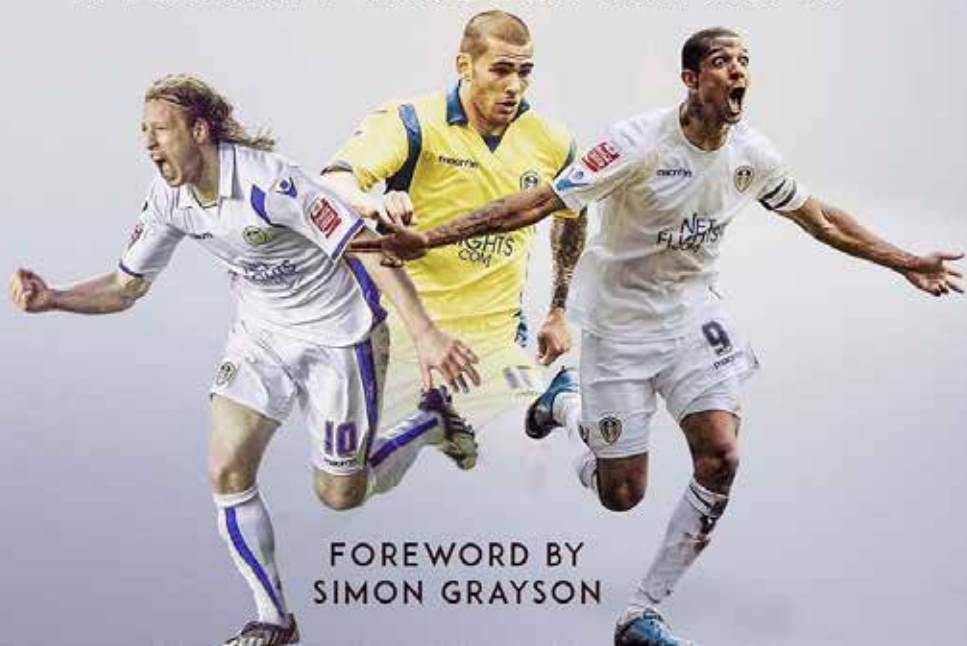


ROCCO DEAN



LEAGUE ONE
LEEDS

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE ABYSS



FOREWORD BY
SIMON GRAYSON

LEAGUE ONE
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R O C C O D E A N



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PART ONE: 2007/08
US AGAINST THE WORLD

Union Berlin 2 Leeds United 0

Pre-season friendly

Alte Forsterei (7,602)

'The players really wanted to play for Leeds United. It wasn't about the money because the money wasn't great, they just wanted to play for Leeds.' – Casper Ankergrøn

Leeds United entered the third tier of English football with Ken Bates as owner, Dennis Wise as manager and Shaun Harvey as CEO. If that's not rock bottom just shoot me now! I never thought I'd live to see my beloved club relegated from the Championship, but the pain of relegation was overshadowed by a much darker reality, the uncertainty surrounding the club's very existence. With unserviceable debts totalling £35m, Bates had put United into administration and the whole summer was dominated by legal wrangling.

The potential saving grace of Leeds's on-field humiliation was the opportunity to start afresh, with no debt and an owner who had the club's best interests at heart. There were five consortiums competing to take control – one of which was led by Duncan Revie, the son of the great Don Revie, who had put Leeds United on the map. I was excited by the prospect of the club being back in the hands of a Revie again; instead, the very people responsible for putting Leeds in this mess regained control by the slenderest of margins. The winning bid required 75 per cent backing to succeed and, after a recount, the Bates regime prevailed with 75.2 per cent of the creditors' vote, this despite offering just a penny in the pound to the creditors. Bates's offer was significantly less than the competitors, but was the best offer overall thanks to Astor Investment Holdings mysteriously agreeing to waive their £17m debt if Bates was given the club. There was a 28-day cooling-off period for any unhappy creditors to lodge appeals, but possession is nine-

tenths of the law and Bates had the keys to Elland Road so continued to run the club as best he could (theoretically).

It would be fair to say the supporters didn't take kindly to the news that the hierarchy who took Leeds to the lowest point in their history were back at the helm, and Bates was already unpopular with the fans long before he got his hands on their club. Being ex-Chelsea was a bad start, his outspoken nature and dodgy dealings were a nuisance, but historic declarations of war on Leeds United were unforgivable in the eyes of many, even two decades on from when the following quote emerged, 'I shall not rest until Leeds United are kicked out of the Football League. Their fans are the scum of the earth, absolute animals and a disgrace. I will do everything in my power to make sure this happens.'

Irrespective of his past, I saw Bates as a shrewd businessman who was capable of leading the club out of League One, but the fact he had led us there in the first place was enough for me to always join in fervently with regular chants of 'GET THE CHELSEA OUT OF LEEDS!' Those chants were water off a duck's back to old 'Cuddly Ken', who wasn't shy in giving it back to the supporters either, 'Dennis, Gus and myself are here for the long haul. So the mindless minority who do their silly chants had better get used to it.' It was a sentiment reflected by the manager, who would not shy away from his unpopularity either, 'The supporters don't like Batesy and they don't particularly like me, but they've got us. It's time to march on and stick together.'

Their comments were a little premature. On 3 July, just an hour before the 3pm deadline for creditor appeals, HMRC – who were due to receive only £77,000 from a £7.7m debt – lodged an appeal against the awarding of the club to Bates, this despite Bates increasing his offer to 8p in the pound to stave off any legal challenge (thus increasing the payment due to HMRC to £616,000). It wasn't so much the offer they were

unhappy with, but the technical grounds on which the club was sold back to Bates. On 6 July, with the hearing for HMRC's appeal set for 3 September, the administrators had no choice but to put Leeds United back up for sale. They didn't have the funds to run the club for two months in lieu of a new owner, and even if they did, the Football League were unlikely to permit Leeds to start the season in administration. With just three days to prepare bids with proof of funding, there was only one competitor for Bates, so this time there was no surprise that the club was once again sold to his newly formed company, Leeds United Football Club Limited. Bates paid £1.5m for the club, with the creditors now receiving 11.2p in the pound (with the exception of Astor Investment, whose £17m was duly written off).

Jermaine Beckford: 'I fully understand how Ken Bates rubbed people up the wrong way. From a fan's perspective – someone who appreciates and cares for the club like it's their own – you can't help but look at the administration situation and think, "How on earth has he been able to do this and get away with it?" But successful people have to do certain things to get their own way, especially if it's something they truly believe in. And it was for the greater good. The club was going down the pan, it was inevitable they would have ended up in financial ruin.'

That wasn't the end of it though; it was just the start. Because of HMRC's legal challenge, Leeds were unable to exit administration with a CVA (a statement confirming the majority of creditors agreed to the sale) as required by Football League rules. Instead, the administrators had made a direct sale to Bates, and without a CVA the Football League refused to grant Leeds their 'golden share' to compete in the 2007/08 season. Amid the uncertainty, season ticket holders received

a letter from Bates explaining that season ticket money would be refunded if Leeds couldn't start the season. If the letter was supposed to be reassuring it had the opposite effect on me; I found it absolutely galling. A £400 refund would be scant consolation for having no football club to support.

Due to the administration palaver Leeds had no competition to prepare for, they were operating under a transfer embargo, and they hadn't paid their players for six weeks.

Jonny Howson: 'Yeah, I managed all right for money. I was still living at home with my mum and dad, and they didn't charge me rent or board or anything like that, so I was fortunate. But you are aware that other people's careers and livelihoods were on the line. As much it didn't affect me, I had the passion and love, and grew up supporting Leeds, but of course there were others who thought, "I'm not sticking around for this."'

The club soldiered on with their pre-season plans regardless, and a 20-man squad headed to Germany on a tour. Frazer Richardson, Jonathan Douglas, Seb Carole, Ian Westlake, Trésor Kandol and Jermaine Beckford were the retained first-teamers, with Jonny Howson, Ben Parker, Fabian Delph, Tom Elliot and Rob Bayly brought along from the youth team. Alan Thompson, Matt Heath, Rui Marques and Tore André Flo were hoping to earn new contracts once the transfer embargo was lifted, and they were joined by five trialists who weren't just making up the numbers. Among them was David Prutton, a 27-year-old midfielder who had played over 200 games for Nottingham Forest and Southampton, with over 60 of those coming in the Premier League. Another was Leon Constantine, who was hot property having scored 22 goals in League One for Port Vale the previous season. It was indicative of what a huge pull Leeds United were at this level, that this calibre of player would join for pre-season with no guarantee

of a contract and plenty of other options on the table, and it was heartwarming to know how much the squad that travelled to Germany really wanted to play for Leeds.

David Prutton: 'As soon as I knew Leeds was an option I didn't really want to go anywhere else. There was an element of risk, but as a group we trusted that Dennis would put a contract in front of us as soon as he could, and presumed Ken Bates would sort out the administration side. Plus, when you're young and in your 20s you don't really worry about all that! "Leeds United want me to go and play for them? Yes please! I'm there with bells on, give me the white shirt!"'

My friends Paul, Rick, Gaz and I also made the trip to Berlin. We spent three days in the historic German capital and had a great time. We didn't take in any culture, did no sight-seeing and took no photos, we simply drank all day in the blazing sun while playing four-way poker (using Tic-Tacs as chips), then drank all night. The match with Union Berlin was the only break in the cycle, although the early evening kick-off meant we could still drink all day in the blazing sun, but instead of playing poker we chatted and chanted with the rest of the Leeds fans before heading to the ground. The game itself is a blur (surprise, surprise), but I remember being stood on a decrepit terrace behind the goal with no roof to shade us from the still-blazing sun, and being impressed by the atmosphere in a small and unloved stadium. Less impressive were Leeds, who played like the bunch of strangers they practically were.

After a 2-0 defeat we were back in Berlin replenishing our alcohol levels when we realised Dennis Wise and his coaching staff were sitting at the table next to us, on the other side of some shrubbery. We began discussing how much we hated our manager in obnoxiously loud voices, resulting in Wise's

assistant, Gus Poyet, coming over and pleading with us to have more respect for the man who had dragged our play-off finalists down to League One. Sadly, the German lager robbed me of any further memories of the altercation, although I do remember chatting in the bar with Alan Thompson, who was singing Wise's praises and adamant he would lead us back to the Championship. The positive feeling towards the management team was unanimous throughout the squad.

Jemaine Beckford: 'Dennis and Gus were a great double act. From the outside looking in you would think Gus was the nice guy and Wise was the beast, but it wasn't like that, they could each be the good cop or the bad cop. They bounced off each other really well.'

It had been an unprecedentedly turbulent summer, but at 6.30pm on Friday, 3 August, just one week before the season began, Leeds were finally granted their golden share, securing their place in League One. However, it came at an unprecedented cost: they would begin the new season on minus 15 points. It was the heaviest points deduction ever handed out by the Football League, who explained that with no creditor-backed CVA, Ken Bates had effectively wiped out the club's debts just by calling in the administrators, an act that could not go unpunished. Bates immediately appealed against the points deduction, but two days before the season started the sanction was confirmed following a vote by the chairmen of the other Football League clubs. As Bates had signed an agreement that no legal action could be taken against the Football League the matter was considered closed, but he would not take the decision lying down and appealed to the FA for their intervention. Bates labelled the ruling 'an unlawful miscarriage of justice' and believed the issue should have been handled by an independent tribunal, not by 69 self-interested competitors.

‘They’ve already cut off my arms and legs, now they’ve cut my balls off as well,’ was the famous quote from Wise, and with only five clubs voting in Leeds’s favour a siege mentality was created within Elland Road. ‘Us against the world’ had been at the heart of Leeds’s mantra since the club was founded out of the ashes of Leeds City, who were expelled from the Football League for fielding ineligible players during the First World War, a practice that was understood to be common throughout the league. Fast forward 88 years, and under similarly shady circumstances the club had at least managed to retain their place in the Football League and keep their name (except for the ‘A’ from ‘Leeds United AFC’, and I really liked that letter). Finding solace in these two minimum requirements was really scraping the bottom of the barrel, and Ray Fell, chairman of the Leeds United Supporters’ Club, summarised the feelings of the fanbase, ‘The fans are bewildered by it all. It is a recipe for relegation.’

The fear of relegation was backed up by the past, the present, and the predictors of the future. In the history of English football only six teams had received points deductions and they had all been relegated at the end of the season. History only dictates so much, but in the here and now Wise’s team had lost six of their last seven pre-season friendlies, and the bookies – so often correct – slashed the odds for Leeds being relegated to League Two. I braced myself for the worst as Leeds jumped into the abyss.

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Tranmere Rovers 1 Leeds United 2

Matchday 1 of 46

Prenton Park (11,008)

‘Minus 15 made the squad stronger. You had nothing to lose. Typical Dennis Wise, us against them, that’s his character.’ – Casper Ankergrén

The new season was finally upon us and Leeds were alive and kicking, 24th in League One and 15 points adrift without kicking a ball. Despite having only eight days to sign players, by kick-off at Tranmere Wise had scrambled a squad together and believed he had a 'group' that was strong enough to overcome their 15-point deficit and achieve promotion.

Without the weight of a £35m debt around his neck, Bates was feeling flush and sanctioned a £500,000 spending spree once the transfer embargo was lifted. 'Don't spend it all at once,' he might have said, but within 24 hours Wise had spent the lot on nine players. The majority went on Norwich City's versatile midfielder Andy Hughes, the trialists and out-of-contract players were rewarded with the deals they were promised, and the remaining funds were spent bringing Casper Ankergrén back from Brøndby. The Danish goalkeeper had spent the second half of the previous season on loan at Elland Road, and his recollections of summer 2007 portray the instability that was forced upon the players, although in Casper's case it was self-inflicted.

Casper Ankergrén: 'Dennis Wise really wanted to keep me, but I still had a contract with Brøndby who wanted to sell me to a Norwegian club. I completely shut that down. I really wanted to go back to Leeds because I felt the passion the people had for football, even if that meant waiting until the end of the transfer window. It was only four days before the season started that I finally signed. I hadn't played, or even had a proper pre-season, but I was straight in at Tranmere.'

One signing who wouldn't be making his debut at Tranmere was Leon Constantine. An ankle injury in the final pre-season match robbed Dennis Wise of his new striker for the first three months of 2007/08, so Leeds would start with a duo

who had only played together once for the club. Physically they looked like they could be a decent partnership – Trésor Kandol was big and Jermaine Beckford was fast – but both were as raw as it comes. Kandol was 25 and had only scored a dozen professional-level goals, while Beckford was 23 and had only played half a season in professional football.

Jermaine Beckford: 'My loan at Scunthorpe did wonders for me. I was playing games, scoring goals, winning games, and getting an understanding of what it takes to be a professional footballer. It reinforced my belief that I was good enough, that I was capable, that I could make it in the game.'

A historic afternoon for Leeds United was a landmark occasion for right-back Frazer Richardson, who would make his 100th appearance for the club at Prenton Park. Richardson was one of a teamful of graduates that came through the fruitful Thorp Arch academy around the turn of the century, and if fate hadn't transpired so badly Leeds could have been opening the 2007/08 season with a team of homegrown players who were in, or approaching, their prime: Paul Robinson, Frazer Richardson, Ian Harte, Jonathan Woodgate, Matt Kilgallon, Matthew Jones, Stephen McPhail, James Milner, Aaron Lennon, Alan Smith and, well, Scott Carson I suppose. Instead, the historic starting 11 was: Casper Ankergrén, Frazer Richardson, Eddie Lewis, Rui Marques, Matt Heath, Andy Hughes, Alan Thompson, Curtis Weston, Ian Westlake, Jermaine Beckford and Trésor Kandol.

I was 23 years old and still living at home, and working for my dad's flood restoration business, Chem-Dry of Harrogate, who were dealing with the worst flooding (or best, in our eyes) to hit the UK since records began. In non-flood times we would have 30 to 40 ongoing jobs, but now we were dealing with 1,300; a challenge of epic proportions. The handful of

trained staff we had weren't allowed any time off – we worked around the clock for seven days a week, and even holidays were cancelled – so, instead of being in the ground for the opening day of the League One season, I was driving back to Yorkshire from Surrey.

Leeds United playing their first ever game in England's third tier was big news, and I was pleased to be receiving regular updates from talkSPORT while racing against time to get back into Radio Leeds bandwidth and catch what I could of the full match commentary. I was less pleased when what might have been a regular, halfway-through-the-half update, gleefully revealed that Leeds had fallen behind. At least it was a Leeds fan who scored the first goal of the League One era, and Tranmere's Chris Greenacre couldn't resist giving a quick 'Leeds salute' to the travelling fans behind the goal. It was a fittingly bizarre way to open what was fast becoming the most bizarre season in the club's history. talkSPORT's half-time report suggested the visitors were lucky to only be a goal behind, but the Whites came out fighting after the break and deservedly levelled through Matt Heath.

It was pedal to the metal up the M1. With a vanful of dehumidifiers it was difficult to exceed the speed limit, but I gave it everything I could. Meadowhall is a significant milestone on the journey up the M1 as it confirms entry back into Yorkshire, and at this point the struggle to receive Radio Leeds commenced. As the game headed into its final minutes I was still failing to get reception, so it was through talkSPORT that I learned of a dramatic last-gasp winner in the big game in League One. It had gone to Leeds, with Kandol somehow bundling a cross from Andy Hughes through the goalkeeper's legs and into the net. I was ecstatic; what a way to start the season!

Thereafter I managed to tune in to Radio Leeds and rejoice in all the post-game reaction, with everyone seemingly stunned

at what they had witnessed. Even more stunning than the lucky late winner was Kandol's subsequent cartwheel (quite an achievement for a man of his size and elegance) but most stunning of all was the transformation in team spirit for the second half. The lads had pulled together like a proper team, not just a bunch of players thrown together in the final days of pre-season. Dennis Wise had clearly instilled an 'us against the world' attitude, although he was hardly selling rain to the Mancunians – considering the goings-on of the summer it was impossible for the squad to feel any different.

After saluting the Leeds fans at the final whistle, the players, led by Wise, formed a big celebratory huddle in the middle of the pitch. 'You can't pre-plan celebrations like that after the game,' said Wise. 'That was natural. That shows how close the group is.' The Whites were up and running, and according to their manager it was a case of three points down, just another 102 to go.

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Leeds United 4 Southend United 1

Matchday 2 of 46

Elland Road (24,005)

'Playing for Leeds United, there's pressure every single second! But the biggest pressure came from ourselves because we knew what we were capable of.' – Jermaine Beckford

'Welcome back,' wrote Ken Bates proudly in his first programme notes of the season. 'Yes, we are still here despite the best efforts of opportunists, politicians and certain people who acted simply from motive of malice.' Bates was on the charm offensive, explaining that the club had been restructured to be 'leaner and meaner', and talking up the investments made to improve the matchday experience for the fans.