

HARRY DE COSEMO

# Black & White Knight

**How Sir Bobby Robson Made  
Newcastle United Again**

'Detailed, insightful and heartwarming, this book captures the very essence of Sir Bobby Robson the manager and, more importantly, the man.'

Chris Waugh, *The Athletic*.



Foreword by  
**George Caulkin**

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## Chapter 1

# Sliding Doors

*'Things were moving at last. The North East was calling me back. I was on my way home' – Bobby Robson*

RAIN WAS lashing down hard; the heavens had opened over St James' Park and finally put out the dwindling fire that was Ruud Gullit's tenure as manager at Newcastle United. The mood was mutinous.

This famous stadium, sat atop a hill in the city, was a place where dreams almost came true three years earlier. Newcastle harnessed the power of unity and, led by Kevin Keegan, a man who understood exactly what it took to guide the club, narrowly missed out on the Premiership title. Football is a religion in the area; it can be a force to achieve spectacular things. But that was in the past and difficult years followed. The whole club had never been so divided in its modern history, and they were only heading one way: down.

Already under pressure after a disastrous start to the 1999/2000 season, having collected just one point from

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four games, Gullit handed in his resignation following a 2-1 defeat to Sunderland in the Tyne-Wear derby on 25 August 1999. The result left Newcastle second from bottom in the table.

Anger, frustration and dismay had reached boiling point in the stands and the dressing room. Gullit, a superstar with AC Milan in his playing days before ending his career and transitioning to coaching at Chelsea, had been entrenched in a power struggle with Newcastle and England captain Alan Shearer for the entirety of his reign. Despite seeing his most experienced player return from suspension for the Sunderland game, he decided to leave him on the bench, alongside strike partner Duncan Ferguson.

The result was pivotal in every sense on that soaking wet Wednesday night; it would decide where the future lay. Win the game, and Gullit would have the leverage to force Shearer out of his boyhood club, asserting himself as leader in the manner he had not yet managed; losing, quite simply, meant curtains. Ironically enough, just weeks earlier, the pair were smiling and shaking hands as Shearer signed a new long-term contract, believing he would remain there for the rest of his playing days.

It was the day before when Newcastle's talisman would discover his role for the biggest match of the season, and Gullit didn't inform him of his decision himself. Instead, during a set-pieces drill, he sent over his assistant, Steve Clarke, with a bib, signifying he wouldn't be starting. Stunned, the other players watched on as Shearer took his medicine with little reaction, remaining as professional as ever despite obvious humiliation. Warren Barton must have summed up the mood in the camp perfectly after quizzing his team-mate about the situation, 'You're taking the piss, aren't you?'

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When confronted by the squad about leaving Shearer out, Gullit's reply was brazen, an example of why he was perhaps characterised as arrogant. 'Nobody told me I wouldn't be starting games,' he snapped.

It wasn't just a bad start to the new season; in the league, the last one had ended with no wins from eight games and Newcastle had finished in the bottom half of the Premiership for the second year in succession. Gullit needed a victory, but more than that, he needed to show everybody that he understood the culture of Newcastle like Keegan did, having replaced his successor, Kenny Dalglish. In his pre-match press conference, he blew a big opportunity, before handing in the team sheet ultimately dubbed a 'suicide note'.

'This is not different to any other derby, it's all the same,' Gullit shrugged to a cluster of reporters. 'This is a derby of the region, not the city. In the city it is even worse, because everyone lives in the same city. You meet each other, it is even worse.'

'As a player hearing that, you thought, "You just don't get it!"' Barton says, his voice full of exasperation.

In Shearer's place was Paul Robinson, a young striker signed from Darlington a year earlier, and a Sunderland fan. Aged just 20, he deputised for the main man during his ban after a red card against Aston Villa, and having played in a 3-3 draw with Wimbledon just days earlier, he didn't flinch when he heard the news that he would be keeping his place. With his family in attendance, supporting the red and whites, and the Newcastle supporters unhappy at hearing Shearer wasn't involved, Robinson admitted his reception wasn't the best.

'I'm a very confident lad. To this day I think I deserved to start, whether it was in front of Alan, Dunc [Duncan

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Ferguson] or anyone else,' he said. 'Alan got sent off against Aston Villa on the opening day, I started against Wimbledon when he was suspended and got man of the match.

'I got pulled aside to be told I'd be starting and I wasn't bothered. I thought, "I played well on Saturday, why shouldn't I be playing?" But it was quite hard being booed by your family members at the far end of the stadium and half the Newcastle fans!'

It should never have reached that point. How could it? Shearer embodied Newcastle at their peak. In 1996, after the disappointment of surrendering a 12-point lead at the top of the league to Manchester United, the club went out and made one big splash in the transfer market, the biggest splash the world had ever seen.

Shearer was fresh from winning the Golden Boot at the European Championships, where the hosts, England, had reached the semi-finals, and Newcastle went head-to-head with Manchester United again. This time, it was for the 25-year-old's signature, and this time, they won. He came home in a world-record £15m deal from Blackburn Rovers, with the help of the shirt sponsor, Newcastle Brown Ale, who put four advanced payments towards the deal. The reception he received showed just how loved he was by supporters, and things hadn't changed by 1999.

'Freddie Fletcher, our chief executive, knew Jack Walker, the owner at Blackburn,' Sir John Hall, former chairman and now life president, says.

'He basically said, "If you ever sell Shearer, will you give us first choice?"

'So, one day, he got a call and it was Jack Walker. He said, "Freddie, Man United want Shearer and I'm giving you first choice. It is £15m, can you find it?"

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‘Well, that started us off. We were ringing around. The brewery helped by giving us four payments and we basically raised the money. We got Shearer, and 20,000 people came to the ground to see him. We had some wonderful times.’

On the night, things started well for Newcastle when Robinson slotted the ball through for Kieron Dyer, who finished to make it 1-0 with his first goal for the club. Shearer and Ferguson were summoned separately after the break, but were powerless to stop goals from Niall Quinn and Kevin Phillips from turning it around for the Black Cats. Full time came and everybody wanted to escape the storm, in a physical and metaphorical sense. Gullit knew what was to happen next as he headed down the tunnel with boos ringing out from all four corners of the ground.

John Carver, a member of the coaching team he had promoted from the academy, remembers the immediate aftermath of the game.

‘There was a little room off to the side of the changing rooms, and I walked in to find Ruud with a big notepad, and I think he was resigning then,’ Carver says.

But before he left a day after the anniversary of his arrival and three days after the game, Gullit couldn’t resist one more dig at Shearer and Ferguson; when asked whether his team selection ‘gamble’ had backfired by BBC’s *Match of the Day*, he replied: ‘I didn’t gamble; it paid off. When the two came on, we got some goals against us. It was all going well, we were 1-0 up.’

Robinson describes watching the interview and the sense of dread that followed.

‘When I saw it, it hit home and I thought Gullit was done. He was saying I’d played fantastically and it all



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changed when he brought Shearer and Ferguson on. It was good for me, but he was putting me up against them two.'

Both senior strikers were left fuming and headed into training extra early the next day to have it out with their soon-to-be ex-manager.

Defeat to Sunderland is cataclysmic at any point; it can be enough to irreversibly condemn a manager in the eyes of some supporters. For Gullit, it was the tipping point, the culmination of a turbulent era, which had its highlight in the shape of an FA Cup Final that Newcastle had lost to Manchester United the previous May. His coaching was lauded by some members of the squad and his reputation preceded him, but having only retired from playing a couple of years earlier, his approach to management was his undoing, especially when it came to more experienced players.

For all the headlines that followed that night, Shearer wasn't the man most harshly treated by Gullit. Rob Lee, a midfielder signed by Keegan from Charlton Athletic in 1992 and a linchpin of the team over the previous seven years, had the number seven shirt stripped from him in the summer; it was given to Dyer, a £6m signing from Ipswich Town. As a close friend of Shearer, perhaps alienating him was seen as collateral damage in a wider battle, but nobody was more relieved to see the back of Gullit than Lee.

'He was the most arrogant man I have ever met,' says Lee. 'We never spoke and didn't have a relationship, and when he took my number off me, he didn't have the courage to do it himself. He got [communications officer] Graham Courtney to do it.'

'He didn't like me and I didn't like him, and through Steve Clarke, he told me I could train with the kids or not

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come in at all; unfortunately for him, I had a three-year contract and he was stuck with me. He put all his eggs in one basket with the Sunderland game, and if he had won it I think I'd have had to leave. It is the only time I ever wanted Newcastle to lose.'

It wasn't just the treatment of players that ultimately made Gullit's position untenable, but the staff too. On one morning at the training ground, he demanded long-standing kit man, Ray Thompson, clean his boots in front of the squad. Warren Barton, who always insisted that everyone deserved respect, made a point of doing the job instead.

Upon his departure, Gullit refused to take a penny from the club in compensation despite the fact he had been called in to be sacked; he was entitled to £750,000.

Freddy Shepherd, who replaced Hall as chairman in 1997, told the *Daily Mirror*: 'I phoned him in the morning. We'd had letters, all sorts, from supporters. There had been a dust-up, words said, between the big players and him that morning, in Ruud's office. For once I didn't say too much too quickly when he came in. Then Ruud said, "Before you speak I want to do a press conference tomorrow saying I'm leaving ... and I don't want anything."

'He had the press conference, never slagged anyone off and left without a penny. Ruud was the most honourable manager I ever met.'

Having built up a relationship with many of the players over his time working in the background at Newcastle, John Carver admits having made mistakes after being caught in the middle between Shearer and Gullit. The new era meant a clean slate, and a number of apologies had to be made.

'I had a good relationship with Alan, Ruud knew that. I made a lot of mistakes learning in that role early

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on because I didn't realise, as well as being the coach, I had to be the link between the manager and players. It was very difficult when you had the players against the manager who had given me the job. I had to find my way a little bit, and in fairness when he left I apologised to some of the senior players and said, "Look, give me another opportunity and I'll get it right."

'Paul Ferris was the physio at the time and we had been friends since we were 16, but our relationship got strained because I wasn't sure who to look up to. Gullit was the leader and the boss, I had to do as he asked. I nearly lost a lot of good friends through it but corrected a lot of errors.'

The impact of Gullit's poor man-management even reached boardroom level, with Shepherd apologising to Lee after his resignation was confirmed.

'When Gullit left, Shepherd basically apologised,' says Lee. 'He said, "Look, Rob, I'm sorry, I put the manager in charge and I couldn't interfere." I understood him, and I appreciated him coming to see me and saying, "It wasn't my decision, I have to back the manager." He does, sometimes chairmen don't agree with what their managers are doing, but they can't interfere. They pick the manager, who makes the decisions, and if they step in, what is the point of the manager being in charge?'

And so, Newcastle United's hunt for a new manager began; they needed someone who understood the club, the city and the people. There was one obvious candidate.

\* \* \*

In the summer, it just so happened that Bobby Robson had returned home after a near 50-year footballing career.

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Robson and his wife, Elsie, were residing in Suffolk, having spent nine years in Europe.

He left England in 1990, following a long and successful spell at Ipswich Town and eight years in charge of the national team, to enjoy time with PSV Eindhoven, Sporting Lisbon, FC Porto, FC Barcelona and PSV once again. Going home was supposed to be in aid of a retirement; aged 66, he'd been through a lot on and off the pitch, including very serious cancer treatment twice, and had been persuaded to live a calmer life by a family who hadn't seen as much of him as they would have liked.

But Robson was such a football obsessive, and August wasn't for shopping. It took until his first afternoon at a supermarket after the season started for him to realise that he still had more to give to the game he loved. Managing Newcastle, the club he had supported as a boy but turned away from to join Fulham as a teenager, was a dream. Having already resisted the temptation to return while at Barcelona, as the Magpies looked to build on the work done by Kevin Keegan in 1997, it quickly became evident that he wouldn't let the opportunity slip again despite the alarming situation waiting for him at St James' Park, and the wheels were set in motion to get him into the hotseat; everything seemed to be falling into place.

Hall had stepped away from the boardroom by the time Robson finally joined; Shepherd was in charge. Prior to that, the pair of them went out to Barcelona, separately, alongside Fletcher and Hall's son, Douglas, for private talks. Hall says failure to secure Robson's services the first time around was his biggest regret in football.

'We had two very good friends, who were sports writers for the *Daily Mail*, Joe Melling and Bob Cass. They knew

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Bobby very well, and he was probably England's most successful manager abroad,' Hall recalls.

'He'd won titles in Holland and Portugal and we were thinking about how we could get him. Melling said, "I think he'll come back. Elsie wants to come back." He had a two-year contract at Barcelona and he was coming to the end of the first year. We fixed a meeting up, privately and quietly, and we all took different routes to Barcelona and met at Bobby's house.

'We had a good chat and ate lunch with them. It was a lovely, sunny day; they had a lovely garden. We talked about him coming back, and eventually he agreed that he would come to Newcastle. Everybody shook hands, everybody agreed and it was great.

'We all went our separate ways and I went to my house in Marbella for a couple of days. That night, I thought I would just ring him to make arrangements for how he would come back. I could just tell in his voice that his mind had changed.

"I can't let Barcelona down," he said. He was a very honest, very loyal man. While he was over there, Melling had said that Barcelona wanted Louis van Gaal as their next manager, and they thought they would get him after Bobby's second year. But for some reason, van Gaal was leaving Ajax around the time we were talking. Barcelona had to go and get him, and Melling knew they'd approached him. If they didn't get van Gaal at that time, they would never get him. He would have gone somewhere else.

'We told Bobby and he said, "No, no! They wouldn't do that to me." So he stayed and we came back. Within months, he'd been moved upstairs. It was quite a surprise to him and quite a shock.

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‘It is my one regret. If we’d got him then, when he was at his peak, we’d have been winning things. That two years made a difference, but he was too much of an honourable man.’

Elsie rang Robson while he was golfing to say Newcastle wanted to meet in London. Confidence among the board members was high; they knew he wanted the job, having almost prised him away from one of the biggest clubs in the world, only for him to change his mind. Theoretically, given he was already back in the area, out of work and open to one last hurrah at the club he loved more than any other, the deal would be easy to strike.

Yet, that meeting ended up as a false start. Robson was acutely aware of the situation and was confident in his own ability and value. He’d won the FA Cup and UEFA Cup at Ipswich and led England to their best tournament performance since 1966, the semi-finals at Italia ’90, before winning successive Eredivisie titles at PSV in 1991 and 1992, two Primeira Liga crowns with Porto in 1995 and 1996, and the Copa del Rey, Supercopa de España and European Cup Winners’ Cup at Barcelona in 1997.

Not only were Newcastle drifting towards disaster, but they hadn’t won a major trophy in 30 years. Believing he had the credentials to end that wait and knowing just how much the club needed him, Robson rejected their initial offer of £400,000-per-year because it was too low, and sent Douglas Hall, Shepherd and Fletcher away with the instruction to try harder next time.

They did just that, and eventually got their man, for an annual salary of £500,000 with a bonus of the same value if Newcastle stayed up. Robson finally took the job

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he had desired most. His unveiling, if he wasn't sure of how supporters would react already, was a clear indication of the feeling towards him; a weight had been lifted by Gullit's departure, but the excitement was palpable as he set foot in the stadium for the first time.

Misery had been compounded further after the Sunderland game with a 5-1 loss against Manchester United at Old Trafford; former Newcastle striker Andy Cole scored four, with Ryan Giggs adding the other. Henning Berg's own goal had levelled the score in the first half, but Nikos Dabizas's red card after the break led to a capitulation. Robson's arrival could hardly have come soon enough, and he settled in over the international break.

'When we got the news that Bobby was coming in, there was excitement and pride in the dressing room,' says Warren Barton. 'To play under someone like him, with his knowledge of the game, was amazing. But he brought a feel-good factor. He was a gentleman, too; he treated everyone with respect, whether they were a player or someone making him a cup of tea. That really rubbed off on the players.'

Thousands of fans flocked to St James' to welcome him on 3 September, congregating outside the Gallowgate End, around the corner from where, in 2012, a statue was erected in his memory; a further 500 appeared for his first training session, too. It was imperative that he hit the ground running on the pitch, but before he could do anything, he needed to heal some of the wounds left over from what had gone before.

Shay Given, Newcastle's third-highest appearance-maker of all time and goalkeeper between 1997 and 2009, said it was his presence that reminded the squad what it truly meant to pull on the black and white shirt.

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‘He gave everyone a fresh start and a reason to play for the club again,’ Given remembers. ‘He grew up in the area and made it clear how lucky we were to play for Newcastle, and what a privilege it was, especially with some of the foreign lads who didn’t realise how big the club was.’

Nolberto Solano, who played for Newcastle in two spells between 1998 and 2007, said experience was the key difference between Gullit and Robson, with plenty of big characters in the squad that the latter inherited.

‘Gullit was a good coach, but he had only retired [from playing] two years before coming to Newcastle. He wasn’t the right manager to deal with the experienced players we had like Alan Shearer, but Bobby would read every situation; he was very intelligent.’

Robson couldn’t get away from the fact that his age was a story, and almost instantly in his unveiling to the media, he was asked whether he felt up to the job.

‘Do you want to race 100 metres? You’re either 66 years old or 66 years young,’ he quipped with a glint in his eye. It was the first example of the trademark wit, which showed his humorous side while at the same time sending out a warning to the press that he had their number. He would also profess his love for the Newcastle players of his youth like Jackie Milburn and Albert Stubbins, proving to supporters that he was one of them.

There’s no doubting, though, that the players wished he had arrived sooner, and as a slightly younger man, as Solano attests: ‘I think we should have got Bobby in a little bit earlier. It is not easy when you are in your late 60s or early 70s.’

‘If you look at Sir Alex Ferguson or Arsène Wenger, they stayed at their clubs for 20 years. Obviously, this



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wasn't possible and unfortunately we caught Bobby a little bit late for that.'

More important than anything else, Robson needed to form a team around himself. Gordon Milne arrived as director of football, while the new manager's close friend from his Ipswich days, Charlie Woods, came in as chief scout. Speculation was growing that a new coach would be arriving, too, leaving Clarke and Carver somewhat in limbo before Mick Wadsworth joined as his assistant.

'Bobby coming in gave everyone a lift, but there was a strange feeling for myself and Steve Clarke,' says Carver. 'We were at a bit of a loose end, waiting to see who he brought in. We met Gordon Milne and Charlie Woods, but we were hearing rumours of a coach coming in. Steve and I were obviously very vulnerable. For the first few days, he had nobody with him, but then suddenly Mick Wadsworth appeared.

'In fairness, Bobby was a coach, so he would take some sessions and Mick would take some sessions. Me and Steve were effectively professional ball boys and, when it got to the winter, it was freezing cold and the only way to keep warm was collecting balls from behind the goals. Steve said to me, "We're not going to get anywhere here, John, I've got a chance to go back to Chelsea," so he left.

'That's when it all started opening for me and I developed a relationship with Mick and Bobby.'

Carver would become more involved with the set-up and stepped into Wadsworth's shoes just shy of two years later, when the latter would take up a role at Southampton, and then become manager at Oldham Athletic.

But Woods was Robson's most trusted ally. He had known him the longest, having built up a relationship during their time together at Portman Road. Woods,

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who first came across his close friend in 1960, while playing for Newcastle in a 6-0 defeat to West Bromwich Albion, for whom Robson was playing up front, would go on to be a youth coach for Robson before working in an unofficial capacity during his time as England manager, basing himself in northern Italy during Italia '90 and watching opponents. They finally reunited properly at St James' Park, but only after negotiations with Tottenham Hotspur, where Woods was a scout.

'Just as he got the job, he phoned me up and he was in his car,' Woods says. 'He says, "Charlie, it's Bob." I go, "Where are you off to?" He says, "Charlie, I'm off to Newcastle because I've got the Newcastle job.'

'He loved Newcastle, so I said, "Oh, fantastic, well done." I was at Tottenham and after a couple of weeks he said, "Look, I want you to come to Newcastle with me.'

"Oh crikey," I said. "I've got a job here." But I travelled up to meet him and he wanted me to come. I told him, "You'll have to put this right with Tottenham!" "Leave that with me," he replied. He sorted it and I joined him at Newcastle.'

Milne, too, had close ties to Robson and would head to Newcastle in a supporting role to the new manager away from the training pitch, becoming director of football after three spells in Turkey, in charge at Beşiktaş, Bursaspor and Trabzonspor, which sandwiched time in Japan. The two had become friends over time, having gone up against each other when Robson was at Ipswich and Milne was in charge of Coventry City.

'I had a long history with him, it started back in the 1970s,' says Milne. 'I went to Coventry as manager and Bobby was at Ipswich. I was at Coventry for 10 years, Bobby was at Ipswich for 13 years and another

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pal at that time was [Southampton manager] Big Lawrie [McMenemy]. We'd all done over 10 years, which even back then was quite rare. A friendship developed over that time, and I knew Charlie Woods too.

'I'd finished off in Turkey, and he'd been up there for a while. We were chatting again, I was asking how he was doing, and he said, "I could do with a bit of help but I'm not too sure in what area. What are you doing?"

'That was the start of it, and then eventually he came back to me and asked if I'd be interested in coming in with the title of Director of Football. That probably means a little bit more today; in those days nobody was very sure about it. But to him and me, I was there as a friend and a supporter.

'I've always said, if the position of director of football exists at a club now, he should appoint the manager. He is going to be loyal to the manager and not a threat. If there is a manager in place and a director of football comes in over his head, the manager might not trust him. But there was never going to be any problems like that in our relationship because it was so close and so tight.

'I don't think I'd have done this for anyone else, only him. I was at a different stage of my career, I'd more or less finished it. I was getting to the stage where I was content with what I had, trying to get a bit of time for myself and my family.'

The arrival of Paul Montgomery, whom Robson headhunted for his scouting team after he had worked closely with Jim Smith at Derby County, helping them gain promotion to the Premiership in 1995/96, came first, preceding that of Woods. Montgomery, a native of the North East, would become a valuable asset alongside Woods, Milne and Wadsworth.

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‘Bob rang Jim Smith and asked if he could take me to Newcastle,’ Montgomery says. ‘My job at Derby was to put players together for Jim and they were virtually all free transfers. I think I spent about three million quid; I was wheeling and dealing and it just worked. I’m imagining Mick Wadsworth was instrumental for me with Bob, because when he first went to Newcastle, they didn’t have any money and they were bottom of the league.

‘Mick was manager at Carlisle United when I took Rory Delap and Paul Boertien to Derby, and I took Matt Jansen on trial. He’ll have known my ability to work with a limited to zero budget. I remember Jim said to me, “Take it as an honour that he [Robson] has asked for you.”’

Within the squad, almost instantly, the mood had been lifted. Nothing quite summed up the level of damage control required like the situation with Rob Lee. Few players had given more to Newcastle than he had, but there he was, ostracised and discarded, without as much as a squad number.

Lee bided his time and was swiftly rewarded, heading straight back into the team for the trip to Chelsea for the dawn of the brand-new era. Robson made the senior players central to everything he did, dubbing Lee, Warren Barton, Alan Shearer, Shay Given and Gary Speed his ‘blue chip boys’.

‘I never had an agent and I never pushed to leave,’ says Lee. ‘I was always hopeful with every passing game that there would be a change, because Gullit wasn’t doing great. I was hopeful he would leave before I did.

‘When Bobby turned up, he lit up the room. It was his dream to be Newcastle manager; he was just happy around the place, and it went from being somewhere nobody wanted to be to a place where everyone was laughing and

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joking. He knew we had good players, and if we played for him, there would be no problem with relegation. Myself, Alan, Warren, Shay and Speedo were already the “players’ committee” in the dressing room, and if Bobby wanted anything doing, he’d come to us first.’

Unable to recover his number seven shirt midseason, Lee took 37 before reclaiming his previous shirt the following summer.

‘Gullit gave Kieron Dyer number seven, and once he’d gone, Kieron offered me it back but league rules stated you couldn’t change your number during the season. I had always played in number seven for Newcastle; 17 and 27 were taken and 37 was quite near my age, so I took it.

‘I didn’t ask Kieron for it back, he offered it to me, which was nice of him.’

Lee’s reintroduction to the squad was evidence of the change in atmosphere, and the fight, energy and passion Robson demanded from the off was obvious even in defeat at Stamford Bridge. Newcastle went down to Frank Leboeuf’s first-half goal, despite battling away, and probably deserving something from the game. Nevertheless, they remained in the bottom three.

Afterwards, Robson couldn’t hide his excitement at being back in English football as Newcastle manager, but it was clear he understood how difficult it would be to leave his mark from the start. He told Gary Lineker, his main striker during his England days, who was working for the BBC’s *Match of the Day*: ‘It is a big job, it’s mammoth. We have a lot of players, maybe too many, but we have nine good players who were injured, so have a better selection than we could put out on the pitch.

‘I can’t say what happened under Ruud, he’s a colleague of mine and he had a very difficult task. We needed a

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victory so badly today, the team hasn't won a game for weeks and weeks. I think if we can get everybody fit and instil some self-belief in the players, they'll be capable of getting us out of trouble and up the league.

'It's good to be back. I love English football, I've watched it on television over the years, but to be right back in the heart of it is a thrill for me and I'm very excited about it.'

Tellingly, Alan Shearer had instantly come back into the side, alongside Duncan Ferguson in attack. Paul Robinson was on the bench, but he had noticed a difference in the whole squad's morale now Shearer was in a better mood. Robson had taken him aside and told him he wasn't facing the goal enough.

'Alan was smiling again,' Robinson says. 'He was England captain. Obviously nobody is bigger than the club, and he didn't make decisions or anything like that, but he owned the dressing room. Not in a bad way, everybody loved him, and you knew that if he was happy, he was getting you one, two or three goals a game.'

Newcastle's reward for reaching the previous season's FA Cup Final was a place in the UEFA Cup. Their first-round opponents were Bulgarian side CSKA Sofia, whom they faced away from home in the first leg. Goals from Nolberto Solano and Temuri Ketsbaia got the Robson era off to a flying start, before attention swiftly turned to his debut at St James' Park.

It was against Sheffield Wednesday, the only side below the Magpies in the league table. On paper, this was a relegation six-pointer, though it was perhaps a little premature to be dubbing it so drastically. At 4.50pm on Saturday, 19 September, it felt like anything but; it felt like the start of an incredible ride.

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Danny Wilson's side were like rabbits caught in headlights, only Newcastle were like a steamroller. They won 8-0, with Shearer scoring five, adding to goals by Aaron Hughes, Kieron Dyer and Gary Speed. Shearer, not three weeks earlier, had been on the brink of the end of him in the black and white shirt. He would have left with a whimper, through the back door without a second glance, and not on the shoulders of those who worshipped him most as he eventually did; it is no exaggeration to say Robson saved his career on Tyneside, and it all started that afternoon.

A season-high crowd of 36,619 were in attendance – with the expansion to over 52,000, which had been signed off on in 1998, still in the works and set to be completed a year later – to make Robson's bow one of the most unforgettable days of his entire reign. The bad feeling left by the Gullit era dissipated in its entirety almost instantly.

'I could sense something in the build-up that week,' says Carver, who wasn't at the game as he doubled up as an opposition scout on match days at Robson's request. 'Yes, they were working extremely hard, and Bobby was drilling them, but smiles were back on faces and you could sense that the players were desperate to get a hold of something.'

'When the city is behind the team the way they were that day, it brings a totally different outlook on the whole stadium. There is a buzz; Sheffield Wednesday were just unfortunate.'

'Alan scored five that day, and the last home game he was on the bench,' says Shay Given. 'To have your captain, your talisman, back onside and scoring goals is huge. Momentum was a big thing for Bobby; he knew the team was good enough to climb the table, not just avoid relegation.'

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Warren Barton identifies the points that were behind Robson's success at Newcastle, and rarely were they more evident than on that day. Whilst it wouldn't always be as straightforward, the basis of his ideology shone through; it was a real precursor to a fantastic five-year spell in charge.

'He got us on the front foot straight away,' says Barton. 'Then he gave us belief, by winning games, and he got the city behind him. There's a feeling in that city when everything is going well, heading to St James' Park, that excitement, you felt like you were going to win.'

'In the first 15 minutes of that game, Sheffield Wednesday killed us. The fans stuck with us, players didn't lose confidence or shy away from the ball. There was such an adrenaline rush about that day. After the game, Bobby just said, "Wow!" I don't think he was expecting it.'

Positivity returned; the shackles were off and Newcastle was a loud place again. Loud for the right reasons. Everyone was together, pulling in the same direction; United in every sense of the word. But for all the noise, the smiles and the joy, there was a job that needed doing; three points were required to pull away from trouble. The danger was that the occasion would overshadow the game, but Newcastle were cool, calm, collected and ruthless.

Robson walked into the centre circle to rapturous applause before kick-off; even that was a sign that his career had come full circle. Just over 31 years earlier, he had stood on the very same part of the pitch at an empty Craven Cottage after losing his first managerial job at Fulham, poignantly and pensively looking at all four corners of the ground, digesting the news that he



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was unemployed with tears filling his eyes. Now, having achieved almost everything he could dream of in the interim elsewhere, he was back home with a golden opportunity to be the saviour for his people.

It took 11 minutes for Newcastle to score their first goal, when Hughes headed Dyer's left-sided cross into the bottom corner at the Gallowgate End. It broke the deadlock and the tension at the perfect moment, after what was a difficult start to the match. By half-time, Shearer had completed his hat-trick, including one from the penalty spot.

Dyer scrambled a fifth over the line just two minutes after the break, before a textbook Speed header made it 6-0. Shearer's extra brace rounded it off, but after being replaced by Paul Robinson for the Sunderland game, he took the opportunity to remind the youngster who was boss.

Having won the second penalty of the day, Robinson dusted himself down and asked if Shearer would settle for four goals and give him the chance to score his first for the club. The answer he received was less than complimentary but hardly unexpected.

'I've gone down for the penalty and taken a dive,' Robinson laughs. 'I picked the ball up and said, "Can I have it to get my first goal? You've already scored four." He says, "No."

"Ho'way man," I said, arguing in front of everyone. He told me to "fuck off", so I turned around and said, "I hope you miss, you bastard!"

'When he scored, the first person he dived on was me, and he called me a cheeky bastard. It was banter, but I was desperate to score; it was a free shot at goal. Knowing my luck, I'd have missed anyway.'

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John Carver was following the result from elsewhere, and given his potentially precarious position as a member of the coaching staff from the previous regime, he admits to feeling unsettled as the game unfolded. But he can appreciate his new role for the education he received, especially with the club embarking on a European campaign that season.

‘I was keeping in touch with it and thinking, “Oh, God. It’s a great result for the club but where does this leave me?” At the time, I didn’t want to [scout opponents], but it gave me the opportunity to go and watch foreign teams, for example when I went to Sofia, watching how they played, how the Premier League teams played, what their systems were. It was a great education after working at youth level for such a long time. It stood me in great stead for the future.’

Just a week later, Newcastle were beaten 3-2 by Leeds United at Elland Road. Lee Bowyer and Harry Kewell scored early as the Yorkshire side raced into a two-goal lead, before Shearer made it seven goals for the week to level the scores. Michael Bridges – a North Shields-born striker who began his career at Sunderland and would join Newcastle for a loan spell in 2004 – struck a cruel blow to snatch all three points 13 minutes from time. But was another example of the spirit and energy Robson had injected into the club at every level.

Sofia were dispatched in the UEFA Cup, despite a 2-2 draw back on Tyneside, with Robson finally opening his Newcastle goalscoring account. Middlesbrough then followed, beaten 2-1 in the Tyne-Tees derby thanks to yet another brace from a rejuvenated Shearer, before a second international break. Upon the return, everyone received a wake-up call with a 4-1 defeat to Coventry City. Warren

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Barton's red card with the score already at 2-0 signalled the point of no return; yet defeat at Highfield Road was Newcastle's last for six games, and they would only lose twice more in the league before the end of January.

By then, though, their European excursions were over. A 5-2 aggregate victory over FC Zürich in the second round was followed by defeat to AS Roma in round three; Francesco Totti's penalty in the first leg at the Stadio Olimpico proved the difference as the Giallorossi couldn't be breached back at St James' Park. Robson had transformed Newcastle; from the brink of combustion not four months earlier, they were now taking on the Italian league leaders and running them close. Roma were managed by future England boss Fabio Capello; they would go on to win Serie A the following season with a team that included the likes of Totti and Brazilian World Cup-winning defender Cafu, who also played in the tie. It was a huge task and these were early days, but the signs were good.

Robson steered Newcastle to an 11th-placed finish in the Premiership, more than respectable considering the disaster he had inherited. There were fleeting moments of brilliance, none better than a 3-0 home victory over Manchester United in February, which turned out to be Duncan Ferguson's last great moment for the Magpies before being sold back to Everton the following summer. The Scot scored an opening goal before Red Devils captain Roy Keane was sent off in the second half and Shearer, who finished the season with 23 league goals and 30 in all competitions, added two more.

For the third season running, it was in the FA Cup where Newcastle shone most brightly. Losing finals in 1998 and 1999 – to Arsenal and Manchester United respectively – gave them the drive to go again, and they

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reached Wembley, where the semi-finals were being played. Chelsea, who had done the double over them in the league, were the opponents; after wins over Tottenham Hotspur, thanks to a replay, Sheffield United, Blackburn Rovers and Tranmere Rovers, the Geordies swarmed down to London once again.

For Rob Lee, who had been played out of position on the right wing by Gullit against Manchester United a year earlier, it was an opportunity to right some wrongs. Exclusion from the squad was a thing of the past; he'd played a crucial role in Robson's rebuild and he went into the Chelsea game feeling completely different from the last time he played at Wembley.

Ultimately, the result was disappointing; the Blues won the third meeting of the season 2-1. Gus Poyet, who would go on to become manager of Sunderland 13 years later, scored twice to condemn the Magpies. Robson would later dub him 'the scourge of Newcastle'.

'Against Manchester United, I didn't want to win the game for Gullit. He didn't want to play me in that game but he was playing me sporadically because he had no players,' Lee says. 'Nobby was injured, so he was playing me right wing.

'I wanted to win it for Newcastle and I'd have loved to have won it for the fans, but I was in two minds that day because I also knew it would be the end of my career at the club. I was caught between a rock and a hard place.

'Defeat was bittersweet; I hated losing and Wembley was the worst place to lose. But I knew if Gullit won something, he'd be a Messiah and I certainly would have had to leave.

'The previous year, against Arsenal, I liked Kenny [Dalglish] so I was more disappointed to lose. When

you like a manager, you'll run through a brick wall for them and I'd have loved to have won it for Bobby. He was desperate, being a Geordie and managing his club.'

It was all going so well, too. Lee scored the equalising goal in the second half with the number 37 on his back, which in itself was a battle scar and a reminder of the difficulties he had faced and overcome. But it was another near miss and the wait for a trophy didn't stop at 31 years; Newcastle wouldn't get any closer to ending it under Robson, either, and it still continues today.

'It was the first time we'd played well at Wembley in my time,' Lee continues. 'We didn't play well in two cup finals, and didn't play well in the Charity Shield [in 1996]. But we should have won it and we knew whoever won that game would have gone on to win the cup.'

Sure enough, Chelsea did just that, beating Aston Villa 1-0 in the final. It was another bitterly disappointing end to a superb cup run, but Newcastle have never quite done enough to impose themselves on the domestic competitions in the modern era. Birmingham City ended the Worthington Cup journey in the third round the previous October.

'We can talk until the cows come home about why we didn't win anything, but maybe we just weren't good enough,' Shay Given says with authority. 'Be that individually as players, collectively as a team or as a club.'

But Robson was seeing the bigger picture, even as early as after that latest Wembley heartbreak. Warren Barton says his target was to connect the club with supporters and challenge at the top end of the table, placing even more importance on it than silverware.

'Bobby's first aim was to get everyone together. We'd go and do fundraisers in the community and meet the

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fans. He'd say, "We'll get these people behind us and give them a good team to support."

'He prided himself on that. He didn't just want to settle for mid-table and go for a cup, he was aiming for the Champions League. For him, Newcastle had to be in the top five, and that's where he put them.'