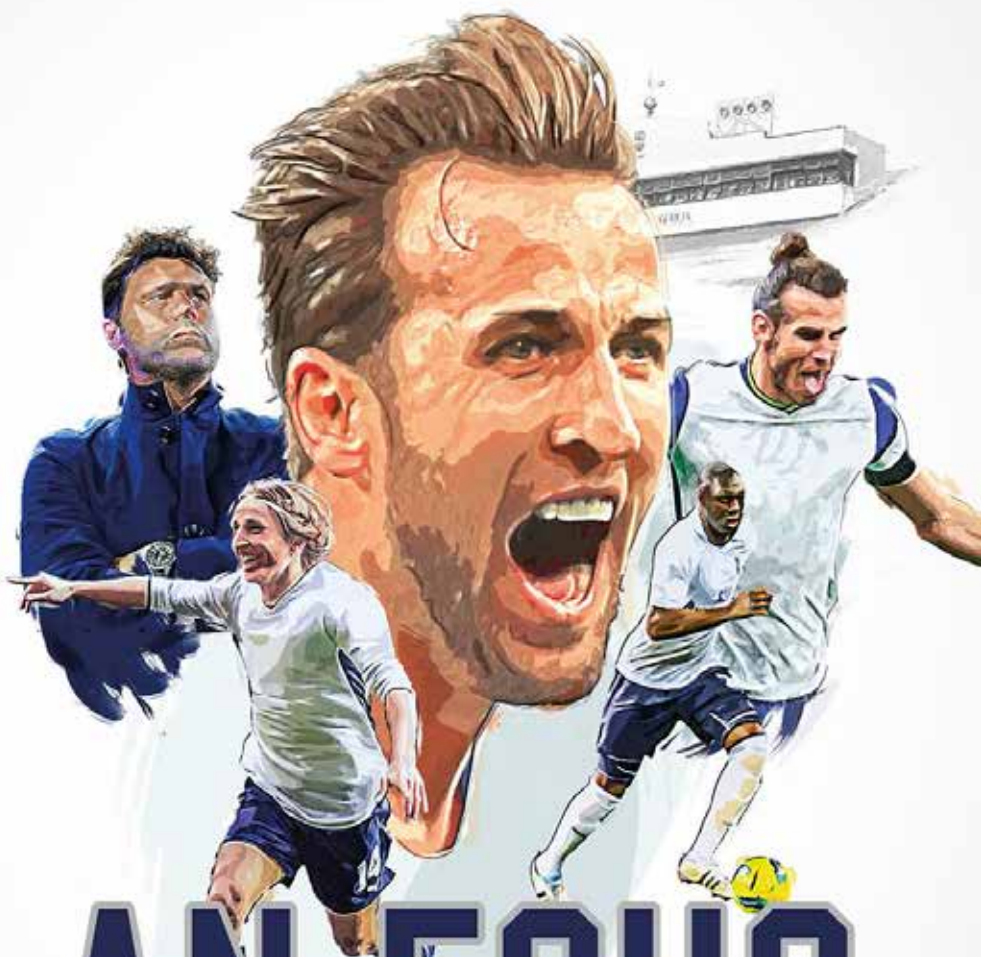


GARETH THOMAS



# AN ECHO OF GLORY

TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR  
IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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## Chapter 1

# A new millennium

IT IS Monday, 3 January 2000 and on a cold winter's evening at White Hart Lane, Tottenham Hotspur have just beaten Liverpool 1-0 under the floodlights thanks to a venomous 20-yard strike from forward Chris Armstrong midway through the first half.

Their first win of the 21st century keeps Tottenham sixth in the table at just over the halfway stage. They have already crashed out of all the cup competitions but Premier League wins over rivals Arsenal, Manchester United and now Liverpool leave Spurs fans optimistic of qualifying for the UEFA Cup.

'Last year we won the Worthington [League] Cup which was a magnificent bonus. But no more than a bonus,' said manager George Graham in his programme notes. 'We finished 11th in the Premiership and that wasn't good enough. I want to be in the top six and back in Europe again next season. That will be real progress. And then I want us to do it again and again.'

At the turn of the century, Tottenham Hotspur was a club still coming to terms with its new place in the footballing hierarchy after the birth of the Premier League in the 1990s changed the face of English football for ever.

Tottenham had been considered one of the 'big five' clubs in England when they, together with Arsenal, Everton, Liverpool and Manchester United, led the breakaway from the Football League that brought about the creation of the Premier League in 1992. With the competition now in its eighth season, Tottenham could no longer consider themselves one of England's elite clubs. The 1990s saw them left behind, with Alex Ferguson's Manchester United lifting the lion-embazoned trophy in five of the first seven seasons of the Premier League. Bitter rivals Arsenal were United's closest challengers and nouveau-riche Chelsea, packed with glamorous signings from the continent, were not far behind. But Tottenham had been cut adrift. The epitome of mid-table mediocrity, they had not finished in the top six since the competition began and hadn't fallen into the bottom six either. No longer aspiring to be the best in the land, finishing in the top six had become the new glory.

The new year's optimism in north London was not to last long as the hard work put in against Liverpool was undone by three consecutive 1-0 defeats to Sheffield Wednesday, Chelsea and David O'Leary's high-flying Leeds United side.

Graham had left Leeds to take the Tottenham job just 16 months previously. But now O'Leary, who had been Graham's assistant, had the Yorkshire side grappling Manchester United in a title race. Meanwhile, Spurs had slumped to ninth place and the aim of a top-six finish was slipping out of reach.

Graham's appointment as Spurs boss in September 1998 had sent shockwaves through the football world. There could be no doubt that this was chairman Alan Sugar's most ambitious appointment to date. A proven winner, Graham's achievements in the game far outshone those of predecessors Ossie Ardiles, Gerry Francis and Christian Gross. But Graham's two league titles, one FA Cup, three League Cups and one European Cup Winners'

Cup had all come during his nine-year tenure at arch-rivals Arsenal.

Not only that, it was under Graham that Arsenal had earned the 'boring, boring Arsenal' tag as his side became renowned for their impeccable defensive discipline and for grinding out 1-0 wins. In other words, the complete antithesis of 'the Tottenham way' of favouring style over pragmatism.

If anyone thought that Graham was going to change his ways for Spurs though, they were very much mistaken. 'I think they've had enough of the idea that they'd rather entertain and lose,' he sneered.

But nothing could better symbolise the clash of ideologies more than Graham's fraught relationship with his star player and fan favourite David Ginola.

Brought to the club by Francis in the summer of 1997, the signing of the French maestro was something of a coup at the time. Ginola had starred in Kevin Keegan's 1995/96 side, who were known as the 'Entertainers' for their gung-ho approach and ought to have won the Premier League title that year.

However, Keegan's replacement Kenny Dalglish saw the flamboyant long-haired winger as a luxury the team couldn't afford and was happy to offload him to Spurs, where the fans took to him straight away. A two-footed winger, Ginola could surge down to the byline to cross on his left or drop his shoulder to cut in and shoot on his right, always indulging supporters by embarrassing a few defenders on his way, of course.

With Graham in the dugout, Ginola was again getting the impression he wasn't wanted, his undoubted talents deemed to undermine the effort put in by the rest of his team-mates who did as they were told, tracking back and releasing the ball early.

At Leeds, Graham had hauled Ginola off with Spurs 1-0 down on 68 minutes, leaving the away supporters as

perplexed as they were incensed. This was a recurring theme of the 1999/2000 season and marked the 14th time in 29 games that Ginola was taken off early. Graham told the media that he had to preserve the Frenchman due to his age (Ginola had just turned 33) but the player disagreed.

‘I was enjoying myself and didn’t want to come off. I wanted to carry on playing. The fans love me,’ Ginola had said after being replaced with 15 minutes to go with Spurs 3-0 up at home to Watford on Boxing Day as the fans voiced their displeasure at their idol missing the chance to get on the scoresheet. More than just a good player, Ginola was an icon, a symbol of everything Tottenham Hotspur was supposed to represent. With his wavy hair, rolled-down socks and untucked shirt, Ginola was an entertainer and White Hart Lane was his stage.

March’s fixture against Southampton saw the visit of another of the Lane’s great entertainers, Spurs legend Glenn Hoddle, who – after leaving the England job in the spring of 1999 – had recently made his return to club management with the south coast club and was greeted with the warmest of receptions. ‘You’re Spurs and you know you are,’ they sang to their former idol, letting him and Graham know who they would prefer to see in the White Hart Lane dugout.

Ironically that day no one could complain about a lack of entertainment at the Lane. The 7-2 final score was Spurs’ biggest league win since the 9-0 victory over Bristol Rovers in 1977.

The strike partnership of Steffen Iversen and Chris Armstrong had scored five goals between them against the Saints but in reality neither the fans nor manager had much faith in the pair’s ability to score the goals required to get the club into Europe again.

Armstrong made a point of not celebrating his goals that day in protest at the constant abuse, moans and groans he had grown accustomed to at White Hart Lane. The

one-time England B striker had become the club's record signing when Gerry Francis paid Crystal Palace £4.5m for his services in June 1995.

Fans were unimpressed that the club had decided to spend so much money on a player who had only scored eight times in the Premier League the previous season, and despite a healthy return of 22 goals in all competitions in his debut campaign of 1995/96, the goals had dried up since then.

The win against Southampton had moved Spurs up to sixth place with ten games remaining but in the first of these they faced a trip across north London to Highbury to take on the old enemy. For Arsenal, the 1990s had been a golden period as Arsène Wenger picked up where George Graham had left off. Ironically it was Hoddle who had recommended Wenger to Arsenal in the first place, having played under him at Monaco in the late 1980s. Wenger's Arsenal side had won the double in 1998 and pushed the Manchester United treble winners all the way in 1998/99. Now in his fourth season in the Premier League, he had used his knowledge of the European market to build a formidable side, with the likes of Patrick Vieira, Marc Overmars, Freddie Ljungberg and Thierry Henry adding attacking flair to the ageing but still highly effective defensive unit he had inherited from Graham.

Graham was able to field a strong side in the derby, the most significant absentee being the injured Tim Sherwood as Spurs lined up in their usual 4-4-2 formation, featuring Walker, Carr, Campbell, Perry, Taricco, Anderton, Freund, Leonhardsen, Ginola, Iversen and Armstrong.

They were no match for Wenger's Arsenal though. The Gunners took the lead after 19 minutes and the game was put to bed on the stroke of half-time when referee Paul Durkin awarded Arsenal a penalty after Taricco brought down Ray Parlour. Henry tucked it away calmly and in the second half Arsenal were happy to defend their lead, Spurs



never really threatening to break them down as once more Ginola was taken off with five minutes remaining.

For Spurs sixth place would represent good progress on previous seasons, where the closest they had come was seventh in 1994/95, incidentally the last time they had finished above Arsenal. Despite starting that season with title aspirations following the signings of World Cup stars Jürgen Klinsmann, Ilie Dumitrescu and Gheorghe Popescu, manager Ossie Ardiles's gung-ho tactics were quickly found out and the Argentine was replaced by the more pragmatic ex-QPR man Gerry Francis.

Despite a promising start to Francis's reign, Spurs failed to push on and instead went backwards with finishes of eighth and tenth in the following seasons. With just three wins from 14 games at the start of 1997/98, Francis resigned. Spurs had spent £30m on transfer fees during his tenure; only Newcastle and Arsenal had spent more but the money had not been well invested.

Much of the funds made available to Francis had been spent on uninspiring and ageing signings as the young manager tried to replicate the template that had led him to relative success at Queens Park Rangers. Clive Wilson, John Scales, Andy Sinton and Les Ferdinand had all played for Francis before and were established Premier League players but they did little to improve the quality of the squad at a time when rivals Chelsea and Arsenal were finding better value for their money abroad.

Francis insisted that Sugar had tried to get him to change his mind about resigning.

'I've told Gerry on six occasions that if he came in and we called him Francisco Geraldo and that things would be turned around everybody would be happy,' the chairman had said.

Presumably Sugar was alluding to the attention the media was giving to Chelsea and Arsenal's foreign managers,

Ruud Gullit and Arsène Wenger. If you can't beat them, join them, Sugar must have thought when he decided to make Swiss coach Christian Gross only the Premier League's fifth foreign manager on the advice of his agent Andy Gross (no relation) who also represented Jürgen Klinsmann. Ironically it was Sugar who had made Ardiles the second foreign manager in the English top tier back in 1993.

After a nervy period in the bottom three over Christmas, Gross eventually managed to steer the team away from the danger of relegation, with a memorable 6-2 victory away at Wimbledon in early May confirming the club's top-flight status. The players didn't take to Gross's continental attitude to diet and training, though, and a poor start to the 1998/99 season led to Graham being hired to steer Spurs away from danger and ultimately to an 11th-place finish.

Importantly Graham managed to bag a trophy that first season, winning the League Cup with a 1-0 win over Leicester City at Wembley thanks to a late Allan Nielsen header. That win meant that Spurs qualified for the 1999/2000 UEFA Cup, only to go out to Kaiserslautern in the second round as Graham controversially rested Ginola for the second leg. In his first full season and having brought several of his own signings into the starting 11, the expectation was for Graham's side to push on and qualify for Europe on a regular basis. After all, the likes of Sol Campbell, Stephen Carr, Darren Anderton and Ginola were considered among the finest players in the country in their positions. The spine of a very good team was there, if Spurs could only find a way to make the most of their abilities.

The good news in March 2000 was that Aston Villa, their rivals for that sixth spot, had also lost on the derby weekend to relegation-battlers Southampton and John Gregory's side still had to come to White Hart Lane in a month's time.

On 3 April Spurs went into the Monday night fixture at home to Middlesbrough in tenth place. Things started well with another Armstrong goal on the half-hour mark but a comedy of defensive errors either side of half-time saw the home side 3-1 down as chants of 'we want our Tottenham back' and, for the first time, 'we want Graham out' could be heard loud and clear.

Then, on 83 minutes, Ginola received the ball from a throw-in on the left-hand side. With his shoulder-length hair slicked back in the pouring rain, the Frenchman turned on to his right foot and began to jinx across the face of the penalty area, leaving one Boro defender on his backside before nestling the ball into the bottom-right corner from the edge of the D. It wasn't enough to get back into the game but it was the archetypal Ginola goal and, in some ways, the archetypal Spurs goal, scored by a player who wasn't just a cog in a machine but a maverick, an artist, who wanted not only to win but to entertain those who had paid to see him perform.

When Spurs then went and lost 4-2 at home to Aston Villa, more protests were held outside the stadium by the Tottenham Action Group, set up by fans to drive Alan Sugar out of the club. Sugar had been unpopular with a large section of supporters ever since his falling-out with Terry Venables in the early 1990s.

Sugar and Venables jointly purchased the club from outgoing chairman Irving Scholar in 1991, each paying £3m for an equal share. Venables was adored by the fans, having won the FA Cup with the club both as a player in 1967 and as manager just weeks before the takeover in a 2-1 extra-time victory over Nottingham Forest.

Under the new regime Venables was to move upstairs into a chief executive role while Sugar took care of resolving the club's financial troubles. The two men didn't work in unison though, each feeling undermined by the other.

In the summer of 1993 Sugar ousted Venables from his position, leading to lengthy court battles which Sugar eventually won.

Now nearing the end of his seventh year in sole charge, Sugar had nothing to show for his tenure other than a solitary League Cup and there were few signs of progress on the pitch. In his first few seasons Sugar had spoken of his plans to build a title-winning team, but when Jürgen Klinsmann abandoned the club after just one season the Hackney-born business magnate grew distrustful of footballers as he became increasingly concerned about the direction the sport was heading in.

‘Not long ago clubs got £40,000 a year from TV,’ he told the *Daily Mirror* in 1996. ‘Then it was £2m a year, and soon it will be £4m. Wow! £2m a year. Where’s it all going to go? The answer: It flows straight out in high wages.

‘Whether this time round we get £150m or £200m a year, and it’s split up so we get £10m a year. Big deal. These days that won’t buy Les Ferdinand’s left leg.’

Sugar was right of course. In 2021/22 the Premier League TV rights pot was £2.6bn, of which Tottenham took a share of around £155m, and £10m nowadays would barely be enough for a decent Championship player.

Sugar invested in modernising White Hart Lane, turning it into a 36,000 all-seater stadium and ensured the club was run on a sound financial footing. But he was loath to pay the ever-increasing sums that were being spent on the Premier League’s star players. Like many chairmen in this period, Sugar was apprehensive about the effects of the 1995 Bosman ruling which meant that clubs were no longer entitled to demand a fee or block a move should a player wish to leave at the end of his contract. Their fear was that the transfer market would collapse as players would choose to run their contracts down to pocket hefty signing-on fees and bigger wages, with Steve McManaman’s

lucrative free transfer from Liverpool to Real Madrid in 1999 a prime example.

Some chairmen at other clubs were nonetheless happy to keep writing the cheques, chasing glory on the pitch. Steel millionaire Jack Walker had spent a fortune turning Blackburn Rovers into the 1995 Premier League champions and now, in 2000, Chelsea's Ken Bates and Leeds United's Peter Ridsdale were sanctioning big-money transfers in an attempt to challenge Manchester United and Arsenal's dominance.

Sugar had no interest in buying big-name players for popularity's sake. 'Of course some irrational club will pay all this money, win the championship and there will be euphoria all round,' he said.

'What happens when this dies down? Reality hits them in the face and they'll have to pay off all the debts. I can see it clearly. Clubs will pay the money, whatever it is. But one day they will have to pay the price.'

Sugar may have been right about the dangers of overspending, but his stubborn and very public refusal to spend large amounts on players did not go down well among Tottenham's supporters. Spurs had always been known to use their financial muscle to bring in star players from Jimmy Greaves in the 1960s to Chris Waddle and Paul Gascoigne in the '80s. Five years after Klinsmann's departure and with Graham failing to haul the club up by its boot straps, the pressure was on Sugar, now Sir Alan, having been knighted in the 2000 New Year Honours list, to either drastically improve the playing squad or sell up.

Away from the boardroom, there was some relief for Spurs on the pitch as they recorded wins over Leicester and Wimbledon. And in the penultimate home game of the season against Derby County, Graham decided to give opportunities to some young newcomers, naming Anthony Gardner, Simon Davies, Matthew Etherington and Dave

McEwan on the bench. The latter three all came on in the second half of a dull 1-1 draw.

All four had arrived in a recruitment drive led by director of football David Pleat aimed at bringing down the average age of the squad. When hired by Sugar in 1998, Pleat had advised that the club should never again make the mistake of paying out large fees on ageing players as Gerry Francis had done when he made 30-year-old Les Ferdinand Spurs' record signing in 1997.

Two and a half years on, the £6m paid out for Ferdinand was looking like a very costly error. Injury had blighted his first two seasons at White Hart Lane, scoring just five goals in each of 1997/98 and 1998/99. And in 1999/2000 things had only got worse as an injury in September ruled him out for six months.

Pleat was a big believer in taking a gamble on young players from the lower leagues, something Tottenham would go on to become known for in the 21st century, giving chances to the likes of Gareth Bale, Kyle Walker and Dele Alli to thrive in the Premier League.

Etherington and Davies were the first to arrive, both joining from Peterborough where they were already in their second season as first-team regulars in the Third Division. Striker McEwen was somewhat more of a gamble given that he was 22 years old and was playing for Dulwich Hamlet in the Isthmian Premier League, but he was deemed closer to first-team level than reserve frontman Peter Crouch, who moved the other way on loan. Centre-backs Anthony Gardner and Gary Doherty were brought in from Port Vale and Luton Town, respectively, with the added bonus that Doherty could also play up front as an auxiliary target man.

It was no surprise then to see Graham continue to blood the youngsters and name Etherington and Davies in the starting line-up for the penultimate game of the season at Old Trafford. Graham didn't make the trip to Manchester

himself as chronic arthritis had kept him away from the dugout for the end-of-season run-in, which meant that it was his deputy Stewart Houston who would have to break the news to David Ginola that he had been replaced by Etherington in the starting 11.

Ginola's exclusion at Old Trafford may have had something to do with his interview with *The Observer* during the week where the 1999 PFA Player of the Year expressed his regret at the way his career had panned out. In any case it is doubtful that Ginola's presence would have made much difference in the 3-1 defeat in front of the Sky cameras, in what was little more than a warm-up act before the Premier League trophy could be presented to Sir Alex Ferguson's team after the final whistle.

Spurs' last game of the season was at home to Sunderland, who were looking to overtake Aston Villa into the sixth spot that the Lilywhites had so craved themselves. The hosts, on the other hand, could hope for nothing better than tenth place.

The adoring home fans made a point of welcoming Ginola back into the team as the Spurs players took to the field in navy blue, showcasing the following season's Adidas away kit. There was one new face for them to welcome too, as young defender Ledley King made his full home debut, slotting in behind Ginola at left-back.

With the pressure off, Spurs put in one of their best performances of the season in a 3-1 win capped off by a delightful chip from right-back Stephen Carr. The 23-year-old Irishman had been one of the standout performers of the campaign and was attracting interest from some of Europe's top clubs as his constant runs down the flank caused huge problems for Tottenham's opponents.

Another player attracting interest was captain Sol Campbell. Now 25 years of age, Campbell had matured into one of the finest centre-backs in the country and had

been heavily linked with Manchester United who were keen to take him north for a discounted fee, given that he had only one year left on his contract.

'I am fed up of people asking me about Sol. He has stated quite clearly that he will only talk about contracts in the summer,' said David Pleat in an interview with BBC Radio 5 Live.

Campbell was given a standing ovation as he performed a solo lap of honour, the chants of 'you're Spurs and you know you are' being sung in a desperate tug at his heart-strings in full knowledge that he may well have just played his last game in a Tottenham shirt. Sugar had promised that significant funds would be invested in the squad over the summer. Whether this would be enough to convince Campbell to sign a new contract was the big question that would dominate the rumour mill for months to come.