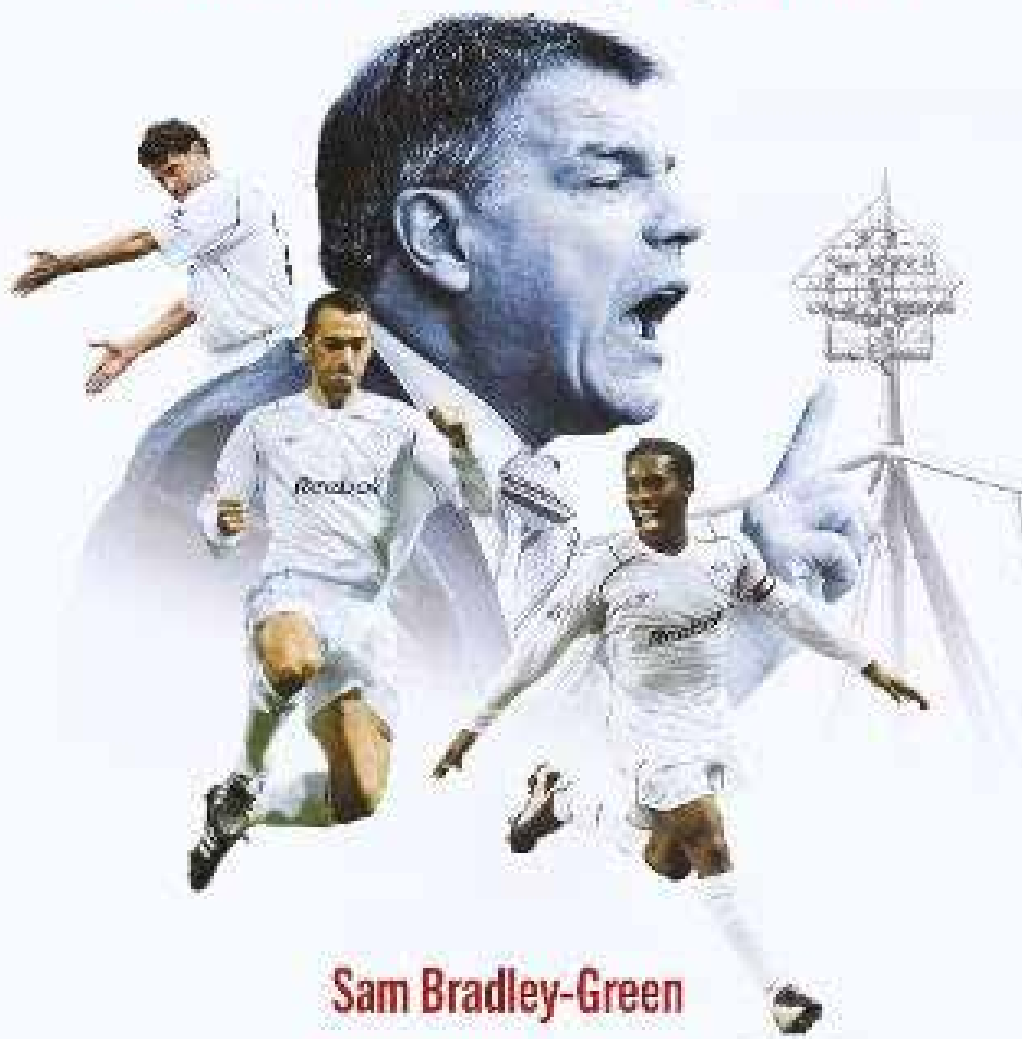


# MEASURED SPIRIT

How Sam Allardyce Made  
Bolton Wanderers a Top-Flight Force



Sam Bradley-Green

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## Todd-al change

‘COME ON Bolton! Come on Bolton!’

Stamford Bridge was awash with fans in white and blue but both sets of supporters were singing loudly and encouragingly from the bottom of their hearts for the men in white. Sunday, 10 May 1998 may have been approaching the dawn of the new millennium but for many Bolton fans, it was the dawn of a potential Armageddon.

As news came through of Coventry’s equaliser at Everton in the 89th minute thanks to a goal from Dion Dublin, Bolton fans gained hope that the impossible could be possible. Wanderers needed only to match Everton’s result to stay in the Premier League for the first time in their history. After 1997’s amazing First Division title-winning campaign, manager Colin Todd’s team were trying to look at the influences of the great nights at Burnden Park under his former boss, Bruce Rioch. Bolton had made a much better go of their top-flight season compared to their last efforts in 1995/96 and had taken this chance of Premier League stability down to the last day. With this, they had the chance to stay up but also to relegate the ‘grand old team’ of Everton.

Everton v Coventry stood at 1-1 in the 89th minute at Goodison Park as Bolton were trailing 1-0 at Chelsea

thanks to a 73rd-minute strike from player-manager Gianluca Vialli. The Bolton fans knew that just one goal would save them and ensure another go at the Premier League at the Reebok Stadium, less than 12 months after its opening. Bolton had struggled to turn the Reebok into a fortress a la Burnden Park but certainly had regained form and had also bought wisely with a mixture of experience and quality. As the away section of Stamford Bridge started to put their ear to their wireless radios and start to hear about Dublin's equaliser in Merseyside, the news spread throughout not only the away end, but all four stands of Stamford Bridge.

The 34,845 attendees felt that history could be made. Chelsea fans caught themselves joining in with Bolton chants, and at one point, the home supporters were starting to boo their own players for tackling Bolton players. The confusion among the 22 on the pitch was a unique sight as Chelsea had consolidated fourth place three weeks earlier with a home victory against Liverpool, and were effectively playing for nothing. Yet, with that in mind, they still fielded a strong line-up and many of the players who had helped Chelsea win the League Cup in March and would start the Cup Winners' Cup Final three days later, such as Frank Leboeuf, Mark Hughes, Roberto Di Matteo, Gustavo Poyet, Vialli himself and top goalscorer Tore André Flo, all played against Bolton on that summer's day in west London. Three days away from Chelsea's major European showpiece, it could be argued that this fixture was in fact Bolton's cup final.

Bolton had started with a 3-5-2 formation with a defensive unit of Guðni Bergsson, Mark Fish and Gerry Taggart then a midfield of Neil Cox, Per Frandsen, John Sheridan, Alan Thompson, and hometown hero Jimmy

Phillips. Phillips, more comfortable as a defender, had filled in and showed his Bolton spirit and stated he would play anywhere to help his hometown club. Up front was the partnership of Bob Taylor and the previous season's First Division hero, Nathan Blake. Taylor had proved to be a fine acquisition as the record signing Dean Holdsworth was yet to start firing for the Whites as Bolton looked to replace the iconic John McGinlay who had departed for Bradford City earlier in the season.

'Sad but true, Bolton have looked a bit short when it mattered the most,' stated the commentary team as Bolton started to build up a move to try and bring the scores level. John Salako, wearing McGinlay's former number ten shirt, began to show glimpses of the player who had earned international recognition with five England caps in 1991. The Nigeria-born midfielder had arrived on a loan from Coventry City but had not really pulled up any trees during his time at the Reebok Stadium. However, he began to shimmy and shake with the ball down the left-hand side, took on three Chelsea defenders and found himself with the ball at the edge of the box. His cross was then deflected into the path of club icon Alan Thompson. The ball fell on to the Geordie's unfavoured right foot in the D; he then chipped it into the six-yard box. There stood the unmarked Swiss striker on loan from Nantes, Gaetano Giallanza, another Hail Mary attempt from Todd in March to try and replace the goals lost by the sale of McGinlay. However, the ball moved towards him in only his third appearance for Bolton. Could he be a hero for the Lancashire side? The stadium held its breath, and the ball came drifting towards him. With one flick of his head, he was due to be a hero, keep Bolton in the Premier League and have his name etched in the history books of one of the founding

members of the Football League. Alas, the ball sailed past him and out for a goal kick. It needed the slightest nod, the smallest touch and he would be for ever remembered by the Bolton faithful.

The camera would pan to Colin Todd, whose expression said more than the expletives of the away end could. It was over, that was the big chance, surely. Then in the next move, substitute Gus Poyet, never one to shy from the dramatic, started to drive forward with the ball in midfield. At this moment, the Chelsea fans began to boo Poyet; they wanted Bolton to stay up.

Poyet threaded a lovely ball with his right foot through the visiting defence to youngster Jody Morris. Morris was expected to be a future England hero but never reached the heights of his childhood friend and academy scholar John Terry; he is, however, still fondly remembered by Chelsea fans. The 19-year-old took the ball forward and hit a low strike across Keith Branagan and into the bottom-left corner to get his first league goal. With 90 minutes on the clock, the score was now 2-0. The crowd knew it, the players knew it and Todd knew it. Bolton's time in the sun, in the greatest league of all, was over. Back to the First Division they went. Coventry's equaliser was irrelevant, Bolton could not do their bit. Chants were replaced by tears: the hopes of the faithful, travelling fans turned to sorrow as the players bowed their heads. Some knew it would be their last appearance in a Bolton shirt, some had no idea what was to come. Just a year later, there was more heartbreak in the capital for Todd and his white army.

After that relegation in 1997/98, a run of positive results at the back end of the 1998/99 First Division season had seen Bolton manage to book a play-off position with some difficulty. A high-end play-off place or the potential of an

automatic promotion looked very much on in late February. However, a stuttering end to the season saw Bolton lose four of their last ten games as they slumped to sixth in the table, secured with a final-day victory over Portsmouth at Fratton Park.

Bolton, very much the outsiders for that final promotion spot back to the Premier League, would face Ipswich Town who finished third under George Burley and were disappointed not to make the top two after ending up just one point behind Bradford. Ipswich held a greater goal difference than Bradford as well so could see themselves unlucky not to be a Premier League club. This would be some fight on Todd's hands: not only to get to Wembley but also, if the worst happened, to keep hold of his best players. Sharks had been circling around the talents of Claus Jensen, Per Frandsen, Mark Fish and up-and-coming youngster Eiður Guðjohnsen. If Bolton could not secure Premier League football for these international players, then they would run the risk of another club prising them away from the Reebok.

However, Bolton managed to get through the play-off semi-final by the skin of their teeth. An 84th-minute strike from one of the Scandinavian Whites, Michael Johansen, earned a 1-0 win at the Reebok and something to take on the long journey three days later to Portman Road. Ipswich were furious as they felt they should have been awarded a penalty prior to Johansen's volley as Fish tripped David Johnson in the box during the first half.

However, if the first leg was a damp 1-0 affair, the second leg was anything but. On 14 minutes, Ipswich's Irish-by-proxy midfielder, Matt Holland, evened the aggregate with a lovely finish, before Bob Taylor equalised in the second half from close range after some great work from



Jamaican teenager Ricardo Gardner who laid the ball off to Guðjohnsen whose shot was saved before it was smashed in by Taylor; 1-1 on the night, 2-1 Bolton on aggregate. However, the basketball-esque match continued to rage on and just one minute later, future England international Kieron Dyer put Ipswich ahead as the Portman Road crowd could smell blood; 2-2 on aggregate. The madness continued and Bolton had a corner in the 84th minute. Johansen floated the ball in; it evaded many a head but eventually fell to his Danish compatriot Frandsen who struck it in a way that would make many a Viking proud. He slammed his shot past the keeper to make the game 2-2 on the night, 3-2 Bolton with six minutes left to play.

Many in the crowd and at home thought the drama was done. How wrong they were, and Ipswich still felt they could add another twist in the evening. Fabian Wilnis, a signing that January for Ipswich from Dutch side De Graafschap, had the ball on the right. The Dutchman, who had cost Ipswich £200,000, almost paid that back in one moment. His pass found the run of the pacy teenager Dyer who once again broke Bolton hearts. The floated ball came in and Dyer got the deftest of nudges on it with his head just inside the box; the attempt had enough pace to loop in the air. The back spin caused the ball to dip at a speed which caught Bolton goalkeeper Steve Banks off guard, landing behind him and into the net; 3-2 Ipswich on the night, 3-3 on aggregate. Extra time was looming.

Six minutes into extra time, the crucial goal of the game was scored. Taylor hit a ball from Guðjohnsen into the back of the net; 3-3 on the night, 4-3 Bolton on aggregate. Bolton fans looked relieved, the plans for Wembley were on, many already thinking of excuses to tell the other halves. Still, Ipswich had other ideas and Holland scored his second,

but though it gave Ipswich a richly deserved victory on the night, it was not enough; 4-4 on aggregate but due to the now cancelled away goals rule, Bolton progressed. Skin of their teeth does not even cover it. It was the third consecutive year that Ipswich's hopes of reaching the Premier League had been dashed at the play-off stage but never so cruelly. Throughout the evening, the side who had occupied that second automatic promotion position for much of the season were within reach of a place in that Wembley final on 31 May 1999. Ipswich would have their day in glory a year later by beating Barnsley 4-2 at Wembley to reach the Premier League. Yet, it was Bolton who would be marching up Wembley Way and reaching those two towers to face Watford in 1999.

A crowd of 70,343 fans attended Wembley for the final. Watford had beaten Birmingham City via a penalty shoot-out after a two-legged 1-1 aggregate score. Watford won 7-6 from the spot at St Andrew's to book their place in the final. They were managed by a man who was no stranger to Wembley, former England boss Graham Taylor. Taylor, who was a victim of cruel media taunting during his time in the big job, had started to rebuild his career and had worked hard to build a strong Watford team who had caused some teams problems and had surprised many in the First Division.

The media projected that the winner of this tie would take in around £10m in TV rights and sponsorships and both the bookies and pundits predicted a comfortable Bolton victory. However, Watford had done the double over Bolton that season with a 2-1 win at the Reebok in October and a 2-0 success at Vicarage Road in April, a result that would very much still be in the minds of both sets of players in the build-up to the final.

The match kicked off at 3pm with South African defender Mark Fish captaining Bolton. Colin Todd and Graham Taylor would lead their sides out at Wembley in front of a cascade of fireworks and expectation. The game began with Bolton dominating early on. Chances from Taylor and Guðjohnsen scared the Watford faithful but there was nothing to show for both efforts. Then, in the 37th minute, a corner from Watford left-back Peter Kennedy was whipped in but cleared by Neil Cox and Colin's son, Andy Todd. Yet a moment of sheer brilliance by Nick Wright silenced the Bolton faithful into silence. Wright performed an acrobatic overhead kick which the youngsters of 1999 would refer to as a bicycle kick, from inside the box, slamming the ball past Steve Banks and into the far corner of the net before being mauled by his Watford team-mates and stunning everyone in a white shirt. The sea of fans in yellow were elated and the rocket man, Elton John, celebrated in his own way: a glass of bubbly from his private live stream in Seattle. It was not even half-time yet, Elton!

By the second half, the game dragged on with no real events in the game. Todd brought off Cox and Johansen and brought on young Dane Bo Hansen, and the ever-reliable Scott Sellars. Bolton were pushing and pushing for an equaliser: it felt all too similar to that final-day game at Stamford Bridge a year earlier. With Wanderers stretched and out of position, Watford took their chance. In the 89th minute, Sellars lost the ball in the middle of the park to Kennedy who passed it to substitute Allan Smart. Smart, upset not to be starting after eight goals that season, took the ball in his stride and calmly placed it past Banks to confirm Watford's place in the Premier League for the first time to the elation of Taylor and the supporters in the

stands. Once again, in London, Bolton hearts were broken on the last day with a 2-0 defeat.

Todd looked defeated, by the result as well as the job. Had he taken this team as far as he could? From his humble start as Bruce Rioch's number two in 1992 to this Wembley defeat, Todd's association with the club had had its fair share of ups and downs but 31 May 1999 was Watford's day and once again, not Bolton Wanderers'.

But from the demise, a phoenix would rise. It is always darkest before the dawn they say: this epitomises Bolton Wanderers perfectly.

That summer brought an air of change and a sudden dose of reality to Todd and his squad before the 1999/2000 season. For many of the international superstars at the Reebok, it was either goodbye or soon to be goodbye. Chairman Gordon Hargreaves stated in the summer, 'This club is still geared financially for Premiership football, and we have to address that situation and bring it into line with Division One status before we can mount a renewed challenge.' In short, Hargreaves was saying that Bolton had a Premier League squad with a First Division budget and wage structure. Something had to give: there needed to be a recoup of some money after the failure to return to the Premier League.

Todd had been a figure of stability and reliability since his move to Bolton in 1992 to act as assistant to Bruce Rioch. He had followed Rioch before and after their stint together at Middlesbrough, so it was a natural next step after a short-term spell as first-team manager on Teesside. After Rioch left for an ill-fated tenure at Arsenal following the play-off final win in 1995, Todd originally took up the role of joint manager with his former Derby team-mate Roy McFarland. However, after McFarland was dismissed in

early 1996, Todd was officially given the role of first-team manager of Bolton Wanderers. Both of Todd's attempts with Bolton in the Premier League ended in relegation but his title-winning team of 1996/97 went on to be one of the supporters' favourite eras and gave Burnden Park the most perfect send-off as Bolton made the move to the Reebok Stadium.

However, after relegation in 1998 and play-off final defeat in 1999, the cracks were beginning to show and maybe it was time for all parties to start a fresh adventure. Todd knew that in order to reach previous heights again, he would need further backing in the transfer market, something Hargreaves and the board were not too keen on after substantial financial outlays in the mid-to-late 90s had already been put in place, namely a brand-new, state-of-the-art stadium in Horwich.

During the summer, the rumours surrounding Danish anchor Per Frandsen were all over the local press, namely in East Lancashire as Blackburn Rovers seemed to take a serious interest in taking the midfielder to Ewood Park. Frandsen had become a cult hero at Bolton with his performances at Burnden Park to help secure the First Division title and his reliability in tough times. Frandsen had also been part of the Danish squad which competed at the 1998 World Cup so was very much a jewel in the crown for Todd and Bolton. He was seen as one of the best players outside of the Premier League by the summer of 1999. Although the financial writing was on the wall for Todd's non-existent transfer kitty, he was assured that Frandsen would not be sold.

However, Todd was deflated at the free transfer of Scott Sellars to Huddersfield Town: this one stung Todd as he felt Sellars was vital to Bolton's push back to the top

flight. Sellars had arrived in Bolton during the 1995/96 season for a fee of £750,000 from Newcastle United and had gained great stock with the supporters and his manager due to his leadership qualities, great ability and superb attitude. Fifteen goals in 111 appearances displayed those attributes and many in BL6, including Todd himself, were disappointed to see him cross the Pennines to Huddersfield. Yet, if Todd was given the choice of losing Frandsen or Sellars then he was surely happy with the conclusion of his summer outgoings.

The season started and Bolton had spent a grand total of £0.00 on transfers in the summer; the future looked bleak for a team fighting to win the title. Three defeats in six kicked things off as they struggled to find form. Bolton still had a great plethora of quality, but a lack of fresh blood was always going to hurt especially with a Wembley hangover. After a 2-2 draw away at Barnsley on 18 September 1999, Todd was brought into Hargreaves' office to discuss something serious. A bid had come in for Per Frandsen from Blackburn. An already depleted squad would not only struggle without the Dane but would flounder and Todd made it noticeably clear if this bid was accepted and went through then he would have to leave the club as his position would become untenable. The board did not take Todd's remarks seriously as they knew of his family ties to the town, with a home in the brand-new Turton Heights estate in Bromley Cross as well as his son, Andy, being a member of the first-team squad. Todd was in fact informed that before any new signings could appear at the Reebok Stadium, he must first sell off any valuable assets. Again, he made his position clear.

At 50, Todd felt he had no reason to be playing games and waited for the decision from the board regarding

Frandsen's future. On 22 September 1999, after seven years at the club, Todd resigned. Bolton had accepted an eventual £2.25m offer from neighbours Blackburn and Frandsen had made his way through Darwen over to Ewood to sign the papers; just like that, Bolton had lost arguably their best player and their manager in the space of a day.

Todd stated, 'My position had become untenable after the club accepted an offer from Blackburn for Per last Thursday. I wanted to wait until that transfer was complete and now, it is, I have resigned.' Todd's anguish was obvious and how torn he was about this decision. 'I felt the club could have gone further without the financial constraints that have held back my personal ambitions,' he added.

Todd also revealed that he'd had some free transfers and loans rejected by the board in the summer after assurances that high-profile players would not leave. He seemed resentful since the club had recently sold the land at Burnden Park to a supermarket developer two years after their departure and recouped £6.7m for this. This would, at first, become a 'Big W' – a form of Woolworths where in its present-day iteration it is a large ASDA superstore. However, it must be remembered that they were only two years down the line from purchasing the Reebok Stadium for the sum of £35m, a move which would go on to cost the club over £100m.

Todd had left and the last remnants of that iconic Bruce Rioch side that swept through the lower leagues and killed many a giant was gone. It was time for a fresh change and a new era to begin. Roy Evans, formerly of Liverpool, was heavily rumoured to be taking over but it never materialised. In October, Bolton's board chose Phil Gartside of Leigh to

replace Gordon Hargreaves as chairman and on 19 October 1999, a decision that would change the club for ever was made. On his 45th birthday, Bolton Wanderers announced their new manager: welcome, Sam Allardyce.

The legacy began.