




Phil Spencer

Everybody Round My House for a Parmo!

Middlesbrough's Journey
from Cardiff to Eindhoven

Foreword by Bernie Slaven

A photograph of Bernie Slaven, a man with short brown hair, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and red tie. He is looking off to the side with a serious expression. A red flower is pinned to his lapel.

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One Stevie Gibson

THE 1990s was a decade that saw Middlesbrough become everyone's favourite second team. After moving to the Riverside Stadium in 1995, the club embarked on an exciting new era that would see them push to become a major point of local pride. That was the key mantra when local businessman Steve Gibson rescued the club from going out of business at the 11th hour on a dark day in 1986, when the famous gates of Ayresome Park were locked with a view to never opening again.

Gibson's love affair with Middlesbrough extends back to the 1960s when he and future cult hero Chris Kamara would attend matches together as children with the same dream as so many around the area: to pull on the famous red and white jersey for themselves. Kamara ultimately managed to achieve that dream, and while the future businessman may have fallen short in his hope of being a player, it wasn't enough to stop him from becoming the most important figure in the club's history.

After forming a consortium to rescue the club in 1986, Gibson increased his shareholding in 1993 before

succeeding Colin Henderson as chairman in 1994. It was at that point that we really started to see his vision for Middlesbrough come to life. Gibson had already spent 23 years as the founder and owner of global transportation company Bulkhaul Limited – a company that he started after borrowing £1,000 from his father. It was exactly that sort of ambition and forward planning that would see Middlesbrough working towards the goal of gracing one of the biggest stages in European football.

While the opening of the Riverside Stadium was seen as a huge opportunity to announce the club to the world, one key arrival changed everyone. Bryan Robson was a name that was recognised all over the planet. The Chester-le-Street-born midfielder enjoyed the sort of career that children could only dream of, making almost 500 appearances for Manchester United and picking up 90 caps for England. Appointed captain of both club and country, it was only fitting that he would pick up the nickname ‘Captain Marvel’ for the way he approached the game; after all, growing up in the north-east of England during the 1960s and ‘70s was hardly a place where opportunities were handed to you on a silver platter. Instead, you had to graft and prove yourself at every opportunity – something that Robbo did with great success.

Some critics in the football world thought that Robson’s arrival on Teesside was a deal that was led by Gibson’s ego – after all, who wouldn’t want to bring a Manchester United and England legend to the club? Yet, as we’ve learned over the years, it has never been Gibson’s priority to be the centre of attention. Instead, Robson’s arrival was used as the catalyst to raise the profile of the club and attract players who, quite frankly, would otherwise have never heard of Middlesbrough, let alone considered moving there.

Fans loved life under Robson. His arrival created huge opportunities to bring in high-profile signings from some of the top footballing nations around the world. Robson's connections were enough to attract Gary Walsh from Manchester United, plus his former Old Trafford teammate Viv Anderson from Barnsley, before word spread of Middlesbrough's project and players were clamouring to be involved. The signing of Nick Barmby from Tottenham Hotspur in 1995 was a real turning point, and then a certain South American star changed the game completely.

Juninho's arrival was unprecedented: a signing that showed the football world that the Gibson and Robson duo were deadly serious about their ambitions. The Brazilian attacking midfielder caught the eye of Middlesbrough's player-manager in an Umbro Cup international clash with England. Moving quickly, the Teessiders wasted little time in bringing the 22-year-old to Europe for the first time in October 1995.

Supporters had been excited by new signings before, but this was completely different. The newly built Riverside Stadium was packed out, with a carnival-style celebration, to welcome the new hero. It's not often that initial hype around a new signing is matched by quality and longevity of performance, but that's what Juninho brought. He would begin his love affair with a club that would see him become the most unlikely of adopted Teessiders – but we'll get to that later.

The 'Little Fella' was followed to the Riverside by his compatriot Emerson before a mammoth deal to sign Fabrizio Ravenelli from Juventus was completed in the summer of 1996. The 'White Feather', as he was known to team-mates and fans alike due to his trademark hair colour,

left the Italian giants at the peak of his power. He arrived in Middlesbrough on the crest of a wave having scored a goal that helped Juventus to win the Champions League Final in May 1996, his last appearance for the club. Ravenelli's flagship move was another huge signal of intent and an indicator that Boro were growing at an astounding rate.

Despite reaching both the League Cup and FA Cup finals in the 1996/97 season, Middlesbrough suffered relegation to the First Division. In December 1996, following an outbreak of illness at the club, Middlesbrough failed to field a team for a match against Blackburn Rovers. Subsequently, the FA penalised them with a three-point deduction for failing to fulfil a fixture, ultimately subjecting Boro to the drop. Even this setback wouldn't stop Robson from bringing in further high-profile additions in the shape of players such as Paul Gascoigne, Paul Merson and Andy Townsend.

Experienced, big-name signings continued into the late 1990s, when the likes of Brian Deane, Paul Ince, Christian Ziege and Gary Pallister arrived, before Alen Bokšić and Christian Karembeu followed suit in 2000. However, the signings of Bokšić and Karembeu would prove to be the last notable transfers of this type. Croatian striker Bokšić perfectly summed up the sort of ego and complacent attitude that was at Boro at that time, something that Dave Allan, the club's media manager throughout the period this book covers, perfectly summed up with a recalled tale involving Bokšić from the early 2000s.

Allan explained: 'He used to do one interview a year with Boro TV, Century Radio, BBC Tees and Eric Paylor at the *Evening Gazette*. He'd do it in the media room at Rockliffe Park, be really professional and then stand up, say thank you, shake everybody's hands and then as he was

walking out of the room would say, “See you next year!” There was no chance he’d ever do another interview. We’d be at an away game and the away press would ask if there was any chance of speaking to Bokšić, and I’d just say, “I highly doubt it!” He’d then pretend that he didn’t speak good English. I used to ask him, “How is it that you can tell me in perfectly good English that you aren’t able to speak good English?””

The 2000/01 season proved to be Bryan Robson’s final campaign in charge. Two wins in the first 17 matches of the season strongly suggested that something needed to change as Boro began to flounder in the Premier League. Middlesbrough had an ageing squad and there was a strong feeling that they needed a new face at the helm.

Terry Venables arrived in December 2000 and worked alongside Robson to ensure that Boro finished the season with their heads above water in the relegation battle. Venables was a manager with great experience at the highest level, having led Barcelona, Tottenham and England during the 1990s. Sources close to the club at the time revealed that, while Venables was brought in to support Robson in his role, he instead ‘ran the shop’ during the second half of the campaign. It was also revealed that Venables was actually offered the job on a permanent basis in the summer of 2001 but turned it down as it conflicted with his media commitments.

This meant that Gibson and Lamb had to make a strategic appointment for the direction that they were hoping to head in. Part of Gibson’s blueprint for success was based around the club developing a youth academy that would be a consistent and reliable source of genuine assets in the future. Whether that was developing players who were

ready for the first-team set-up or creating them to be used as financial assets, it was an area that Gibson was determined to thrive in. Ahead of the game and already using this model were Manchester United.

The Red Devils were the team that most clubs looked up to due to their dominance in both domestic and European competitions; yet behind the silverware was an academy set-up that was built for success. The fabled Class of '92 was seen as the pinnacle, with the likes of Ryan Giggs, Paul Scholes, David Beckham, Nicky Butt and Gary and Phil Neville establishing themselves as first-team players. Countless others moved on to enjoy successful careers with other clubs in the Premier League and Football League. It was exactly this that Gibson was looking to emulate and that was clear with numerous Old Trafford alumni moving to the Riverside – most notably Robson and Anderson as the club's management team.

As the new millennium dawned it was clear that Middlesbrough were looking to put plans in place for the long term. Gibson was looking for a manager who had the unique skillset of working with high-profile global superstars, while also having the genuine passion for developing youth and providing a pathway to the first-team. There was one candidate who ticked all the boxes and would lead Middlesbrough into the most exciting era in the club's history.