

Warren Turner

GOT THAT LOVIN' FEELIN'



## From Clark to Cooper

Nottingham Forest's  
Unique Story of Turmoil  
and Triumph

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## 1996 and All That

IT'S 1996. If you were there, you might remember it as the year you first used the internet – or 'information superhighway' as some folk, idealistically, still thought of it – after domestic access had quadrupled to four per cent in the previous 12 months. It may have been the first time you owned a mobile phone, a widescreen TV or a PlayStation. Headwinds of change were all about.

Oh, and not forgetting Nottingham Forest, which is what we're here for. Well, 1996 was a pivotal time for the grand old club, too. For the first quarter of the year Forest were the toast of British football, the only – *only* – side from these shores left in European competition, and its supporters, as was their right, revelled in the fact. 'There's only one team in Europe' would get at least one airing per match in the long gap between the end of the UEFA Cup third round, in December, and the quarter-final with Bayern Munich at the start of March. As that date with Bayern drew near, Forest were all over the newspapers and the football magazines, and on your radio and TV. If you followed football, the Tricky Trees were in your eyes and ears.

Fast forward nine months and you see a club in turmoil, stuck at the bottom of the table and grasping for a financial rescuer. So here's where we'll start the journey of Forest's recent history, from the quarter-final first leg, when the Reds

carried the nation's hopes and all seemed possible, to the sorry situation they found themselves in at the end of the year, all the time asking: how did it go so wrong, so quickly?

\* \* \*

The Forest side that arrived in Germany were in decent fettle. They had just arrested a recent slump with a 3-1 win at Sheffield Wednesday – leaving them ninth in the Premier League – and were further boosted by Stuart Pearce's return from a six-week injury lay-off. The media glare they were under was a pleasant if slightly bamboozling novelty, recalls centre-back Steve Chettle, who was by this time in his tenth year as a first-team player, 'The BBC covered that game [against Bayern] and we were in the hotel with the pundits, and everything else, and it was bizarre, really, because we'd not had that coverage for so long.'

Forest came away from the first leg with a creditable 2-1 defeat, the away goal coming from Chettle's header from a free kick. They spent much of the night on the back foot but defended tightly. There was encouragement for the second leg and the squad felt it. 'We were confident,' says Chettle. 'Right at the beginning of the tournament we were in the same situation against Malmö. We knew we only needed a goal to go through, and our defensive exploits in the competition were really good. We kept clean sheets against Auxerre and Lyon and got through without conceding a goal against either team.'

In front of 28,844 at a noisy and expectant City Ground, Forest penned Bayern back inside their own half for 28 breathless minutes. They had chances, too, with Bryan Roy, Pearce and Colin Cooper going close. But the Reds' hopes were then crushed as Chettle was adjudged, harshly, to have fouled Jürgen Klinsmann in an aerial duel, and the resulting free kick saw Christian Ziege find the net with a low effort that bounced under Mark Crossley.

The Bavarians were just too smart, too wily, for Forest after that. ‘We had to go and chase the game,’ Chettle says. ‘And we were playing against possibly the highest calibre of player at that time around Europe, even though it was the UEFA Cup – against [Jean-Pierre] Papin, Klinsmann and the people that’d played in the German national team for so long. And they picked us off.’

We need not say more about that game, except to state that Bayern went on to score four more, with Steve Stone netting a late consolation. You might expect such a savage defeat to have a lasting effect on the Forest squad, though Chettle disputes this: ‘It was obviously a crushing blow, from thinking you’ve got a chance to getting beat by five. But I don’t know whether it, deep down, had a psychological effect on the next half a season.’

As if to prove the point, Forest produced one of their most convincing displays of the season in beating title-chasing Liverpool at the City Ground three days later. The hosts capped a first half of front-foot football with a Stone goal on 42 minutes, and then demonstrated their defensive obduracy after the break to shut the visitors out.

Subsequent newspaper write-ups, however, were concerned less about the on-pitch action than the barracking from the stands directed at Stan Collymore, making a return to Nottingham after his £8.5m transfer to Anfield the previous summer. The striker was made to toil that afternoon under a relentless stream of boos and jeers, punctuated by chants of ‘Judas’ and ‘There’s only one greedy bastard’. As Liverpool manager Roy Evans hooked Collymore on 70 minutes, a cheer went up of comparable volume to that which greeted Stone’s winner. ‘This was the unacceptable face of football ’96,’ wrote *Guardian* reporter Neil Robinson. ‘Beyond reason and deeply unpleasant.’

This writer, who was at the game, would not dispute that description, but would add that time has eased the scorn felt

towards Collymore. Nowadays, it would be difficult to find a Forest fan from the mid-1990s who did not recount Stan's exploits with fondness, and his inclusion in the club's official all-time XI, drawn up from a poll of season ticket holders in 2016, proved that softening of feeling.

\* \* \*

The win over Liverpool left Forest with a reasonable chance of qualifying for the following season's UEFA Cup through their Premier League placing. Although the Reds lay seven points off fifth-placed Arsenal, who occupied the last qualifying berth, they did have two games in hand over the London club.

A 1-0 defeat at Wimbledon on 30 March slowed down that challenge for the top five, however, in a grubby game that this time saw a Forest player at the wrong end of merciless treatment from the stands: Jason Lee, starting up front, was targeted over and over for his so-called 'pineapple' hairstyle.

Lee had run the gauntlet of mocking chants for several weeks after a TV sketch by Frank Skinner and David Baddiel that lampooned him as a clumsy, bumbling fool who wore dreadlocks in the shape of a pineapple. The pair cheerfully brushed off the criticism that came their way and continued to stoke the terrace mockery through their *Fantasy Football League* show.

As the chants continued in subsequent matches, Lee declined to publicly speak out against his mockers. However, he made his feelings clear after scoring at Leeds in a 3-1 win on 8 April, holding up his hair to the Elland Road supporters with rueful defiance on his face.

In a 2020 interview, Lee gave more clues as to the hurt he felt at the time. 'Baddiel and Skinner, did they realise the impact of what they were saying, how it affected so many people?' he said. 'When the show was going out, I was invited on and I declined because I was 23 years of age. As far as I

was concerned, I had better things to do. I'm not going to laugh with you, laughing at me, when I'm trying to take myself seriously and build a career.'

Skinner has publicly upbraided himself over the sketch but had yet to make a direct apology by the time this book was published. Lee did eventually get a face-to-face 'sorry' from Baddiel as part of a 2022 interview for his AbsoluteLee YouTube channel. Though the apology was accepted, the former comedian remains on probation. 'I think it was important to try and draw a line under it,' Lee said in a *Guardian* piece. 'There is no point apologising and then going out and putting your foot in it and continuing to make grave errors. It is a process. You have to give people the opportunity to apologise and prove that they are sincere. The first part is the apology and now let's see how you conduct yourself.' Baddiel and Skinner's antics look like an artefact from an alien culture from today's viewpoint. Yet the fallout goes on.

\* \* \*

That triumph at Leeds, off the back of a 2-1 home win over Tottenham, pushed Forest up to eighth and just four points behind Arsenal with a game in hand. A win over Blackburn Rovers the following Saturday would have put fifth place in tantalising range, only Blackburn did what Blackburn were wont to do for much of the '90s: they thrashed Forest with devastating efficiency. This time the Lancashire side netted five, with one Ian Woan goal in reply. Forest were actually quite tidy in possession and troubled the visitors down the flanks, but with Bryan Roy out through injury the attacking threat through the centre was blunted. The front two of Jason Lee and Kevin Campbell were no match for Rovers' hardy centre-backs Colin Hendry and Chris Coleman.

Roy's absence proved that Forest lacked the squad depth necessary to sustain a challenge for the European places. Lee, to his credit, had scored eight top-flight goals over the season



while Campbell was a decent finisher and unselfish team player whose time at Forest would come. Neither, though, shared Roy's ability to dribble at pace ('The thing is that he doesn't slow down when he gets the ball,' Steve Stone once said of him) and to create openings with one-touch play around the box. In combination they didn't possess the guile to concern most Premier League defences.

The addition of Andrea Silenzi in the summer of 1995 had been designed to address the shortage of options up front. But by the spring of '96, the Italian striker was largely out of the first-team picture. His £1.8m signature stands as a costly lapse for a club that turned over £16m in the 1995–96 financial year. There were better ways for that money to have been spent, to put it lightly, but it's a mistake that manager Frank Clark owns up to unreservedly. 'Silenzi is the only player I've signed without seeing,' Clark admitted to the *Garibaldi Reds* podcast. 'I rang a couple of people and watched some videos of him. I spoke to [former England coach] Don Howe, who gave a very good opinion. I looked at his CV and at that time he was in the Italian national squad and a regular in Serie A. I weighed it up and took a chance on him.

'He found it very difficult to cope with England, with the training. It wasn't so much the weather, as he came from Turin where it gets cold. It just didn't go for him. I don't blame everybody else but myself. I have to accept full responsibility.'

Forest's next three fixtures ended with a haul of two points – home draws with Coventry and Newcastle, and a 5-0 defeat at Manchester United – before the season was rounded off with a 3-0 win over Queens Park Rangers. That left them in ninth – down from 1995's third-placed finish but still a respectable achievement, and one that was accompanied by runs to the quarter-finals of both the UEFA Cup and FA Cup.

Perhaps, if Stuart Pearce hadn't been laid off for six weeks with a calf injury, Forest could have put Arsenal under pressure for fifth. The skipper's absence coincided with a run of three

defeats in a row, two of which were by the odd goal. Pearce, for his part, was much blunter in his assessment of why Forest had to settle for mid-table. 'From the time Stan [Collymore] left we began to slip,' he wrote in *Psycho: the Autobiography*. 'The average players who had been overachieving went back to being average and worse. Instead of playing to capacity, there were too many players performing below par.'

Off the pitch, Nottingham Forest Limited had returned to profitability over the last 12 months, as its 1995–96 report and accounts were to reveal. The financial good cheer led chairman Fred Reacher to announce in the report, 'It is definitely in our thoughts to build a new Main Stand in the foreseeable future.' At the time of writing, the 1960s-built stand, now named almost insultingly after club legend Peter Taylor, continues to squat incongruously by the side of the pitch, a visible reminder of Forest's lengthy spell on the outside of the Premier League's golden gates prior to promotion in 2022.

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Despite the apparent improvement in Nottingham Forest's financial health, Clark was informed by the club's hierarchy at the end of 1995/96 that there would be no significant pot for summer signings. The board's stance soon changed, Clark claimed in his autobiography, over fears of a drop in season ticket sales.

And so three new faces were brought in. The first, Chris Allen, had played a handful of games on loan to Forest the previous season. An unpredictable winger, in the sense that his awkward ball control would send him in unexpected directions as he ran at opposition defences, Allen somehow made enough of an impression to warrant a permanent stay with a reported £500,000 heading to Oxford United in return. Dean Saunders then arrived from Galatasaray, his £1.5m fee an extraordinary amount to pay for a 32-year-old striker who had never scored more than 17 top-division goals in a season.

Next up came Nikola Jerkan, the £1m Croatian defender who had caught Frank Clark's eye with his Euro '96 performances. 'He controlled everything, strolling out from the back to set up attacks,' Clark reflected. This intriguing signing signalled that Clark was preparing to evolve Forest's style with a greater emphasis on playing the ball out from the back. This was a facet of play that Clark's sides had not excelled at, nor attempted to do with regularity: their successes had been built on counter-attacking football – fast, one-touch and often direct. The big problem with Jerkan, though, was that he moved at a strolling pace in any situation, whether carrying the ball or going after it, and aged 31 he wasn't going to get any faster.

For one fleeting but marvellous 90 minutes of football, Forest's biggest summer signings played their part to great effect. It happened on 17 August, the opening match of the new season, as the Reds came away from Coventry with a 3-0 win. Kevin Campbell – whose time at Forest had been marred by injuries – looked fresh, sharp and confident as he netted a hat-trick, with two of those efforts assisted by Saunders. Jerkan played a full 90 minutes as part of a back four that kept a welcome clean sheet.

'Campbell and Saunders will be a potent combination,' purred Clark after that resounding victory. 'They really hit it off together and provide so much movement up front. It gives us an added dimension.' He was not the only one looking ahead with confidence, grins Steve Chettle. 'Mark Crossley said once previously, when we beat Liverpool in the first live Premier League game [in 1992/93], that we're going to do well this season. In his wisdom, in the showers, he said the same thing after Coventry. I blame Norm for everything.'

To be fair to Big Norm (who got the nickname over his resemblance to *Cheers* barfly Norm Peterson), nobody could have foretold the horrific form that Forest would subsequently endure – 16 Premier League games without a win in a run stretching until 21 December.

That streak began with a 4-1 home defeat to newly promoted Sunderland, where the frailties of Forest's new back four were brutally exposed: central defenders Chettle and Jerkan were overwhelmed in the air by the visitors, who bagged two headed goals, while Colin Cooper, who had been shifted from centre-back to the right of defence, looked somewhat unsettled in his new berth. Clark, though, kept faith with largely the same defensive personnel for the next three matches and his side shared the spoils with Middlesbrough (1-1), Southampton (2-2) and Leicester City (1-1).

But then the defeats arrived with increasing regularity. Forest's 12 games post-Leicester yielded eight losses, four draws and just seven goals. Saunders contributed just a single strike to that tally and Jerkan, in the meantime, lost his place in the starting XI and would rarely be seen again in Garibaldi red. There were two reasons for this: first, he lacked authority in the air, a problem that had been masked from Clark's eyes by his more aerially combative national team colleagues Slaven Bilić and Igor Štimac.

The 16th match of Forest's winless streak – a 4-2 defeat at Anfield on 17 December – spelled the end of Clark's reign. In typically dignified fashion, he offered himself up for blame for the poor form and tendered his resignation, despite having 18 months to run on his contract. 'I wasn't sleeping well and had lost faith in the methods that had always served me well,' Clark wrote. With his love for the club also heavy on his mind, he decided to get out in time for a successor to have a reasonable chance to turn the ship around. Old school, in the best possible way.

Clark was too modest to admit it, but he did have a hard luck story to tell. Campbell sustained a hamstring injury in the Southampton draw that put him out for eight games and Stone ruptured a patella tendon against Leicester, an injury that ended his season. There was a case to be made for the manager being a victim of misfortune and Saunders was keen

to put forward that message after a 1-1 home draw with Derby on 19 October, 'When you lose people like Steve Stone and Kevin Campbell, the problems start. Bryan Roy has been hurt, too, and now ricked his back quite badly. Manchester United might have the quality of reserves to plug those gaps. At Forest, we don't find it so easy.'

That's when, however, Clark's missteps in the transfer market really bit hard. To have £4.8m worth of players – Silenzi, Allen, Jerkan and Saunders – either contributing little on the pitch or skulking in the background was too much for Forest, with its running sore of an overdraft, to bear. Just as the team became short of overall Premier League quality, there was no means of buying a way out of trouble. The search for new owners who could inject the necessary capital for a squad rebuild had started in September, but while Forest's current corporate structure remained in place, Clark's successor would have to make do and mend.