiar and available, rather than cherry-picking the quality that was needed.

Meanwhile, Ray Train and the talented Billy Hughes (another of Roker's dwindling number of former FA Cup winners) had been consigned to Adamson's out tray and it was not long before even one of Stokoe's quartet of autumn signings was left out of the picture by the new boss, the dropping of the wholehearted Holton not going down well with supporters who, with the exception of the value-for-money Siddall, had seen precious little to applaud as their team remained rooted at the foot of the table.

Late January did bring an iota of 'exotic' colour for some: the bright yellow packets that contained the stickers that accompanied the Panini *Euro Football* album included in an edition of the football follower's go-to magazine, *Shoot*. For many boys, it was their first taste (or should that be aroma) of the delights that the colourful pageant of Panini-produced self-adhesive pictures offered; the quintessence of sophisticated collecting. First impressions may have been a little anticlimactic, the range of 288 stickers containing images of a large ratio of obscure and unfamiliar teams and players. The country-by-country sections often included players pictured in their current domestic club colours and much knowledge was absorbed in young minds regarding the alternatively spelled versions of countries' names. An outlay of 3p for a packet of four stickers also seemed ever so slightly stingy considering that many of those same youngsters may have already been in the process of building their domestic *Soccer Stars 76-77* collection (produced by FKS) whose 4p per packet of seven (non-adhesive) cards appeared more generous value. A mixed bag of an introduction to the world of Panini, maybe; but one later more fully appreciated as the touch of gold it was.

Such diversions were needed on Wearside. In that bleak cold winter of 1976/77, a goal, let alone a point, was becoming a rare commodity. Seemingly doomed, a sense of resigned gallows humour abounded, one typical quip coming on a primetime Tyne Tees TV variety show as local comedian Spike Rawlings declared his favourite pop group as 'Jimmy Adamson and the Easy Beats'. Another tale doing the rounds said that a Leicester supporter had observed the dog of a visiting Sunderland fan only barking twice during the 90 minutes, both occasions being after the scoring of the home team's goals in the 2-0 defeat at Filbert Street. Curious, the local man asked the visitor what his remarkable dog did after Sunderland scored, which met with the reply: 'I don't know; I've only had it six months.' With an embarrassing total of 11 points from 25 matches and the goalless run extending to ten games, the club were well adrift in February.

The Cruel Hope

What followed was as remarkable as it was unexpected. With the influential Tony Towers' appearances curtailed by a niggling injury, coach Ternent had urged Adamson to give teenagers Kevin Arnott, Shaun Elliott and Gary Rowell their chance. All three had been finds of respected scout Charlie Ferguson. The Sunderland midfield was transformed with this rejuvenating shot of youth. Rowell recollects: 'Adamson played a 4-4-2 formation and I was asked to play in a different position; wide left of the midfield four. I was pleased. He gave me a regular start.' Such young bucks were impervious to the early season off-field media stories and local opinion on the troubles that had beset the club during Stokoe's final weeks. As Rowell now affirms: 'When you're young, you're just concentrating on nailing down a place. It was a great adventure. Beyond brilliant!'