

ROCCO DEAN



# MARCELO BIELSA

**VS THE DAMNED  
UNITED**



THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF  
**A CLUB REBORN**

FOREWORD BY EDDIE GRAY

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**VS THE DAMNED UNITED**

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R O C C O   D E A N



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Part One: 2018/19

**THE SEASON THAT HAD  
EVERYTHING, EXCEPT A  
HAPPY ENDING**

## MARCELO BIELSA'S LEEDS UNITED

*First of all there's the boss who's right behind us,  
He's the one who fills our hearts with pride.  
It's a joy to us all, when big Swede heads the ball,  
To know that he is on our side.  
There's a blonde-headed madman known as Gjanni,  
And he goes like a human dynamo,  
Patrick Bamford of course, he can work like a horse,  
And top-knot Ayling's always on the go.*

*And we play all the way for Leeds United,  
Elland Road is the only place for us,  
With heart and soul for the goal that's clearly sighted,  
We're out to toast each other from that silver cup.*

*Hear the roar when Kemar scores to lift the Roofe off,  
Jackie Harrison's pillow feet are just sublime.  
While the Pole is always there, doing more than his share,  
Bera's side before self, every time.  
Proud and tall at the coin-toss, Captain Cooper,  
And the 11 Stus patrol down either wing,  
Yorkshire Pirlo in pivot, then to tie 'em in a knot,  
There's Pablo the Spanish King.*

*And we play all the way for Leeds United,  
Elland Road is the only place for us,  
With heart and soul for the goal that's clearly sighted,  
We're out to toast each other from that silver cup.*

## Pre-Season 2018/19

MARCELO BIELSA came into my life at 11.35pm on 31 May 2018, when Justin posted on our LUFC WhatsApp group, 'Hope we get Bielsa.' I had no idea who he was, so turned to Wikipedia, as I did with all the new players and managers we were subjected to (the words paint a thousand pictures; you can't trust a YouTube highlights reel). At first glance Bielsa's record didn't look anything special. He'd won Argentinian titles, managed some big European clubs for short periods (including a worrying two-day stint with Lazio), and the national teams of Chile and Argentina with varying success. Despite the lack of trophies and longevity, it was obvious from his CV that he had something about him. I turned to Twitter to search for credible news and saw a photo of Bielsa, posted by Radio Leeds's Adam Pope, who was linking him with the job. I was immediately struck by Bielsa's intense glare; obsessive and serious, this guy would demand respect. At 11.40pm I responded to Justin with a screenshot of Popey's tweet, and captioned it, 'Love at first sight.'

The next morning, further research into Marcelo Bielsa turned my initial intrigue into desperation to appoint what was clearly a very special man. The so-called 'Godfather of Modern Football', Bielsa's methods and philosophy had spawned the new breed of managers at the very top of the world game today. Diego Simeone, Mauricio Pochettino and Zinedine Zidane were

all 'disciples' of Bielsa, while Pep Guardiola, widely regarded as football's leading boss, had labelled Bielsa as 'the best coach in the world'. How could a club that had finished in the bottom half of the Championship in six of the past seven seasons attract a manager like this? And how had I never heard of him?

I also learnt about the origins of his nickname, 'El Loco' ('The Crazy One'), by reading about the time he confronted angry fans outside his home with a grenade in his hand, and watching grainy footage of a young Bielsa on the shoulders of those same fans, screaming amid wild celebrations, 'VAMOS NEWELLS CARAJO!' Later that day, manager Paul Heckingbottom was sacked. Now I was getting excited.

Current owner Andrea Radrizzani was a year into the job. He had increased the budget on the playing squad, professionalised the whole running of the club and, most significantly, bought back Elland Road. Putting our home back in the hands of the club was a tremendous statement, and helped keep the fans onside despite a miserable first season. The team went backwards after two cheap managerial appointments, while off the pitch there was the embarrassing release of a new badge 'for the next 100 years' that was so poorly received it was binned within six hours. The jury was still out on Radrizzani's ambition and judgement, but on the morning of 15 June it was announced that Marcelo Bielsa had agreed to become Leeds United manager and any questions about Radrizzani's ambition were put to bed. In terms of his judgement, well that would be defined by the results of 'The Bielsa Experiment', as it briefly became known.

In his first press conference you could tell Bielsa was a great man, yet doubts still lingered in my head. He confidently announced that we didn't need a new centre-back, that we had Pontus Jansson and Liam Cooper, and Gaetano Berardi and Calvin Phillips could cover. This was absolutely baffling to

me. I'd expected a new centre back to be the priority, a worthy partner for Jansson, the best defender in the league. Cooper had been at the club for four years without ever cementing his place in a predominantly useless team, and neither Berardi nor Phillips had ever played centre-back in their lives (neither would be considered tall enough). If Paul Heckingbottom had made such a suggestion then people may have burnt their season tickets before a ball was kicked, but there is a fine line between madness and genius and Bielsa had seen something in these players that we hadn't. He knew he could mould them into his system.

Doubts remained through pre-season; the friendlies didn't inspire confidence, nor did our transfer activity. There were only two permanent additions to the squad, and although Patrick Bamford was our most expensive signing in 17 years, every penny of the £7m fee was immediately recouped by selling prodigious midfielder Ronaldo Vieira to Sampdoria. Four loanees arrived from the Premier League, three of whom had underwhelmed in previous spells in the Championship, while the fourth was only halfway through a 12-month injury rehabilitation program.

However, the real work was going on behind the scenes. The players were training harder than ever; double sessions, triple sessions, daily weigh-ins, and the infamous 'Murderball' sessions (11 vs 11 played at maximum intensity, with no breaks in play). They were painstakingly drilled in the art of 'Bielsaball', and also trained in humility, made to spend three hours litter-picking around Boston Spa, the time it takes the average fan to earn enough money to watch them play.

By the eve of the new season the players couldn't wait to show everyone what they were capable of. Sky Sports was frothing at the mouth over Bielsa (or using him to sell more subscriptions), and I was flying back from a holiday in Sicily – not for the match, but for my wife's 30th birthday party.



# August 2018

## **The Championship**

*First and second – promoted to Premier League*

*Third to sixth – play-off for last promotion spot*

*22nd to 24th – relegated to League One*

## **Leeds United 3-1 Stoke City**

A beautiful summer's day welcomed in the new season, but back in the old days, the grey and drizzly Paul Heckingbottom days, I had arranged to host a BBQ with our families for Frankie's birthday on Sunday, 5 August. I hadn't given the opening day of the season a second thought, but now the prospect of missing the grand opening of the Bielsa era was verging on catastrophic. After colluding with my dad on potential escape plans, common sense sadly prevailed and we would make do with watching it on telly.

The BBQ was a success, i.e. all the food was done by kick-off and we were able to watch the game from the sun-baked patio. 'We're going to get spanked,' declared Lewis while sharing the team sheet on WhatsApp. Reading through the same old names from last season, it was hard to disagree: Peacock-Farrell, Ayling, Berardi, Cooper, Douglas, Phillips, Klich, Hernández, Sáiz, Alioski, Roofs. Only one new addition to a team that finished last season at the bottom of the form guide, playing against relegated Stoke who had retained all

their 'Premier League players', and added multimillion-pound signings to 'ensure' promotion.

But Leeds started brilliantly, playing at a fantastic tempo and even dominating possession. The players were visibly leaner, fitter and stronger; clearly they were following Bielsa's strict regime religiously. Thus it was no surprise when they took the lead after a lovely move cut through Stoke's defence and Mateusz Klich provided the cool finish. Klich had arrived at Leeds the previous summer but after just one start he was sent out on loan, back from whence he came, the Dutch Eredivisie. He wasn't even in Bielsa's plans initially, but after losing Adam Forshaw to injury and Ronaldo Vieira to Sampdoria, the door was left ajar and the popular Pole barged his way in, locked the door behind him, and threw away the key.

Significantly, Klich's goal did not change the game. Leeds continued to press like maniacs and the second goal followed when England's backup goalkeeper, Jack Butland, let a Hernández shot squirm through his hands and tickle the back of the net. At half-time we were in dreamland; 2-0 up and coasting against the favourites for promotion, the most expensive squad in the Championship.

In the second half I expected a backs-to-the-wall performance, and when Stoke pulled a goal back from the penalty spot I feared the worst. But Leeds responded in the best possible way, reinstating the two-goal advantage almost immediately, with Captain Cooper the deserving scorer. If I didn't already love El Loco, then his celebration of the third goal won my heart entirely. Sat on his bucket with hands clasped together, his body didn't move an inch but his fists shook ever so slightly when the ball hit the net. He just couldn't quite keep full control of his passion. Leeds saw out the victory in a professional and comfortable manner for an exceptionally impressive start to El Loco's reign.

After the game came the interview. Bielsa had never conducted a post-match interview as he only talks to the press at press conferences and hadn't spoken one-on-one to a journalist for decades. Contractually obliged, The Great Man insisted on conducting the interview in English, with the help of his translator, Salim Lamrani. To the naked eye, what followed was a hilarious spectacle showcasing Bielsa's 'loco' nature. Salim would translate the question to Bielsa, Bielsa would whisper his Spanish answer to Salim, Salim would whisper back the English translation of his answer, and Bielsa would repeat to the interviewer at least what he could remember of the English answer. You couldn't help but laugh, though while the public was laughing at Bielsa, I was laughing with him. This approach protected him from giving detailed answers before processing the match events, while showing a humble respect for the new country he was trying to adapt to. The genius had landed.

### **Derby County 1-4 Leeds United**

After the fantastic performance against Stoke, the big question was whether Leeds could repeat it, and how often. There were also questions about the squad size, which was significantly smaller than the 25-man modern standard. In one of his famous long and captivating press conferences, Bielsa spoke of his preference for having 18 players of similar ability, with youth team players filling in when needed. This way, everyone would stay motivated and everyone would be an important part of the team. I liked the theory; pressing like maniacs over the marathon 46-game Championship season would be a big ask for such a small squad, but I was already starting to trust everything Bielsa said.

Leeds headed to Derby and I headed to the Straker wedding, sacrificing the chance to even watch on telly this

time. Pride Park had not been a happy hunting ground for us in recent years as Leeds always seemed to be Derby's biggest game of the season and, more often than not, their players would respond. The rivalry between the clubs was born out of the bad relationship between their managers in the 1970s, and, while it wasn't quite Revie vs Clough, Sky did their best to hype up the clash of the new bosses, the master Marcelo Bielsa vs the apprentice Frank Lampard, who was one match into his managerial career. Lampard was very respectful in the build-up, supporting Sky's narrative by revealing that he had 'all Bielsa's books' on his shelves at home.

It was an evening kick-off, and as we sat down for the wedding breakfast I propped my phone against a spare glass and loaded Sky Go. Leeds were already 1-0 up! The lead didn't last long as, a few minutes later, Derby equalised from a free kick – a 'stunning strike' according to the commentators, though in reality it was a soft goal for young keeper Bailey Peacock-Farrell to concede. As they had against Stoke, Leeds responded brilliantly. Less than ten minutes later Alioski's pinpoint cross was met by an equally pinpoint header from Kemar Roofe, which looped gloriously into the far corner. I couldn't help letting out a 'GET IN!' in my now drunken excitement.

Being an upstanding citizen and respectful wedding guest, I turned off Sky Go for the speeches and just kept checking the score every few minutes; 2-1 became 3-1, and 3-1 became 4-1, I was absolutely blown away! In celebratory mood among a wedding full of Middlesbrough fans, I quickly went from absolutely hammered to waking up wondering if Leeds had really won at all. Twitter confirmed it wasn't a dream, and from all reports we were even more impressive against 'Frank Lampard's Derby County' than we had been against Stoke. Once home I was able to watch the footage for myself, and what a joy it was. With beautiful passing, relentless pressing,

fantastic goals, it had been a true masterclass by the master, leaving Lampard scratching his head.

What a sensational start to the season; six points and seven goals when some people (me) may have accepted one point and one goal. I was now heading off to Canada for a work trip, but I would be back in the country just in time for the next game, to finally see Bielsa's Leeds in the flesh, to finally see Bielsa upon his bucket.

### **Leeds United 2-0 Rotherham United**

By now, Bielsa-mania was in full swing, with press conferences dominated by questions about the 'bucket' Bielsa perched on in his technical area. It was all quite embarrassing, just serving to feed the El Loco caricature, yet The Great Man still answered the questions with his innate honesty: 'It is just a bucket, I cannot say any more than this. It is a comfortable bucket.' The bucket was added to the product line in the club shop, retailing at a whopping £80.

My pilgrimage to Elland Road began in Toronto on Friday evening. I had been miraculously allocated a seat in business class on the outward journey, and lightning struck twice on the flight back to Heathrow. 'Is your name Rocco?' asked the stewardess as I was boarding. It was my old school friend, Sarah, and a few minutes later I was being smuggled from my seat on the very back row into business class! I was cock-a-hoop, far too excited to make use of the flat beds and get even a wink of sleep.

I arrived home at noon, said hello to Frankie, showered, donned my new 'lucky' Bielsa top, and waved goodbye to Frankie, with my dad already waiting on the driveway, desperate for his fish and chips. Me and my dad have an arrangement where he pays for our season tickets and I buy the fish and chips. However, due to jet lag or a Freudian slip,

today I hadn't brought any cash so Dad had to cough up. Just two home games in and he was effectively three fish and chips down on the deal. Once a season, fish and chips are not the pre-match highlight, eclipsed on the first home game by the sight of Elland Road as you walk down Beeston Hill. It's a glorious sight all year round, but especially so when basking in the August sun, and even more so after a 16-hour journey.

Over the summer, Andrea Radrizzani had been busy sprucing up the exterior of the stadium. The iconic statue of our greatest captain was now the centrepiece of 'Bremner Square', an area of personalised bricks bought and inscribed by fans. The south-east corner of the ground was already a focal point on matchday, but this new feature added nicely to the atmosphere among the scarf stalls, burger vans, and programme sellers on Lowfields Road. There was also an added buzz in the north-east corner of the ground, where the ticket office had been replaced by a fan park, transforming hordes of anxious queuers into tanked-up louts.

The final hurdle before entering the ground is always a nerve-wracking affair – the age-old battle of man vs machine. The automated turnstile has never malfunctioned, but one day it might, and this perpetual threat hangs over me every match until I am inside the Kop. My hatred for the automated turnstile isn't helped by the fact it cost me a job, for I was among the humble turnstile operators who were tragically made redundant in the summer of 2004. I lived the dream, being paid £25 a match to watch Leeds. My boss was a lovely bloke called Ray Gay who used to call me 'Deano', which I took as a sign of affection until receiving my first pay cheque, with 'Dino Rocko' written on the envelope. It's certainly not the first time my names have been mixed up (or misspelt), but I couldn't help chuckle at the irony of a man called Ray Gay mixing up my names.

After trudging through piss in order to take a piss in the Kop's unrefined toilets, I finally made it to my seat. It was a great feeling being back in the Kop, the only place for me. Within five minutes of kick-off I had texted the WhatsApp group, 'This is amazing.' It was so clear to see the difference; quick first-time passing, one-twos, rehearsed patterns of play. It was as if Bielsa had taught the players how to play football. Yet it was Rotherham who should have taken the lead when a misunderstanding while playing out from the back almost presented them with an open goal. Somehow Peacock-Farrell recovered to make the save and I couldn't help feeling it was a big moment in the season. Playing out from the back had cost Pep Guardiola's Manchester City many goals in his first season, so I assumed it would do so for Leeds. The key was avoiding any early-season calamities that would undermine the confidence of players and fans in the philosophy.

It was 0-0 at half-time but in the second half the pressure finally told and Leeds took the lead through Luke Ayling's first goal for the club, with the help of goal-line technology. I didn't even know we had goal-line technology, so it was very confusing when the goal was eventually awarded, but a huge relief. Now ahead, we began to flex our muscles. Some of our football was irresistible, and one move in particular was mindblowing, especially coming from the players of the previous season.

A long, calm build-up of passing across defence and midfield exploded into life with a series of one-twos that resulted with the ball at Sáiz's feet, and the goal at his mercy. The Spanish playmaker refused the chance to pass into the net – perhaps he thought the move had been too good for a simple finish – and instead he scooped the ball towards the top corner, where it was headed off the line. It would have been one of the best goals I've ever seen at Elland Road, more suited to

Barcelona than Beeston, but when the second goal did come we had to settle for one of the best in recent years. Under pressure deep in their own half, again Leeds would not simply clear the ball but played in triangles around the Rotherham attackers until Calvin Phillips was free in midfield. The local boy lofted a magnificent 50-yard pass in behind the defence, Kemar Roofs beat the defender for pace, shrugged him off with his new-found strength, and from a tight angle (of which we had the perfect view) he lifted the ball into the far corner. Game, set, and match. Elland Road rejoiced.

As the players made their customary post-match lap of honour the Leeds fans lauded their new heroes, the same players who had been lambasted earlier in the summer. I knew they could fall back to their normal standard soon enough, but seeing that they were capable of playing such fantastic football was so exciting. I couldn't wait for the next match.

## **Swansea City 2-2 Leeds United**

Leeds's tough start to the season continued with a long midweek trip to relegated Swansea. Unlike Stoke, Swansea had sold players, changed manager, and seemed fairly content with a re-building job in the Championship, but nevertheless this was still expected to be one of the most difficult away games of the season. The match was live on Sky, so I headed into town to watch it with my mates.

Complacency crept in during the pre-match merriment and by kick-off we were scampering around town, struggling to find somewhere to watch the game. We headed to Christies, an old favourite that held fond memories of rolling around the floor aged 21, celebrating a victory at Newcastle. To our horror Christies weren't showing the game, so we dashed up the hill to The Den, which held fond memories of rolling around the floor aged 33, celebrating a draw at Newcastle. The Den wasn't



even open, so we dashed to the safe haven of The Alex, the main pub in Harrogate for watching live sport, which held my very fondest memory of watching football in a boozer. Not Newcastle-related this time, nor were we rolling around the floor, as it was completely covered in smashed glass from 300 or so dropped pints after Jonny Howson's last-gasp winner at Carlisle sent us to Wembley in 2008.

We arrived at The Alex 15 minutes into the game with the score still 0-0, but Swansea soon took the lead with a strike from outside the box that should never have beaten the keeper. I expected Leeds to cave in but again they responded well, equalising when youngster Jamie Shackleton burst to the byline and squared for Kemar Roofe to tap home. Roofe had arrived at the club two years earlier, a £3m marquee signing from League Two Oxford who couldn't nail down his best position, let alone a place in the team. Bielsa had made him an out-and-out striker; a good one, too, a livewire fox-in-the-box with four goals in four games this season.

In the second half Bielsa's side continued to play some good football, but it was no big surprise when Swansea's Leeds-born striker Oli McBurnie scored a fantastic looping header. Staring defeat in the face, Bielsa introduced this year's marquee signing, Patrick Bamford, and in the 79th minute a few slick passes sent Bamford racing down the left wing. Pat sent a harmless-looking low cross into the box, but it evaded the first defender and turned into a magnificent pass when Pablo Hernández popped up, nipping between two defenders to slot the ball calmly into the bottom corner of the net. It was another lovely goal, and another indication that the team's resolve had been significantly strengthened.

Swansea could have won it at the death, but Peacock-Farrell stood big and atoned for the soft goal he had conceded in the first half, securing a 2-2 draw, which felt like a point gained

rather than two dropped. The feel-good factor continued unabated and we celebrated with too many Sambucas, too long into the night. By the morning there was no feel-good factor at my desk, or at the Thorpe Arch training ground, where the Leeds players received a two-hour hammering for all the things they had done wrong at Swansea. El Loco was setting the bar high; failing to win was not to be celebrated.

### **Norwich City 0-3 Leeds United**

Saturday brought another long trip, to another ground where we always seem to struggle (I'm not sure there's a ground where we don't). There was no long trip for me though. Away days were sadly a thing of the past, and tickets are in such demand that if you don't go to every game you barely have a chance of going to any.

Instead I was hosting another birthday BBQ. It was a glorious summer's day, spent in the garden with Frankie and the full Purchase clan; my Manchester United-supporting mate, his wife, and all four godchildren. We fired up the BBQ, cracked open the beers and kicked a ball around while *Soccer Saturday* blared out of the kitchen. Despite Norwich's slow start to the season, and ever the pessimist, I assumed our bubble would burst today. Quite the opposite, the bubble soared! Within 20 minutes of kick-off, host Jeff Stelling announced, 'Goal at Carrow Road!' and I was surprised and delighted to hear that Mateusz Klich had put Leeds into the lead. Five minutes later, 'Another goal at Carrow Road ... but which way has it gone?' To Leeds of course! Gjanni Aljoski had doubled the lead. What a start, what a team!

We had to repel what sounded like a bit of an onslaught at the start of the second half, but Pablo Hernández soon delivered the knockout blow, curling in a peach of a goal from the corner of the box, sealing the three points and capping a

superb individual performance. Hernández had been playing in Qatar when he joined Leeds in 2016 for next to nothing, and the similarities between him and the last man to lead the club out of this division (in the right direction), Gordon Strachan, were striking. They both came to Leeds in their 30s, the old men of the squad but still among the fittest players who dictate matches, scorers of important goals and special goals, model professionals and natural leaders, if only by example in Pablo's case.

In the post-match press-conference, Hernández received the highest praise from his manager. Bielsa is famed for improving players, and was asked whether he thought he could improve Pablo's game despite him entering the twilight years of his career. He replied, 'Hernández is so good he can improve me as a coach.'

### **Leeds United 0-0 Middlesbrough**

It had been the hottest summer in my living memory, certainly since the hosepipe bans of the mid-1990s, and today was another scorcher. In anticipation of a mouth-watering Friday night top-of-the-table clash, I had booked the afternoon off work and headed to The Boathouse with Rick, our new favourite haunt for pre-game beers. It boasts a large beer garden that runs along the banks of the Leeds-Liverpool canal, perfect for a sunny day. As the afternoon progressed we were joined by the Woollards, then special guest Lewis, all the way from Canada. The special guest had his own special guest, Pontus Jansson's brother, who had befriended Lewis through post-match Twitter debriefs. Peter had travelled from Malmö for tonight's game and had arranged to come meet Lewis, but by the time he and his friends arrived I was 'a bit' drunk and didn't even introduce myself.

For most of my mates' football and drinking goes hand in hand, but they don't for me. I enjoy the drinking part, but

the price you pay during the game just isn't worth it. I like to be fully engaged and fully wound up; booing just dulls my senses (not to mention the dreaded double vision that can be induced). Thankfully, I managed to sober myself up by the time we got to the ground.

Sky billed tonight's game as Bielsaball vs Pulisball, a cheesy line but a valid reference to the clash of styles. Tony Pulis is the archetypal English manager (despite apparently being Welsh), and his direct and physical Middlesbrough team were strongly fancied to be one of the two winners of automatic promotion from the division. It promised to be the toughest test yet for Bielsaball in English football and proved to be just that. Boro had no problems with Bielsa's high press; their direct style simply bypassed it, thus Leeds struggled to dominate. A tense match unfolded, and despite a lack of goalmouth action it was a game I enjoyed; two top teams going toe-to-toe, a good, honest battle and a good advert for the Championship. Peacock-Farrell made a couple of big saves, there were a couple of big penalty shouts for each team, and in the end Middlesbrough were worthy of their point, and maybe more.

I left the ground feeling a little deflated and it was sobering (quite literally) to see Bielsa's Leeds team kept at bay. Nevertheless, it was a decent point on the board, and the clean sheet was a feather in the cap of El Loco, who had made a big pre-match call in bringing fit-again captain Liam Cooper back into the team, not in place of Berardi, as expected, but Sweden international Pontus Jansson. It was a major show of loyalty from The Great Man as Berardi had done everything asked of him and deserved to keep his place, even if it meant our best defender would watch the biggest match of the season so far from the bench. I'm not sure any other manager would have left out Jansson for this game as his aerial prowess alone was a big attribute to ignore against Pulisball, but it set down

an early marker for the rest of the squad. Play well, and you will keep the shirt.

Leeds headed into the first international break as Championship leaders, but no one was getting carried away. We had been top at the same stage last season, playing stylish football under a foreign manager new to the English game, until a trip to The Den after the first international break derailed our season with a defeat the players later admitted they never recovered from. Waiting on the other side of this season's first international break was a trip to The Den.