

DEANO Life After Football

Dean Windass

WITH PHIL MARSHALL



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Wembley, All Over Again

Monday, 26 May 2008

We're on the open-top bus going round Hull and I have never seen a sea of humanity like it. In the 15 years since that unforgettable day I have not met anyone from the city who said they weren't out on the streets that afternoon celebrating. Hull City. Repeat, Hull City. Winning at Wembley. And now in the Premier League for the first time in the club's history. The most incredible 48 hours of my life.

'It's Roy of the Rovers stuff.' That was our manager Phil Brown's assessment after we'd beaten Bristol City 1-0 on a sweltering Saturday at Wembley in the Championship play-off final. I'd told him I'd score at Wembley a few weeks earlier, after he dropped me with three games of the league season to go. 'I know you will,' he said. I was Hull City's Roy that afternoon.

To be fair to Browny, a Hollywood scriptwriter would have struggled to come up with anything to describe that afternoon in the hot London sunshine. Seven minutes before half-time, my strike partner Fraizer Campbell latched on to a through ball and sprinted down the left-hand side of their box. He went past one defender, left another on his backside, looked up and stood the ball up on the edge of the penalty area. I was in loads of space, thinking 'just try and hit it cleanly'. The sort of volley I'd executed thousands of times in training and matches during my long career. Bang. Right foot, swinging cleanly and sending it goalwards. I've hit it sweet as a nut. The keeper's got no chance. BBC Humberside's commentator David Burns calls me the 'Hull boy' in his description of the goal. Boy? I'm 39 and at kick-off I knew if we didn't win it would probably be my last game for the club I'd supported since childhood. Maybe even my last game as a professional as well. Not

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that I was thinking about that as I set off towards our fans, slowing down to a jog before Fraizer caught up with me and leapt on my shoulders.

An hour and a quarter later and I'm sitting on the bench, having been substituted with about 20 minutes to go. I've never known exhaustion like it, physical and mental. I can't do any more except pray that the referee Alan Wiley is going to blow his whistle. He does. The fat bastard has only gone and done it. I sprint on to the pitch, using my last reserves of energy and as I run towards my team-mates I look to my right as 38,000 Hull fans – including hundreds – no, thousands – of people I know celebrate like it's the best day of their lives.

A once in a lifetime moment, like it is for any supporter when their team does something special. I've lost count of the number of stories about that day I've heard since. For a lot of those fans, it was the best day of their lives. I flop to the ground. I can still remember how sweet the Wembley grass smelt. The best goal of my career, maybe one of the best scored at Wembley.

But I would have been thrilled if any of the other lads had scored it.

The next 24 hours are a bit of a blur. The slightest thing — seeing my then wife, Helen, and kids, Josh and Jordan in the players' lounge afterwards; being interviewed at the side of the pitch; chatting to one of my team-mates, Ian Ashbee, about the enormity of what we have just achieved; or reading the hundreds of messages of congratulation on my phone. And I'm in bits. Tears and beers. Going back to the Grove Hotel near Watford, where we'd stayed for the semi-final first leg at Vicarage Road, for a massive party laid on by the club in a marquee at the back of the hotel and thinking, 'What a waste of money that would have been had we lost.'

On the coach back to Hull the next day and, after a few hours' kip at a mate's place, down to my local, the Menston Arms in Ilkley, with a couple of bottles of champagne. Half-sober and hoarse from all the celebrating and all the talking but now with my mates again, getting the piss taken out of me but also having my hand shaken by so many well-wishers too. Back down to earth, sort of. And through it all the thought that while it might have been my goal that won Hull City the £60m dream ticket into the Premier League, all of the lads in our squad will remember these moments as much as I did, memories to last a lifeline. It's not about me in the dressing room, never has been. It's about the team. Brothers. Mates.

Monday morning. I must have slept about eight hours in the last three days. A few more drinks at the KC Stadium and then on to the buses. There were so many people on the streets we would have walked to the town hall quicker. We didn't get above 5mph for the next few hours. Down Chants Avenue and somebody averts catastrophe by yelling at the chairman, Paul Duffen, to duck as we go under a bridge. Had he still been stood upright it would have knocked his head off. People everywhere trying to climb on to the bus or staggering in front of it. One lass I know lifting her top up and exposing her top half!

Turning the corner towards the town hall and seeing thousands and thousands of Hull fans carrying on the party. Going on to the front of the mayor's balcony to show off the trophy and nearly falling off. Reading that the *Hull Daily Mail* had set up a petition to have a road named after me ... and already had 1,000 signatures.

And just feeling like there will never be another day like this in my life.

Monday, 29 May 2023

'Windass!!!'

You could forgive the commentator for losing the plot. League One play-off final, Sheffield Wednesday against their South Yorkshire neighbours – and rivals – Barnsley. 0-0 after 90 minutes. 0-0 after 120 minutes under a warm Wembley sun. The board goes up for three minutes of added, added time. And 15 years after Josh Windass, then aged 12, watched his old man score the winner in a Wembley play-off final he's only gone and done it himself.

The final whistle blows and I'm on the side of the pitch at the end celebrating. Of course, I'm made up for Josh, but I'm trying not to show my feelings there and then

– it's his moment after all. I'm asked to do a TV interview. I try to stay composed and just about manage to keep it together. The tears? They come later when I'm back in the car, I've sort-of pulled myself together and I switch on the video on my phone. And it starts all over again.

'Oh my God, what happens in my life? I can't stop crying. The winning goal at Wembley 15 years ago and it's just happened to me again. Oh my God, my little boy has scored the winner at Wembley. He was 12 years old when he watched me do it. He's just emulated it. I just can't believe it.'

It finishes with me thanking all those people who'd messaged their support in the days leading up to the game. 'The emotions that go through your mind ...'

The video went viral. It struck a chord but to be honest I wasn't that surprised about the reaction. If I'd gone online after my Wembley winner 15 years earlier and let my emotions pour out like that people would have thought I was soft. Because in 2008 showing vulnerability in the football environment was greeted with suspicion, if not downright hostility.

My generation – and we're talking about players whose careers started in the last decade of the 20th century or before – were told to get on with it. You suffered. And you looked after yourself. Sure, if a teammate asked you for a grand because he was in a bit of financial bother you'd help him if you could. But if he told you he was struggling with his mental health you'd sympathise, mumble something about speaking to the club doctor or even the physio and hope the subject was never raised again.

A year after Wembley, and you've played the last game of your career. You've become Hull City's oldest ever goalscorer and you've scored in the Premier League again. But then it's over. You drop down the divisions because that's never bothered you but a short spell with Oldham Athletic in League One is a nightmare. Then a spell at Darlington as player-coach ends with the sack after a few months.

What are you going to do with yourself now? Questions.

'Are you happy?'

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'No. But a skinful might help, for a bit anyway.'

'What are you going to do when you can't play football anymore?'

'Not sure, something will turn up. I know a lot of people. I've done my coaching badges. Someone will give me a leg up. The phone will ring.'

It has started. The battle with yourself. The game you're never going to win. Divorce. Drink driving (twice). Losing John, my dad, my mentor and my best friend, suddenly having not spoken to him for five months. Boozing myself into near oblivion. Overdosing then trying a second time to kill myself. Bankruptcy.

Then, finally, it dawns on you that the only person who can save your life is you.