



MARCELO

# BIELSA

The Foundation of Success  
at Leeds United

Prologue by  
Rafael Bielsa

SALIM LAMRANI

M A R C E L O  
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S A L I M L A M R A N I

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## An Intense Pre-season

THE SIX weeks of pre-season would give Marcelo Bielsa time to perfect his knowledge of all the first team and the academy players and to meticulously organise the long days of training. In order to improve living and working conditions at the training ground of Thorp Arch, the coach would ask for the realisation of a series of works. The pre-season would also allow for the transmission of values to the professional group, who would plan a nice surprise for Bielsa on his birthday. Finally, the long cycle of preparation would end with a series of six friendly games against opponents of different levels, which would put the team in the best conditions for the start of the Championship.

### **The arrival of Marcelo Bielsa**

The appointment of Bielsa sparked a notable enthusiasm among the fans and some interest on the part of the media.

‘The best coach in the world,’ according to Pep Guardiola – a title that the Argentine always rejected – decided to settle in Yorkshire, accept the challenge of trying to rise to the Premier League after a long absence and at the same time to propose to England a different style of football, with results and beauty. I remember the words of Marcelo about his game plan, ‘Coaches can only transmit their convictions to the players. We will try to be protagonists, to have possession of the ball, to make transitions by passing on the floor and to be loyal to our rivals, without forgetting to develop our adaptability in case of difficulty.’

Andrea Radrizzani, president of the club, expressed his satisfaction at succeeding in bringing a great name of world football to the north of England. He knew that recruiting Bielsa increased the chances of achieving the great goal of promotion to the elite after a long journey through the desert, and responding to the collective aspiration of the fans. ‘It is a very exciting day for the club. We are starting a new chapter in our life and we are very honoured that Marcelo has chosen this club. Marcelo’s background and his career speak by themselves. We believe that his philosophy and his vision reflect our desire to be a winning club. We have the same goal, we have the same dream,’ he expressed with joy.

The reasons that led Marcelo to accept the offer from the legendary English club were multiple. First, he affirmed, ‘Leeds, as a popular expression, corresponds to the feelings

that stimulate me and the emotions that inhabit me.’ In addition, the project built by Radrizzani, Angus Kinnear and Víctor Orta offered solid bases for the future and the sporting possibilities of promotion to the Premier League were real. On the other hand, the players had the necessary characteristics to adopt the style of play of Bielsa. The team was gifted with great mental strength, technical quality, intelligence to interpret the game, physical courage and competitive spirit. Those ingredients, essential for the development of Bielsa’s footballing concept, were present in the group. Before giving a final answer to Leeds’ offer, Marcelo analysed the 53 games the team played in 2017/18, including friendly encounters, which allowed him to forge a very precise understanding of the professional group.

The sporting direction worked in total osmosis with the Argentine coach to design the squad. ‘I found, in Víctor Orta and the president, interlocutors who did not commit to anything they were not sure of delivering on,’ Marcelo remembered. Thus, the players already integrated into the new project remained at the club for the most part. Other members of the professional group – about 15 altogether – were invited to leave, because the coach could not guarantee the playing time that every professional deserves. So as not to harm the often brief career of footballers, Bielsa always preferred to work with limited groups and only retain those who would play an important role during the season, in order to allow others to take advantage of the opportunities at other

clubs. Five additional players would be added to the selected group, as well as young players from the academy. Marcelo wanted to have a total of 22 players, including 18 'starters' of the same level and four youngsters. He always prioritised performance over experience, 'Youth is not an obstacle to being a starting player. You just have to be the best.'

As a great connoisseur of the uncertainties of professional football, but without losing his ambition, Bielsa did not guarantee a promotion to the Premier League to the fans and gave proof of humility in the face of the magnitude of the task, 'Promising when there are no certainties is reckless. I prefer acts to promises. On the other hand, it is impossible not to get excited with this objective.' Indeed, the Championship, with its 46 matches, is the longest in the world and has two games per week for about half of its duration. The competition is fearsome and must be approached in an informed manner and with modesty. 'But, like all coaches, I am optimistic by nature,' added Marcelo. Deep down, he had no other purpose than promotion. He knew what Leeds meant to the fans, who identified with the badge, and their loyalty to the team, particularly during the away games, was total, 'I know everything a foreigner can absorb about the club. The city lives for the team.'

The language barrier was not an obstacle for the transmission of thought and ideas. In addition to the constant presence of an interpreter, Marcelo had rudimentary English that allowed him to express himself. But he also had other

forms of communication to convey his football philosophy. 'Emotion is the best activator of the footballing qualities of a player,' he said.

### **The first meeting with the players**

The first collective meeting with the players took place on the first day of the pre-season at the end of June 2018. It barely lasted for a few minutes and was a markedly sober affair. Bielsa, accompanied by Orta and Radrizzani, went down to the changing room where the players were to greet them and to express their satisfaction at being able to undertake, with a talented group, an ambitious collective project. A principle that Bielsa has always respected throughout his career motivated the brevity of his intervention. According to him, 'In order to be heard, a leader should speak little. The less one needs to talk, the better a coach he is, because that means that you communicate through the actions you propose in training. A style is acquired not by repeated use of words, but by practical facts that allow assimilation of the desired habit.'

Pablo Hernández, former Spanish international and the most experienced of the group, shared his enthusiasm at the idea of working with Bielsa, 'He is an important figure of world football and all coaches have great respect for him.' Similarly, it was one of the reasons that persuaded Patrick Bamford to sign for United, 'It is a great club endowed with strong ambitions and it is led by a prestigious coach. Look

what managers like Pep Guardiola or Mauricio Pochettino say about him. The decision was easy to make.' Adam Forshaw had also ardently encouraged Bamford to join the group by praising Bielsa's methods.

On a personal basis, the first player I met when I started my work was Gjanni Alioski, who came to the training ground a few days before the start of the pre-season to greet the club employees. I liked him immediately and I knew from day one that I would get along with him. He reminded me of a childhood friend, and his spontaneity and vitality elicited affection. His *joie de vivre* was healthy for the group, and his ebullience was always greeted with benevolence because it was always motivated by good intentions. While he liked to be the joker and entertain his team-mates, his intelligence was remarkable and allowed him to speak fluently no fewer than six languages. He excelled in German and in Albanian, his two mother tongues, and spoke very well in French, Spanish, English and especially in Italian. That is why we took quickly the custom of communicating in Italian, a language of extraordinary beauty that we both liked. Instead, when I wanted to have a professional conversation with him before a game, I naturally opted for French, which gave a ceremonial tone to the exchange, and Gjanni's jovial face was immediately transformed and took on a more serious expression. That ritual arose spontaneously and lasted all season.

I always felt great respect from him. Gjanni owns the beautiful virtues that characterise the boys of

popular neighbourhoods: respect for the elderly, affective temperament, attachment to his social roots and brotherly familiarity. I remember that he took me, on an outing with his great friend Samu Sáiz, to Poundland, a shop in the centre of Leeds where all products are sold at the symbolic price of £1. That respect for value of money is typical of working-class people who were faced with financial difficulties during their childhood. Despite the professional success and financial abundance that football had procured him, Gjanni has never forgotten his modest origins.

Regarding his virtues as a player, he represents an undeniable advantage for the team. Bielsa had noticed his generosity in effort and his ability to repeat long, high-intensity runs without showing particular fatigue. During games, he was never intimidated by rivals' size or physical power and compensated his modest stature with an excess of bravery. His defensive aerial game was impressive and his power allowed him to win balls against much taller rivals.

My initial contact with the players took place in the changing room. I remember my first informal conversation with a group made up of Pablo Hernández, Gaetano Berardi, Samu Sáiz and Gjanni Alioski. Those four players, to whom Pontus Jansson would be added – following a well-deserved vacation after the World Cup in Russia – had, over time, forged a solid bond of friendship and they got along very well. Pablo and Gaetano were the leaders of that circle, and the respect shown by the younger team-mates

was remarkable. Gaetano, endowed with the benevolent curiosity that characterises intelligent people, was interested in my work and my background and determined, after our exchanges, that my role resembled that of a 'psychologist'.

Then I met another group of players made up of Liam Cooper, Stuart Dallas, Adam Forshaw and Luke Ayling. 'Call me Bill,' Luke suggested. Liam and Stuart symbolise friendship in its most beautiful expression. Having been very close for many years, they had woven fraternal bonds of such intensity that it was hard not to be moved when you saw how much they cared for each other. My first impression was very positive, and the events of the year to come would confirm that I had not been wrong in my estimation. All four of them would be, with Pablo and Gaetano, the representatives of the professional group and our main interlocutors during the season.

Little by little I got to know all the members of the professional squad, which was made up of both established players and talented youngsters. On the side of experience were players of proven values, such as Calvin Phillips, the local lad who would become a key element of the team; Mateusz Klich, who would be the player most used by Bielsa; Kemar Roofe, who would show a fearsome efficiency; Patrick Bamford, gifted with a rock-solid mental strength; Izzy Brown, the most efficient player in the group in front of goal; Jamal Blackman, whose talent would not have time to express itself after a serious injury; Lewis Baker, gifted with

impressive physical and athletic qualities and able to play with both feet; and Barry Douglas, admirable professional and example to all the group, particularly the youngsters, for his preparation.

The group was harmoniously completed with young players with strong potential, such as Jack Harrison, destined for a great future; Tyler Roberts, capable of unbalancing any defence; Jamie Shackleton, awesome in his maturity; Bailey Peacock-Farrell, talented young goalkeeper with a promising future; Jack Clarke, with an ease and remarkable simplicity on the ball; Leif Davis, gifted with the necessary speed to be a great wing-back; Tom Pearce, young left-back with physical and technical virtues; Will Huffer, young goalkeeper from the academy; Conor Shaughnessy, solid and polyvalent defender, and Aapo Halme, central defender who would prove very useful in a specific moment of the season.

### **The organisation of the day**

During pre-season, the days are relatively long since it is an important period, normally of a total duration of six weeks, the objective of which is to give to the professional group, for one part, the necessary athletic and aerobic base to allow them to cope with the exhausting pace of a long and intense season and, on the other hand, the football identity, as well as the technical and tactical fundamentals. It is a crucial stage, extremely demanding, managed by the fitness coach, in close collaboration with the head coach, who develops the

programme and plans the sessions to bring players to their best level. In general, there were two or three workouts a day.

Benoit Delaval, Bielsa's chosen fitness coach, is a first-rate professional and spent most of his career at Lille. He had previously worked with players like Eden Hazard, winner of the Europa League; Divock Origi, winner of the Champions League; Eder, scorer of the winning goal in the final of the European Championship; and World Cup-winner Benjamin Pavard; also Arsenal player Nicolas Pépé. I had the pleasure of meeting Benoit during our short sporting experience in Lille, in the north of France. At that time, we did not share the same office and we used to see each other several times a day with Bielsa for the preparation of the training session. I had retained the excellent memory of a great professional, a pleasant and exceptionally courteous colleague. He was the only person who systematically thanked me when I translated his words to the coach. Bielsa was also impressed by his kindness. 'How polite Benoit is!' he told me several times. One day I commented on that detail, 'Do you know that you are the only one to thank me after a translation?' Benoit expressed a singular surprise, because it seemed obvious to him. I remember his answer, 'My parents always told me that thanking costs nothing and makes people happy. It is a principle that I learned and I try to instil in my children.' At Leeds we shared the same office and I had the pleasure to know him better and discover his extraordinary human qualities. We became friends over time and I had the

privilege to meet his magnificent family, his wife Axelle and her two children, Emma and Mael.

The work day of the professional group generally started at 9am. We would arrive around 8am to the training ground to prepare the day's programme. After spending six weeks in a hotel in Wetherby, I opted for living in the centre of Leeds, in the same building as my new colleague Rubén Crespo Sánchez, rehabilitation coach in charge of the personalised programmes for the players. We also shared the same office with Rubén. We got along immediately and we became friends. We went together to the training ground located 30 minutes north of Leeds and we used to have rich and pleasant conversations. He was a brother to me throughout the season. I do not remember having woven such strong ties with a person in such little time. I was constantly nourished by his wisdom and his fraternal advices.

When we arrived at Thorp Arch, generally Benoit was already present. He first prepared the programme for the day and displayed it in the gym in front of the physiologists' room. Then, the three of us used to go to the canteen to have breakfast prepared by the unforgettable Bella and her team, composed of Gladys, Slav and Riad. We made a habit of always eating together. When one of us hadn't finished his work by lunchtime, the others waited patiently for him to arrive. It was a ritual that allowed us to reinforce the cohesion of the group and the brotherhood of our ties.

Generally, Gaetano Berardi, Adam Forshaw and Jamie Shackleton were the first to arrive, followed by the rest of the team. Most of the players systematically came to our office, where Tom Robinson, the second fitness coach, was also, to greet us one by one. When they arrived, the nutritionist Nesson Costello, helped by Andy and Alex, whose office was attached to ours, weighed them. Every day, Bielsa meticulously verified the weight of each footballer and indicated in the margin who exceeded the set level. When this was the case, he would let Benoit and me know and would ask us to remain vigilant. Most of the players respected the assigned target made by the DEXA – dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry – scan during the first week and the study of the skin fold which allowed a goal to be set for each member of the group. Every six weeks Nesson made a new examination with the skin fold and, in close collaboration with Benoit, set the new goal for players who weren't yet at the ideal weight.

Then the group would go to the canteen for breakfast and meet later in the physiologists' room directed by Rob Price, head of medicine and performance, who had Henry, Daryl, Paul and Billy under his command. Rob is a professional of great experience. He worked with Rafael Benítez at Liverpool and for the England national team. When he was in Hull City, he hired Rubén Crespo, who followed him when he accepted the Leeds offer. Like Rubén, Rob was my other great friend at the club. A great

connoisseur of player psychology, good observer of human behaviour, endowed with a unique ability to maintain calm in moments of tension, he knew how to take the temperature of the group in a few minutes. Throughout the season I had the privilege of nourishing myself with his advice, his knowledge and his experience. We established a daily routine that consisted of meeting every afternoon in his office after training to exchange our views on the mood of the group, the difficulties of the moment and the possible measures to be implemented to put the players in the best conditions. Over time, the professional relationship with Rob consolidated into a true friendship.

At 10am, the players began to work in the gym under the direction of Rubén, who planned the week's programmes, which were alternately based in prevention, muscle strengthening, power, explosiveness or core strength. Each player had a specific programme, prepared according to his profile and needs. The first morning, the classic tests of the pre-season were carried out in the gym to measure the fitness level of each player, which lasted about two hours. At noon, the group went to have lunch in the canteen, which offered a varied selection of starters, main dishes and fruits. After the meal, the players went to a local hotel to enjoy a break before the afternoon session.

At 4pm, the players returned to the training ground, where a snack awaited them before the session, which was divided into two parts. The first, of a 30-minute duration,

was devoted to physical work under the supervision of Benoit, who alternated technical work, coordination and SAQ (speed, agility, quickness). As an experienced athlete, Benoit imposed a high pace on the players, with high-intensity runs, putting the professional group to a severe test. Out of curiosity, one day I wanted to participate in the physical session that consisted in making four efforts of four minutes at 17km per hour. I do not remember having suffered so much in my life, having been pushed to such limits of exhaustion. Samu Sáiz, who saw that I was struggling to follow the pace set by the players, had slowed down, in a gesture of generosity, to accompany me in the effort.

The second part of the training was technical and tactical and started at 6.30pm. Pablo Quiroga and Diego Reyes, two established colleagues of Bielsa, were in charge of the activity, together with Carlos Corberán. It lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and had between ten and 15 different exercises based on explosive movements and strong passes, without forgetting classic routines like free kicks and tactical positioning. The objective of the pre-season was to forge an identity – to ‘transmit a style’ to the team, to use the words of Bielsa – and to play unforgettable football. During the training sessions, he preferred to maintain an observer role and limited himself to intervening punctually to correct an exercise or give an explanation to the players.

This was a typical day for the Leeds players during pre-season: long, intense and demanding, because it was,

according to Marcelo, 'the period of formation of the physical basis and the idea of play'. Pablo Hernández remembered that preparation, 'We worked a lot.' Patrick Bamford too was impressed by the organisation, 'With Marcelo Bielsa, nothing is left to chance. Everything is meticulous.' Pontus Jansson also said, 'When I came back from vacation, I had the impression of having joined a new club. Everything was much more professional. We had long days with many talks, long and difficult workouts, with a lot of intensity and sprints.'

Each week, the players had a day and a half off. For six weeks, the squad, aware of the importance of the season and the club's high ambitions, dedicated itself body and soul and gave proof of faultless professionalism and of a great spirit of sacrifice. The efforts made by the players to reach their weight and physical condition were admirable. The group demonstrated remarkable discipline and great respect for the coaching staff.

### **Work at Thorp Arch**

The Thorp Arch training ground was excellent, occupying a large space located to the north of Leeds, in the countryside, and offered a guarantee of tranquillity, necessary for the professional football squad. 'It is a club equipped with extraordinary facilities,' stressed Bielsa. 'The stability of a club makes it more attractive. When an institution has an effective organisation, footballers want to belong and the

coaches also want to work there. Contributions to improving those standards are very important.’

Therefore, he decided to make some modifications, particularly inside the main building, to improve the quality of life at work, and the management of the club agreed to make the investment. Bielsa, faithful to his habit, personally took charge of supervising all the work, which lasted for several weeks, and he devoted long hours of study with the club’s architects to remodelling the structure of the building that brought the professional team together and that had to provide the players with all the necessary comfort to allow them to fully dedicate themselves to their profession.

Bielsa’s first priority was the academy, which was going to be vital during the season by providing important players to the team such as Jamie Shackleton, Jack Clarke and Leif Davis. The sporting project was based on the regular integration of the best elements of the academy teams. The coach then decided to build a new structure that would bring together the entire academy, as well as the heads of all youth divisions. Before, they occupied, under the direction of Adam Underwood and Richard Cresswell, a spacious office in the central building. The coaches of the talented youngsters, who performed a notable daily role in the successes of the first team, would thus have better working conditions.

At the same time, Bielsa created a large room for the players in the brightest space in the building. The wellbeing of the players was fundamental and a priority for Bielsa. The

room was divided into several sectors perfectly patterned to facilitate the relaxation and the cohesion of the group. The professionals had at their disposal a worktop, where they could meet around a coffee. An open space was also created with a large television, in which they could watch football games or play video games. A closed space, with a television and a library, was also a cinema and reading room, allowing the players to enjoy some privacy. Finally, the central space was turned into a games room with a ping-pong table, a pool table, chess, a foosball table and a dartboard. The professional group liked to meet in this space during free moments.

Rest and recovery are vital for every team and have a considerable impact on individual and collective performance. Therefore, Bielsa built a rest area composed of 30 beds in the central building, with all the comfort of a quality hotel. Inside, the spaces were separated by a curtain to preserve the privacy of each one with individual lamp and plugs. Thus, the players had the possibility of isolating themselves during free moments to enjoy the benefits of a regenerating nap.

Finally, Bielsa rearranged the offices to facilitate the daily work. His room was on the second floor, with a direct view on the training pitches. In an adjacent room, the centre of video analysis was led by Willy Alonso, a friendly and affable Spaniard. Jorge and Anthony worked under his command. In front of the coach's office were headquarters of the technical staff directed by Pablo Quiroga, comprising

goalkeeper coach Marcos Abad, academy coach Carlos Corberán, plus Diego Reyes, Diego Flores and Lucas Oviña. Our office was on the first floor, next to the players' changing room and the physiologists' room, and had a window that overlooked the gym.

### **'Path to humility'**

During the pre-season, before settling in Leeds city centre, I lived for a few weeks in a hotel in Wetherby. Every morning I used to pick up Marcelo at his home and we went to the training ground together. He liked the place, 'In Argentina I live in the countryside and this place has many things in common.' In the afternoon, after the long day at work, I would take him to his hotel and we took advantage of those moments to exchange our views on the professional group, but also to chat on issues that interested us and that were far away from football. Thus, I used to make an account of the day and gave him my opinion about the players. The professional group had a great human quality and was respectful of the technical staff and the club employees, but also of the people in charge of the cleaning, the kit men Rich and Bees, and the kitchen staff.

One afternoon, while taking Marcelo to his hotel, I said, 'Marcelo, you have noticed that around the main building there is a lot of garbage. I'm going to propose to the players that we all clean the training ground.' Marcelo looked at me with a smile and replied, 'If you succeed in doing that ...'

For my part, as I had already established a good relationship with the players, I knew that they would be receptive to the initiative and would agree to carry out the activity.

After getting the go-ahead from Marcelo, I introduced the idea to Benoit, Rubén, Rob and Tom. This was a practice that I had established from the beginning because of my inexperience in the world of football. I submitted my initiatives to the opinion of colleagues, and the consensus allowed me to take a good decision. Everyone encouraged me to carry out the activity. Thus, on 12 July 2018, during the afternoon, I gathered the players in the gym and we sat in a circle. I started by reminding them of the definition of humility: the virtue of recognising and accepting your own limitations and weaknesses. It is essential in everyday life and in high-level sport. Modesty is an admirable human quality and a sure ally in the face of the immense challenges present in professional football.

Most fans, those of Leeds and those of the rest of the world, come from the working class and face daily the material difficulties of life. To live their passion, sometimes, they have to make important sacrifices to follow their favourite team. Many times, the unique moment of happiness, in a reality marked by every sort of worries, is their team's victory. Pier Paolo Pasolini, the great Italian filmmaker, rightly wrote, 'Football is of vital importance in restoring dignity to those who have nothing.' That is why football is so popular in the world and the passion of the fans is so moving and revered.

In the stadiums, people from all horizons sing their hopes for a better life, which inevitably passes through the triumph of their colours, and they unite in the brotherhood born of their passion for the same badge.

I had informed myself about the price of the tickets. An annual season ticket for Elland Road cost about £562 for the more accessible option, which averaged £25 per game. The minimum wage in England was about £7.83 per hour; an employee then had to work for at least three hours to be able to live his passion. I proposed that the players symbolically pay tribute to the fans by trying to put us in their place for an hour and clean the training centre.

The whole team, without exception, joined the project and agreed to participate. The players wore plastic gloves, they took garbage bags and for about an hour, under the nice summer sun, they cleaned up the training centre. Benoit had the good idea to weigh the garbage bags: the players had collected about 13 kilos. Pablo Hernández was very receptive to the activity. 'You know, before being a professional footballer and being able to live off my passion, I did all kinds of jobs,' he told me. Adam Forshaw also approved. During the garbage collection, he said, 'I understand what you are trying to do and it is a good thing for the group.' The unanimous disposition to carry out this singular task illustrated the values of the team, the sensitivity of the players and their respect for the fans.

## **Marcelo Bielsa's birthday**

On 21 July, Marcelo celebrated his 63rd birthday. The players decided to prepare a surprise for him. Liam Cooper, on behalf of the group, told me that the team wanted to speak with the coach as soon as possible about the content of the training sessions and the imposed pace of the pre-season. 'We'll be waiting for him in the meeting room and we need to talk to him before the start of today's session,' the captain told me.

So, I went up to Marcelo's office to tell him the request from the players, indicating that they were in the meeting room. He looked at me, surprised, and asked me if I knew what it was about, and I said no. Actually, the players had told me what it was all about. Marcelo then decided to go to the meeting room. After greeting the group, he indicated that he was at their disposal. Pablo Hernández then spoke in Spanish to say, 'Boss, we have talked a lot between us about the organisation of the trainings and we have some criticism to make. Liam has them listed in a piece of paper and he is going to communicate it to you.'

Liam then opened the sheet and suddenly began to sing 'Happy Birthday' in Spanish, followed in chorus by the whole group who laughed out loud. Marcelo's face lit up with a big smile. The coach warmly thanked each of the players for the generous gesture and left the room shaking his head and laughing at having fallen into the benevolent trap.

This episode illustrated the excellent atmosphere that prevailed at Thorp Arch throughout the pre-season and the esteem that the group had towards the gaffer. Despite the long working hours, the players unanimously adhered to the culture change and they submitted to the demands of Bielsa's football. They were happy to see each other again every morning, and the joy and good humour, indispensable adornments in the life of any social group, hovered above the training centre.

### **Transmission of values**

Marcelo had commissioned me to transmit certain values to the professional group, particularly through messages placed in the changing room. In truth, the team did not need my assistance because they already had a solid foundation of principles that underpinned their daily life. Players like Gaetano Berardi, Pablo Hernández, Liam Cooper, Stuart Dallas, Adam Forshaw, Luke Ayling, and many others, had nothing to learn from me. On the contrary, I was inspired by their example to try to do my work in the best possible way.

Gaetano, to name but one, was exemplar to me. From the moment of my arrival at Leeds I received great moral support from him. He always expressed interest and consideration for my job. While discreet and courteous in daily life, on the pitch, he became a lion, his commitment and physical courage exciting the enthusiasm of the fans. I always felt a deep respect for Gaetano. He constantly kept back his

legitimate personal considerations to the betterment of the group, giving proof, even in difficult moments, of an admirable state of mind and altruism. I always thought that he could integrate into any coaching staff after his career as a professional player. We were in the habit of going for coffee together. Every conversation with him was a source of enrichment. There was always something to learn from Gaetano. I remember saying to Rubén Crespo, ‘I would like to be friends with Gaetano Berardi.’

Every week throughout the season I would put a message accompanied by a photo in the changing room and in the gym, related to what the team were living through. The procedure was simple. I chose the message and the image and I showed it to Benoit, Rubén, Rob and Tom to get their opinion. When we reached a consensus, I would post the message until the next game. When, despite the endorsement of my colleagues, I was in doubt and I feared that it would not be interpreted as I wanted, I would then request the opinions of Liam, Pablo, Gaetano, Adam, Stuart and Luke to get their approval.

For the preparation of the first messages of pre-season, which recalled values such as work, generosity and the spirit of sacrifice, I was very inspired by the book of the great American basketball coach Phil Jackson, titled *Eleven Rings*. When Marcelo first explained my mission to me, he strongly advised me to read that book. ‘It is an indispensable work and you should study it as meticulously as possible,’ he

recommended. I took note and wrote a synopsis of 20 pages of the book. Reading that masterpiece was fundamental to understanding my new profession and learning the rudiments of managing a group of professional athletes.

I also made extensive use of James Kerr's book *Legacy* on the history of the All Blacks, the legendary New Zealand national rugby team. My colleague and friend Rubén also advised me to read a remarkable work by the sports psychologist Pep Marí, titled *Leading Engaged Teams*. He even gave me a copy of it. I remember doing a synopsis of 22 pages that I found very useful and that I shared with Carlos Corberán. As an expression of gratitude, Carlos offered me another excellent book by Xesco Espar, coach of the Barcelona basketball team that won the Champions League in 2005, *Play with the Heart*, which enriched my knowledge.

### **Friendly games and the first injury of the season**

Six friendlies were scheduled on the programme. The first took place on 17 July, after three weeks of intense preparation, against Forest Green Rovers, who played in League Two, the fourth division of English football. In general, the first friendly takes place 15 days after the first training session, and the players usually play for 45 to 60 minutes each. Marcelo preferred to have a total of three weeks of training.

The first team of the Bielsa era at United consisted of the main future starters of the season. Peacock-Farrell was the goalkeeper. The defensive line of four consisted of Cooper

and Berardi in the centre, and of Dallas and Ayling on the left and right respectively. In the midfield, Phillips was playing as a defensive midfielder, Forshaw as the number eight, and Sáiz as ten. Finally, the offensive line was built around Roofe as the central attacker, Hernández on the right wing and Alioski on the left. All players had 90 minutes of participation and achieved a 2-1 victory, with a decisive contribution from Roofe and Ayling. From a physical and athletic point of view, Forshaw played an impressive match, covering a total distance greater than 12km, a distance at high intensity of 642m, and about 200m of sprints, thus confirming his excellent condition.

The second game took place on 20 July with a fully remodelled team against York City, who played at the sixth level. Kamil Miazek was the goalkeeper. The defence consisted of Ronaldo Vieira, Mateusz Klich and Laurens De Bock. The midfield was structured around Yosuke Ideguchi in the centre, Tom Pearce on the left and Jamie Shackleton on the right. Lewis Baker played in the number ten role and fed the offensive trio formed by Sam Dalby in the centre, Jordan Stevens on the right and Jack Clarke on the left. The game ended in a 1-1 draw. Shackleton showed his full potential achieving the best physical performance of the team, both in total distance and in high intensity and sprint.

For the third friendly, on 22 July, Leeds faced Southend, who played in League One. The initial starting 11 was almost the same as the one displayed in the first game, with

one exception: Laurens De Bock played at left-back instead of Stuart Dallas, who replaced Pablo Hernández as the right-winger, illustrating the versatility of the Northern Ireland international. During the 1-1 draw, Tyler Roberts was able to play his first minutes. Dallas expressed his athletic ability by reaching a total close to 800m in high intensity and sprints.

The fourth friendly continued the rotation by Bielsa to offer minutes to all players of the squad. Thus, against Oxford United, Will Huffer was the goalkeeper. The defensive line of four was made up of, from right to left, Jamie Shackleton, Hugo Díaz, Oriol Rey and Tom Pearce. The midfield consisted of Mateusz Klich, Lewis Baker and Ronaldo Vieira. Finally, in attack were Sam Dalby, Yosuke Ideguchi and Jack Clarke. The coach wanted to test the players in various positions. According to him, each player had to be able to play at least three different positions. The match was prolific in goals and Oxford won 4-3. Again, Shackleton demonstrated his physical potential with a distance in high intensity and sprint of about 900m.

The penultimate friendly, against Guiseley, a team from the sixth level, took place on 26 July, and Jamal Blackman was in goal. Shackleton, Díaz, De Bock and Pearce made up the defensive line. Vieira, Klich and Baker were deployed in midfield. Finally, Ryan Edmondson, Roberts and Clarke were at the forefront of the attack. It was another high-scoring result, but this time in favour of Leeds, and Klich impressed Marcelo Bielsa by showing his talent and

establishing himself as a solid candidate for the number eight position.

The first hard blow of the pre-season happened right before the last friendly, with a serious injury to Adam Forshaw, a key person in the team, who had excelled during training sessions and the first preparation tests. Having injured a toe ligament, an uncommon occurrence, Adam would miss the first six games of the Championship. Fate could be cruel at times and Adam's unavailability for selection would be his first in a long series that would last the whole season. 'It is a hard blow that deprives us of a great player. Before getting injured, Adam Forshaw was the best player of the team,' Bielsa lamented, expressing at the same time his confidence in the team's resources to cope with this long absence.

Faced with this bad luck, far from giving up, Adam showed extraordinary resilience and redoubled his efforts to regain his best level, showing a strength of character worthy of great players. He refused to ever stop working, in the face of adversity. In these difficult moments he was constantly seeking to learn the necessary lessons, see the positive side of things to boost the morale of his team-mates and move on.

The last game of pre-season felt like a dress rehearsal and took place in the legendary stadium of Elland Road on 29 July, one week before the start of the competition, against Las Palmas, a top-level Spanish team. That confrontation would be a chance to establish the level of the team after six

weeks of preparation. Bielsa chose the following starting 11: Peacock-Farrell in goal; Ayling, Berardi, Cooper and Dallas in defence; Phillips, Klich and Sáiz in midfield; Roofe, Hernández and Alioski as the attacking trio. The game was rough and tight, but ended with a 1-0 win for Leeds, following a splendid bit of technique from Roofe. Klich underlined the importance of victory, 'It's good that we won the last game before the start of the season. We played good football.' The team was thus well disposed a week before the opening of the Championship.

After a pre-season that had lasted for a month and a half Bielsa was well established in Yorkshire and had a perfect understanding of the group. 'I arrived in ideal conditions. We had a very long pre-season,' he said. The team had demonstrated flawless professionalism throughout these preparations. The only negative point was Adam Forshaw's injury, which deprived the team of an important player during the first six games of the season. On the other hand, the work destined to improve the infrastructure of the training centre and to offer a better living environment for the players had started and was due to last for a few weeks. The atmosphere inside the team was healthy. After the overall positive outcome of the friendly games, the start of the Championship was arriving under the best auspices. Bielsa expressed his satisfaction, 'We were able to develop everything as projected. But only the competition will allow us to evaluate the quality of our work.'