

ROCCO DEAN



MARCELO  
**BIELSA**

**VS THE PREMIER  
LEAGUE**

LIVING, LOVING AND LOSING  
**BIELSABALL**

FOREWORD BY BRYN LAW

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# Contents

Foreword by Bryn Law . . . . .	9
Introduction . . . . .	13

## *Part One: 2020/21 – Marcelo’s Masterpiece, From Behind Closed Doors*

Pre-Season 2020/21 . . . . .	17
September 2020. . . . .	21
October 2020 . . . . .	30
November 2020. . . . .	41
December 2020. . . . .	55
January 2021 . . . . .	73
February 2021 . . . . .	83
March 2021. . . . .	96
April 2021 . . . . .	105
May 2021 . . . . .	117
The Class of ’21. . . . .	133
Premier League table 2020/21 . . . . .	135

## *Part Two: 2021/22 – The Return of the Fans, and the Curse of the Damned United*

Pre-Season 2021/22 . . . . .	139
August 2021 . . . . .	143
September 2021. . . . .	152
October 2021 . . . . .	160
November 2021. . . . .	170
December 2021. . . . .	180
January 2022 . . . . .	191
February 2022 . . . . .	202
March 2022. . . . .	220
April 2022 . . . . .	233
May 2022. . . . .	242
Premier League table 2021/22 . . . . .	263

Epilogue . . . . .	264
First Impressions of Bielsaball . . . . .	266
Bielsa Era Stats . . . . .	269

*Part One:*

**2020/21 – Marcelo's  
Masterpiece, From Behind  
Closed Doors**

## Pre-Season 2020/21

LEEDS WERE back in the big time, but preparing for life in the Premier League was only one aspect of a very strange pre-season. Six months had passed since Covid-19 robbed us of the freedom to attend matches, and although lockdown was over and the country was tentatively creeping back to normality, mass gatherings were still forbidden. The data would continue to be monitored (Covid cases, hospitalisations and deaths) and plans were afoot to allow limited numbers of fans to return, but the first month of the season, at a minimum, would be played behind closed doors and it was still unclear when the wait to watch Premier League football at Elland Road would end.

The pandemic had also played havoc with the football calendar, resulting in the shortest pre-season in history. Most clubs had six weeks between their final match of the 2019/20 season and the start of 2020/21, although the teams who had made it to the latter stages of the European competitions only had four weeks (the quarter-finals onwards were shoehorned into a two-week period in August). Leeds had the luxury of seven and a half weeks and spent most of it courting Ben White, the loanee centre-

back who had shone in their promotion season. Parent club Brighton & Hove Albion refused to sell and with two weeks to go until the big kick-off there were still no new faces in the first-team squad, then on the last Saturday of August two arrived at once. In the morning the club smashed their 20-year-old transfer record with the £27m signing of Spanish international striker Rodrigo Moreno from Valencia, and in the evening another £13m was spent on German international defender Robin Koch. It had taken Leeds 14 years to amass a £40m spend in transfer fees following relegation from the Premier League, but ahead of their return they had matched that same outlay in 14 hours. Welcome to a whole new ball game.

The short turnaround was further complicated by an international ‘break’ in the week before the Premier League began. Coincidentally, the UEFA Nations League pitted the two new signings against each other, and if scouting Leeds players during a match between Germany and Spain wasn’t strange enough, elsewhere the best young player in the world, Erling Haaland, made a beeline for Stuart Dallas after Norway hammered Northern Ireland 5-1. Dallas nearly jumped out of his skin when Haaland – born in Leeds and the son of former cult Whites hero Alfie – sang ‘Marching On Together’ in his ear, and asked for his shirt. However, the highlight of international week was undoubtedly Calvin Phillips winning his first England cap. The Yorkshire Pirlo had never played a Premier League game, nor represented England in any age group, but there he was, with three lions on his chest and Christian Eriksen in his pocket. I was immensely proud of Phillips – such a lovely lad and a terrific player – and so too was Marcelo Bielsa, who gifted him a classic

Newell's Old Boys shirt to congratulate him on his call-up. Phillips returned the gesture by giving El Loco his debut England shirt as a thank you for everything he had done for his career, and they all lived happily ever after.

Another strange aspect of pre-season was having an out-of-contract manager throughout. Bielsa would only sign contracts from one year to the next, to protect the freedoms of the club and himself, but despite being out of contract he continued as normal, masterminding his assault on the Premier League from Costa Coffee in Wetherby, where he posed with fans for socially distanced selfies on a daily basis. He looked so happy and content too, as if the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders when he lifted the EFL Championship trophy back in July. Only on the eve of the season did El Loco finally put pen to paper on his one-year extension.

It was also strange not knowing what to expect or even hope for in the coming season. I could envisage Leeds taking the Premier League by storm and pushing for European qualification, but I had my concerns too. Even if top-flight teams couldn't handle the intense pressing and all-out attack of Bielsaball, I worried that our inefficiency in front of goal – such a frustration in the Championship – would be more regularly punished by higher-class opposition. I also worried that Leeds wouldn't be able to dominate possession like they could in the Championship, and as a result, wouldn't have the legs to press like maniacs for 90 minutes. Then there was the simple worry that some players might not cope with the step up. It was impossible to draw any conclusions from pre-season matches because there basically weren't any, and attempting to draw comparisons with the promoted clubs

from 2019 only complicated things further. Championship champions Norwich had finished rock bottom, runners-up Sheffield Utd just missed out on a Europa League spot, and Aston Villa spent £100m just to survive by the skin of their teeth, and only thanks to malfunctioning goal-line technology.

Survival was the minimum requirement, but my ultimate dream was for El Loco to save football from the cesspit it had sunk into. Diving, feigning injury, wasting time, claiming for absolutely anything, complaining about absolutely everything; it had all become so common at the top of the game and was not only encouraged by managers but accepted by officials and even pundits. This blatant (and mostly needless) lack of sportsmanship had stopped me from watching top-level football – I couldn't go two minutes without being enraged by something and switching off in disgust – but Bielsa's team would not conform and I hoped his refreshing approach would resonate through the elite; that opponents would be embarrassed when facing a team playing with honour, that they would realise the gains from all the antics and theatrics are not worth the cost to the brand of football, not to mention their own personal and professional pride. The Loco Way was sure to gain a bucket-load of admiration, but his team would need to be successful for football to truly embrace The Great Man's philosophy.