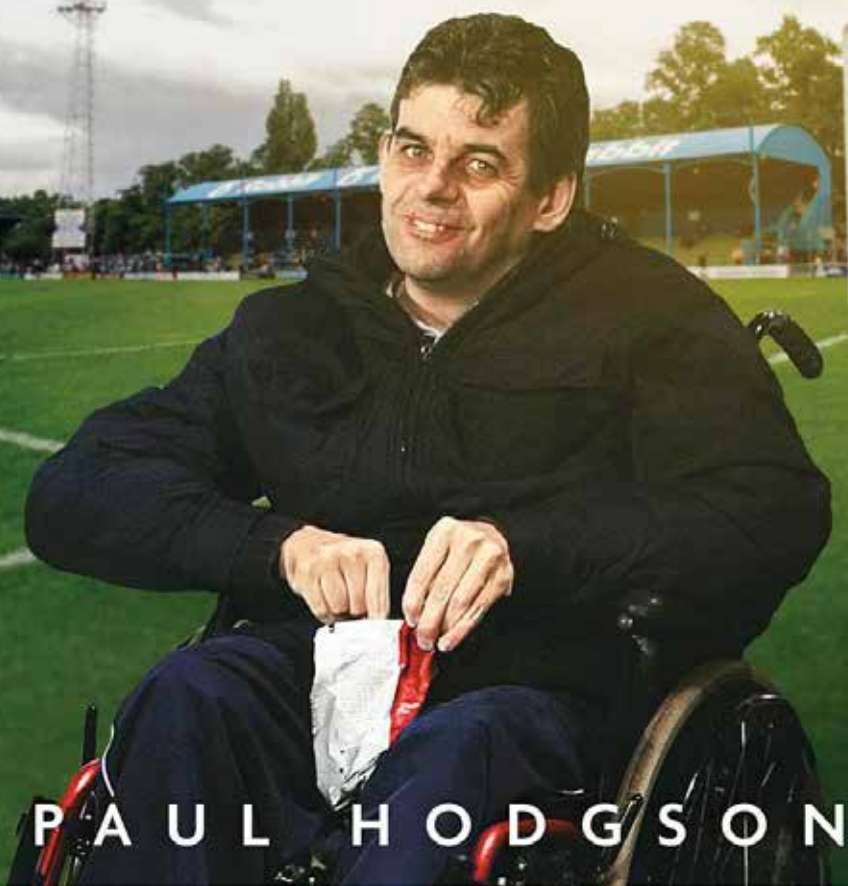


FOR THE LOVE OF DARLO

My Life and Fifty Years
Supporting Darlington FC



PAUL HODGSON

FOR THE LOVE OF
DARLO

My Life and Fifty Years
Supporting Darlington FC

P A U L H O D G S O N



Chapter 1

MY NAME is Paul Hodgson. I was born on 7 March 1965 to Norman and Alice Hodgson in Darlington, County Durham. Interestingly now, I was a perfectly healthy baby boy when I was born.

However, my parents' lives were shattered when I was taken seriously ill at only seven months old. After examining me, our family doctor reassured my mother, telling her not to worry.

This is how my mother remembered the build-up to what happened in late 1965. It goes without saying that she received the earlier information from my father. It may not be 100 per cent factually correct. However, the piece regarding my illness certainly is.

One lunchtime, my father wheeled his bicycle over the cobbles. As he reached the back door to our house, he pushed at the rickety gate, which eventually opened.

He appeared at the back door and my mother looked disapprovingly at his muddy boots and said, 'Don't you even think of coming in here with them on. I've just finished scrubbing the floor.' He put down the basket and bent down to remove his boots.

Anyway, a few minutes later, my father sat down at the table and asked, 'How long is dinner going to be?' My mother replied, 'It's ready.' In the meantime, I was crying in the background. My mother ladled stew while my father washed his hands at the kitchen sink. She then said, 'That's our Paul again. He's hardly slept a wink.' My father ignored the comment as he tucked into his stew.

Finally, after eating two bowls of the stew, my father looked at my mother and asked, 'What did the doctor say is up with our Paul, then?' By this time my mother was cradling me. She replied by revealing, 'He thought he might just be teething and that he might have a bit of a cold, but I told him there's no sign of any teeth coming through yet and to me it looks far more than a cold. Also, I think he's got a rash coming now. What do you reckon?' She then lifted up my clothing for my father to see. He gave the rash a quick glance before stating, 'Look, the doctor said not to worry, so don't. I'm sure he'll be right as rain tomorrow.' Alice glared at him before saying, 'There's more to this than any flaming cold, that's for sure. I'm not stupid.'

Norman then put his boots on followed by his Darlington hat and scarf. My mother looked at him and asked, 'Who are Darlington playing today?' He replied, 'Wrexham. I'll see you later.' With that, without uttering another word, he got up and left the room, leaving my worried mother with a very sick baby in her arms.

Half an hour later, Norman was at the turnstiles at Darlington Football Club. All he could hear was the programme seller shouting, 'Programmes! Come and get your programme here! Only four pence!' As per his routine, he queued up and bought a copy, before heading into the ground.

At almost exactly the same time, Alice brought me a bottle. As she got close to my cot, she noticed something unusual. My face contorted. She paused for a few seconds, not quite believing what she was seeing before looking on in sheer horror and screaming, 'Paul!' She then panicked and rushed out of the room.

A few seconds later, she returned with a neighbour who asked, 'What's this all about Alice? Calm down, just calm down.' My mother by this time was crying uncontrollably. In between the tears, she spluttered out, 'Our Paul's just had a fit. Oh, God, please don't let him die. Please don't let him die!' The neighbour then ran outside and caught the attention of a young boy who was playing football in the street and told him to run to the phone box and ring 999 to get an ambulance. The boy nodded, left his football outside our front door and sprinted down the street towards the phone box.

The neighbour then said to my mother, 'Right, Alice, come with me.' With that, and my mother still cradling me, they went into my parents' bedroom where my neighbour quickly stuffed some clothes into a bag.

Ten minutes later, in the distance the clanging of an ambulance could be heard.

Meanwhile, my father was watching the football, blissfully unaware of what was unfolding at home. All of a sudden, a tannoy announcement blasted around the ground. It said, 'This is an urgent message for Norman Hodgson. Please go to the office immediately.' My father's head was buried in his programme. A supporter tapped him insistently on the shoulder before saying, 'Ere. That's you, Norman.' Norman reacted by barging past the fans in front of him and headed straight to the office, where he was given the news that I'd been rushed into hospital.

On arrival at the hospital, Norman ran towards Alice, almost colliding with a patient who was being wheeled along on a stretcher by an orderly. My sobbing mother held on to him while he caught his breath. Alice cried, 'It's our Paul.' Norman looked at her and then enquired, 'Is he going to be all right?' Alice shrugged her shoulders before revealing, 'I don't know. They've put all sorts of tubes in him. He's in there.' They both peered through the round glass panel of a door. Two doctors and a nurse were bent over me as I was in a cot.

A few days later, my parents were sitting at the specialist's desk eager to hear what was wrong with me.

This is what my mother told me happened that day. Again, the following is not word-for-word factual; however, the story certainly is.

The specialist started by stating, 'Mr and Mrs Hodgson, I've been treating Paul. He's really poorly and after running some tests, we've ascertained that

he's contracted meningococcal meningitis.' My father gave him a questioning look and asked, 'Meningococcal meningitis? What's that?' The specialist replied, 'It's an inflammation of the brain and spinal cord. I must warn you that it's not looking good.' My mother responded by asking, 'What does it mean for Paul?' The specialist shook his head, paused for a few seconds, seemingly not quite sure how to word his next sentence, and then answered by revealing, 'I'm going to be honest with you, Mrs Hodgson. If Paul survives, and I mean IF, he'll suffer brain damage and will never walk. Communication will be extremely difficult, In other words, he will need a lot of care for the rest of his life.'

Alice started to sob and Norman awkwardly tried to comfort her by putting his arm around her shoulder. The specialist continued by saying, 'In the event that Paul does survive, we will be able to see what we can achieve with regard to improving his overall situation. But I can't stress enough that the next few weeks will be critical.' Alice nodded. The specialist went on to explain, 'We can only wait and see as Paul grows and develops what effect this will have on his body. What you both need to think about is whether you are strong enough to cope with a severely disabled child or whether you'd need to place him into care.' My mother vehemently shook her head as tears flowed down her cheeks. After composing herself, she responded by saying, 'That won't happen while I'm around, doctor.' Norman simply remained quiet.