

BRISTOL CITY

MATCH OF MY LIFE

NEIL PALMER



**FOREWORD BY
JONATHAN PEARCE**

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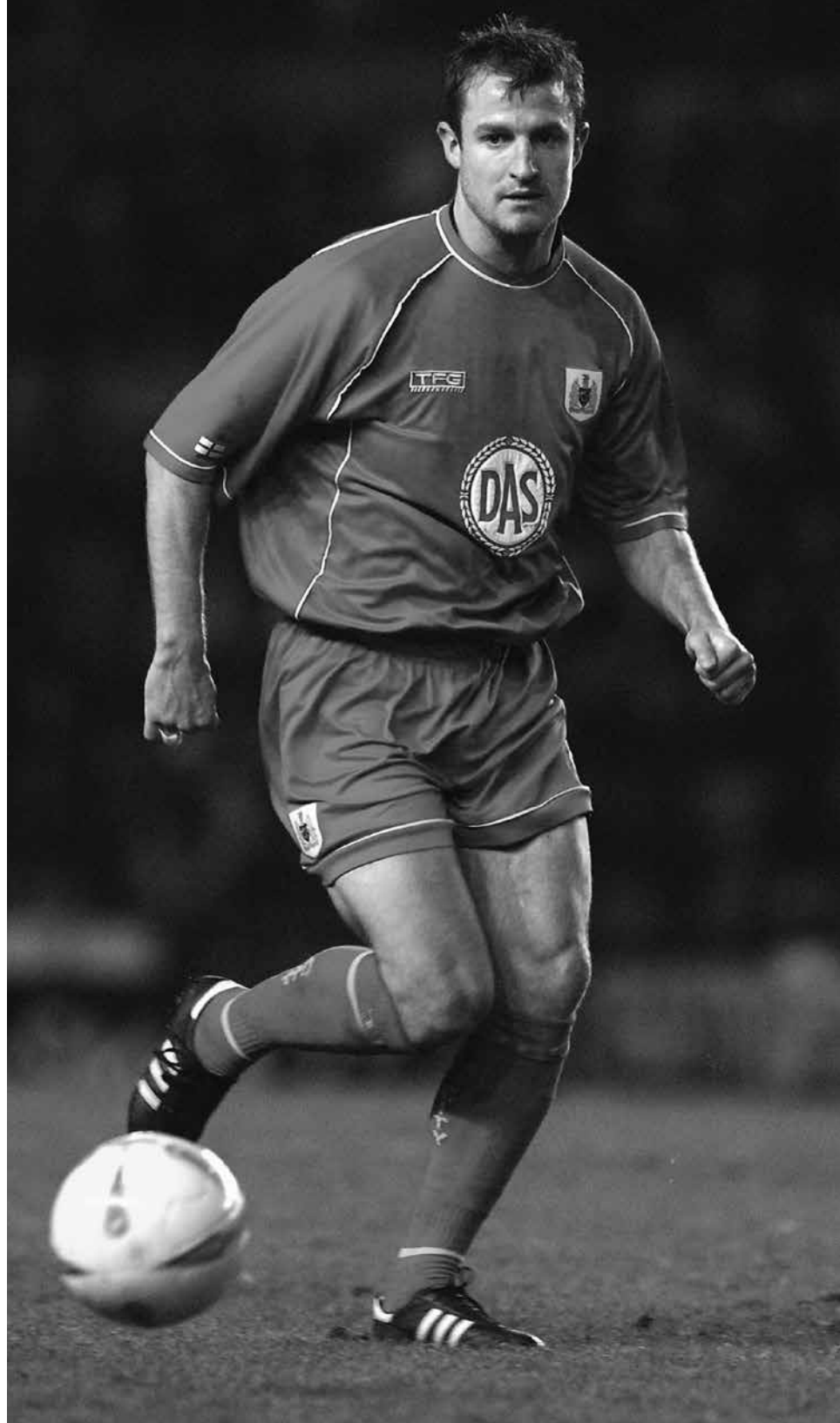
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The Players

LOUIS CAREY



Louis Carey

Louis Carey was certainly 'one of our own'. The young defender watched the club from the terraces and signed his first professional contract with City in 1995. A loyal and honest servant of the club, Carey holds the record for the number of appearances in the red shirt. His 646 games for the club puts him ahead of the great John Atyeo and it's truly a record that will take a long time to be beaten in the modern game. This versatile, quality defender has had a love affair with the club since the age of ten, but like many love affairs they sometimes hit a rocky patch and that happened to Louis after the team's shambolic display against Brighton in the League One play-off final defeat at Cardiff's Millennium Stadium in 2004. Louis's contract was up and there was no agreement from the club on renewing it, so Carey left and joined Peter Reid at Coventry City. There was an outcry from the supporters when the likeable Bristolian left but no surprise six months later when the two kissed and made up so Carey could return to the club, incidentally taking a pay cut to come back to Ashton Gate. Carey went from strength to strength as an inspirational captain under various managers. A real student of the game, he finally hung up his boots in 2015.

Bristol City 2 Crystal Palace 1 (AET) Football League Championship play-off semi-final second leg 13 May 2008 Ashton Gate

Bristol City: Basso, Orr, McCombe, Carey, McAllister, Noble, Carle, Elliott, McIndoe, Trundle, Adebola. Subs: Weale, Byfield, Fontaine, Johnson, Sproule.

Goals: Trundle, McIndoe.

My time at Bristol City is littered with games that stick in my mind. My debut was really special. I had been with the reserves playing Ipswich Town at Clevedon Town's ground and I was taken off with about half an hour to go. To say I was angry was an understatement, but little did I know I would then be travelling up with the first team to play York City. I travelled on the coach and Joe Jordan was manager. I couldn't believe it when my name was read out on the team sheet. That Bristol City dressing room I joined at the tender age of 18 was full of experienced pros like Mark Shail, David Nugent, Brian Tinnion, Gary Owers and Rob Edwards. I remember I got no special treatment, rightly so, and they just let me deal with the nerves in my own way which was great. The only instruction I had was how we would play and what balls to put up to the front lads. I stood in the tunnel before coming out and, although there were only about 3,000 fans at York, the noise and the effect it had on me made it feel like it was 300,000. I never stopped getting that feeling when I walked out for any match for City; it was like a pure shot of adrenalin.

There were also games against Watford the year we won promotion with John Ward that are high on my list, along with games against local rivals Bristol Rovers which were always great affairs for us and the fans. I also recall the home leg of the play-off semi-final against Hartlepool United under manager Danny Wilson. That game had the whole of Ashton Gate buzzing; I could genuinely feel the stadium shaking.

But when I look back on my career I have to say the one 'Match of my Life' that I will take away from my time at the club has to be the Championship play-off semi-final second leg against Crystal Palace at Ashton Gate. We had a phenomenal season that year; we were the surprise package of the league after coming up straight from Division One the previous year. In reality we just thought we could consolidate in our first year but the atmosphere Gary Johnson and his staff created around the place was awesome.

I had a lot of time for Gary as a manager; he had a drive and a buzz for football. I know he wasn't everybody's cup of tea but I liked his dry sense of humour and I could see that now and again he would drop bombs on players and see how they reacted. If you were the type of player who threw your toys out of the pram you were not what he needed when things got tough. Trouble was, there were some players who couldn't see that about him.

Towards the end of the season we had lost that consistency that we showed all through the campaign. We were the type of side that you could not write off. If we were 1-0 down with minutes to go we would make it 1-1, and if it was 1-1 with minutes to go invariably we would pull out a winner. But of late, leading into the Palace games, we had lost a few times and critics were starting to question us. In the camp we were strong and resolute and that eventually pulled us through.

The first leg play-off semi at Selhurst Park was a real rollercoaster in terms of emotion. There was not much

between either of us in the first half as it ended 0–0. In the second half again it was chances at both ends before the game exploded into life. Lee Trundle was fouled on the edge of the box and we had a free kick. Noble and McIndoe stood over it and I drifted into the melee of players in the box. We knew what we were going to do as we had done it on the training pitch a million times. Noble pushed it to McIndoe and at that moment I lost my marker, the ball was passed to me and I just hit it into the corner for my first goal of the season. It was incredible. The lads just piled on me and the bench was in uproar. We laughed about it working and there was no greater feeling than that moment. We were in control but then they pushed defender Fonte up front to try and cause us problems and he did. All of a sudden a ball was played up front, I lost my footing in a tackle with him and I brought him down in the box. Referee Howard Webb pointed to the spot and I felt gutted not only for me but for the lads. They stuck the penalty home and got on top with us clinging on to stay in the game. With that, Noble produced a piece of genius and struck a ball from outside the box that the keeper had no chance with. It completely silenced the home fans and gave us the lead going into the second leg at Ashton Gate.

The game at Ashton Gate still gives me goosebumps today. It was a fabulous, warm evening with the sun just going down, and a combination of the dark blue sky along with the sea of red and white the fans had produced made the ground look really special. I remember the

warm-up and due to the atmosphere and the feeling I was getting from the fans I had never been so relaxed before a game in my life. Gary was the same as he spoke to us before we went out. He told us that we could do it and to just show them what we were made of. As I stood in the tunnel I could see the fans at the old East End and the pitch looked like a lovely lush green carpet. Everything was perfect, and I got that natural shot of adrenalin that I always got walking out in a red shirt. As we got on to the pitch the noise was deafening and credit to those fans, they were as up for it as we were.

We had done our homework on them and knew Neil Warnock had a great record when it came to play-offs, so Gary and his coaching team had to be tactically astute which they certainly were. We had studied their front three of Sinclair, who was young and quick, Clinton Morrison, who had been there and done it, and another youngster Scannell, who again was quick. We knew we had to stop them from playing and getting the ball. We got at them right from the off and their defender cleared an Elliott header off their line within the opening few minutes which gave the fans a massive buzz. It was pretty much nip and tuck to start with but then after about 25 minutes they played a long ball into the box and there was a mix-up between Basso in our goal and McCombe and the result was that their midfielder Watson put them 1-0 up and now the tie was level. It certainly silenced the crowd and you could feel the nervousness going right around the ground. We still had

the belief but we were really under the cosh and almost hanging on as they came right at us. Fortunately the referee blew for half-time and we could go and regroup. In the dressing room Gary was calm and level-headed; this was no time for balling anybody out. He just told us we would be okay and to remember the first leg. He tweaked a few things like moving Noble inside and then off we went for the second half.

Fair play to the crowd – they got behind us from the kick-off and again it was a very close game. I remember the floodlights were on now and Ashton Gate under floodlights is a very special place, particularly when there is something on the game and there was no bigger prize than the chance to get to Wembley. The game was really even but then with about 20 minutes to go Palace put a long throw into the box and Nick Carle brought a Palace player down so the ref gave a penalty. We were on the floor; this was it, possibly the end of our season. I, like the rest of the lads, stood there as Watson stepped up to take it in front of the East End that housed both our fans and theirs. As he struck it Basso guessed the right way and flicked it on to the post. I think in that moment Palace were finished and we just stepped up a gear. The noise from the crowd was as if we had scored and they felt the same as us that this could be our night and our season wasn't ending tonight.

When the game went to extra time we could see that the Palace players were finished and Gary told us as much before it started. It was an incredible night

and when Trunds scored and then McIndoe's fabulous strike put us 2-1 up the joy was immense; my heart was bursting with excitement. We were all in it together and we refused to be beaten which is how we had been all season. When the whistle blew and the crowd came on the pitch, I remember thinking nights like this and with a group of players like this are why you go and play football. We were immense that night and our fitness levels in extra time were extraordinary. The dressing room after was incredible but we realised that we had only done half a job and tonight was pointless if we were going to get beat at Wembley.

The play-off final against Hull City was another milestone in my career. I have played in quite a few important games over the years for City and, in all honesty, for a few of them we just never turned up as a side, but at Wembley I never felt that. Looking back at the game, we had so many chances to win it over the 90 minutes that I am still astonished that we didn't. The defeat was incredibly hard to take. I wanted to do what Geoff Merrick had done in the 1970s: take my local club all the way to the top flight but it was not to be. I know Gary was deeply upset and he felt some of the lads had let him down, but I just felt certain players may have let themselves down, and whether it was nerves or we just froze, the bottom line was that it was just not meant to be. After the game I took a long hard look at my own performance and I asked myself, could I have done more? No. Did I give it everything I had? Yes. So as

long as I could answer those questions honestly I would just have to put it to bed and think about that fantastic season where we came so close.

My career continued at the club but we certainly never reached those dizzy heights again. Then, when Steve Cotterill was in charge, I got a call to his office and he told me he was letting me go. I was upset as I thought I could have had another year with the club and maybe be a help to the youngsters coming through, but I understood football and to be fair Steve was good as gold about it. I see him now and then and he always says he felt terrible doing that to me but we both know it's part of the game.

I thought long and hard about what to do next and to be honest I had had enough of the backstabbing and bullshit that went with the game, so I took a year off and did some voluntary work at a couple of charities that I was involved in. Although I had a few offers I had had enough of the game during that time and the charity work made me focus on things that were important in life. During my time away I had calls from a mate to come and coach the kids at Southampton Academy, but I kept putting him off. I was also asked time and time again by local landlord and City nut Sean Donnelly to come and play for his side, the Three Lions. In the end I did and turned out with the likes of Scott Murray and Colin Cramb. I loved it – it was just lads getting together to play local football on a Sunday with terrible pitches and terrible facilities but we had such a laugh

that it really rejuvenated my love of the game. I also played eight games for Shepton Mallett as a favour to a mate of mine who I had met through the charity work. In the end I took up the offer to coach at Southampton Academy and I can honestly say it has been incredible and really worthwhile, working with youngsters on their hopeful journeys to become professional footballers.

Looking back, I am very proud to have captained my boyhood team and to hold the record for number of appearances – beating John Atyeo is something I will always cherish. I still go back to the club now and then and I get a great reception as I also do when I am turning out for the Lions in local football. In the future I would love to be a manager but the way the game is now it's a very difficult road to even get considered for any job, so we will see. I have enjoyed looking back and I will never forget that lovely warm night at Ashton Gate when a team that were mates refused to be beaten.