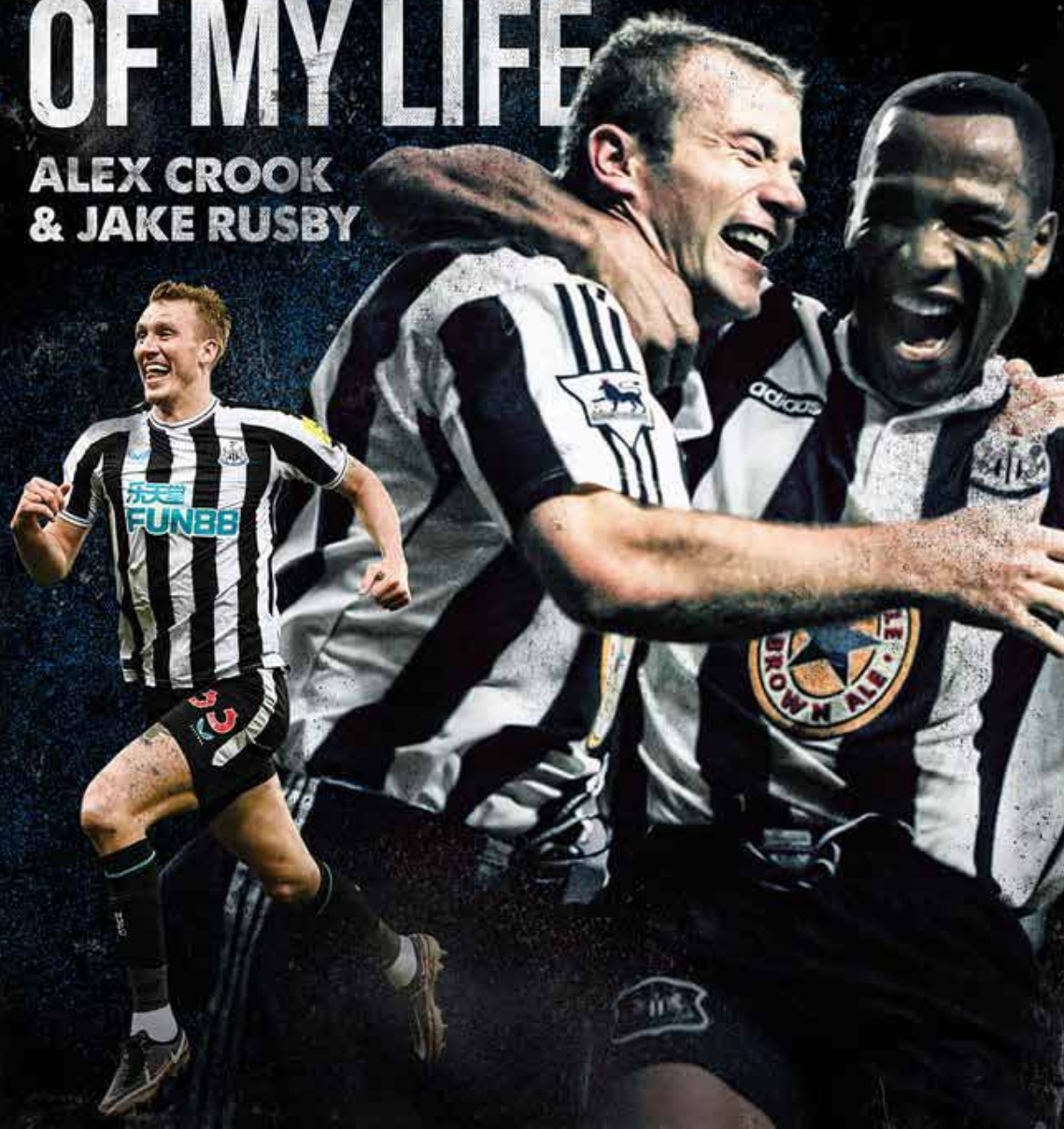


NEWCASTLE UNITED

MATCH OF MY LIFE

ALEX CROOK
& JAKE RUSBY



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Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Foreword by Rafa Benitez	9
Dan Burn	17
Alan Shearer	29
Jonás Gutiérrez	41
Papiss Cissé	51
Les Ferdinand	63
Malcolm Macdonald	73
Nolberto Solano	87
Warren Barton	99
Shay Given	111
Temuri Ketsbaia	123
Bob Moncur	131
Rob Lee	145
Fabricio Coloccini	157
Frank Clark	167
Lee Clark	177
David Kelly	191
Nikos Dabizas	201
Steven Taylor	211
Alan Kennedy	223
Keith Gillespie	233
Barry Venison	245

DAN BURN



Dan Burn

Defender

2022–present

When Newcastle became one of the world's richest football clubs following their Saudi Arabian-led takeover in 2021, few people, even Dan Burn himself, would have predicted the 6ft 7in defender would be one of their first signings. Burn, who famously turned up for one of his early training sessions driving a Smart Car, is as far removed as can be from some of the more glamorous names like Neymar and Cristiano Ronaldo, who were being linked with a move to St James' Park. But the Blyth-born friendly giant – who grew up idolising Alan Shearer and was released by Newcastle as a schoolboy – quickly established himself as a hero among the Toon Army he used to be part of with his wholehearted displays.

After signing from Brighton in January 2022, Burn played a key part in Newcastle avoiding relegation before going on to establish himself as first-choice left-back in the team that would finish fourth in the Premier League in 2022/23 to bring Champions League football back to the North East for the first time in nearly two decades. It's the quarter-final of that season's Carabao Cup en route to facing Manchester United in the final at Wembley that Burn has chosen as the match of his life.

Newcastle United 2-0 Leicester City

Carabao Cup, quarter-final

Tuesday, 10 January 2023

St James' Park, Newcastle

Attendance: 52,009

Newcastle

Pope

Trippier

Schar

Botman

Burn

Longstaff

Guimarães

Willock (Murphy)

Almirón (Saint-Maximin)

Wilson (Isak)

Joelinton

Leicester

Ward

Castagne

Amartey

Faes

Thomas (Iheanacho)

Ndidi

Tielemans

Albrighton

Pérez (Mendy)

Barnes

Daka (Vardy)

Managers

Eddie Howe

Brendan Rodgers

Goals

Burn

Joelinton

I remember my goal vividly because I still replay it every few nights on the television. I broke into the box, took a good second touch, and thought to myself, *I'm just going to hit this*. The moment I struck the shot I knew it was going in and then it was just pure joy, scoring at the Gallowgate End, what I'd dreamed of doing since I was a kid. I've got a box in that exact corner of St James' Park as well, so to do it down there and be able to run over and celebrate in front of all my friends and family was amazing and still feels very surreal.

I do sort of regret the celebration in the dressing room afterwards. After some of the games, the gaffer tries to get people up and dancing and it's only really Jacob Murphy that ever does because he can move. Everyone was telling me to dance and then the gaffer urged me to get up – I thought he wanted me to dance, but he actually wanted me to make a speech. I thought I'd just throw a dance in and then it went viral on social media. I was a bit gutted because it deflected away from how good the goal was, but I think people appreciate that anyway. Wherever I go now people come up to me and say, 'Can you do the dance?' but I save it for goals and, luckily, I don't score that many, so don't have to do it very often.

Later that season I scored my first Premier League goal, against my old club Brighton, which was another great feeling. I was most shocked because I'd scored with my head, as that's something I've always struggled with. It's not for the lack of trying so I don't know if it's about timing or whatever, but, given my height, you'd expect me to score more headers.

People have asked whether I considered not celebrating in front of Brighton, but I didn't really think about that until after and I don't score enough goals to not celebrate.

To be fair to Brighton, they were great with me when I left. They really didn't want me to go but understood it was my boyhood club and didn't want to stand in the way. I wouldn't have left for anyone apart from Newcastle, barring a Manchester City, but that was never going to happen. It was always going to be Newcastle or no one. I actually remember saying to my dad just as the takeover

happened that my chances of playing for Newcastle were gone – then, three months later, there I was signing. It's crazy how these things work out.

I was in Dubai when I first started to hear a few rumours and there were loads of players being touted for Newcastle because everybody knew what was happening with the new owners coming in. The two clubs were speaking to each other, trying to agree a fee, and I wanted to speed it up a little bit, so I ended up ringing Graeme Jones, one of the coaches who my agent had a bit of a relationship with, and spoke to him about it. As it was going through so many different people, I didn't really know what was happening, so I spoke to Graeme and then the gaffer and both said similar things. I knew they were looking at a few other options but, luckily, I managed to get it done. I didn't plead my case as such, but wanted to say that I thought I could help a lot on the pitch in terms of experience, but also off the pitch with the standards I demand of myself and the players around me. Within the space of a week, it went from nothing to me driving up to Newcastle on transfer deadline day to sign the contract.

Signing was really emotional because I had my wife and both my parents there. Seeing how choked they all were brought out the emotion in me as I've had a lot of ups and downs in my career, including being let go by Newcastle as a kid, which was the right decision because I was crap at football back then and not even that into it until I got a bit older!

To know that I was getting the chance to sign for Newcastle and running out a local hero, wearing a black-and-white shirt was really emotional. I was very nervous stepping out for my debut against Aston Villa, but that's something that will live with me forever.

My first impressions of Eddie Howe were really good, particularly the attention to detail he puts into everything and the intensity he works at. It's not just that but also the fact he really wants to build a relationship with you as a person and not solely as a footballer. He wanted to know about my family, kids and my background in order to work out how he could get the best out of

me. I've only got good things to say about the training, which took a little while to get used to just because of the intensity. What you see on a Saturday, the way we press, that's us every single day of the week. I had to get used to long sessions and it was like a sort of mini pre-season for me, not that the training at Brighton wasn't good, but it was a lot more relaxed in the way we went about it. Straight away I saw a lot of similarities between Eddie and Graham Potter, but it's just a lot more intense with the gaffer and we reaped the rewards.

Eddie and his assistant Jason Tindall are very much a team, very similar, and work well together. Jason does a lot of work with the defenders and we went through a stage where we kept ten clean sheets in a row. A lot of that was down to him and the stuff he drilled into us every single day. It just becomes a habit. Jason is a great guy and the impression you get of him is not the reality. Everyone laughed about the stuff that appeared on social media and all the photos about him wanting to be the centre of attention. We gave him a bit of stick and printed out pictures of his face and put them around the training ground, but he took it well.

There are a lot of clubs where the staff and the players are separate, but we're all one big group. Our mentality has always been that no one person is bigger than the team, and that really helped because everyone was pushing towards the same goal. I saw that when I first signed and we were battling to stay up, because I'd been in relegation battles before where I felt people had gone into self-defence mode and ended up deflecting a lot by saying, 'He should have done this,' or 'You should have done that,' but here we were all pulling in the same direction. Even the guys not playing were all getting behind the lads and trying to push them. I looked at that and thought we stood a good chance of avoiding relegation just because of how tight the group was. That goes a long way and there was no sort of bitterness towards players who had been playing from those who hadn't.

A lot has been made of the post-match team celebration photos we take after wins. I'd seen it a few times from afar when I was

at Brighton, and Newcastle did it after picking up the first win with Eddie Howe as manager against Burnley, and it went from there. Sometimes when you're winning games, you can take it for granted, but I've been on the other side where you're losing games constantly so, to look at the photo, it helps remind you what you've done it for. It's a good thing to do and we put them up on the walls around the training ground, so every time you win they're always put up so you can walk past them.

I think that's a reflection of a real change in mentality, because normally in football you'll do training drills and there's a forfeit for the loser, so you're always just not wanting to be the loser, whereas we take photos of the winning team and at the end of the season there's a prize for whoever has won the most games. That keeps training really competitive and little things like that improve the mentality and raise standards.

When I first arrived, a few of the players took me out to welcome me to the club, even though I'm a local, which was nice. As for the manager, he does try to get everyone on a level playing field, so we do these things called 'timelines' where you stand up and talk for 10–15 minutes about anything from your life growing up to how you got into football, where you've been and what your ambitions are. It's good because when you see each other every day you only really talk about football at a very surface level. Once you get into learning about people's backgrounds, it helps you understand them all and understand their different moods. I think being up there, being vulnerable and speaking in front of the lads, brings everyone closer together and it's something Eddie is really passionate about, so maybe why we're such a tight-knit group.

I get on with and speak to everyone, but you tend to gravitate towards people who are similar to yourself, so that's always what I do. I got on with Sean Longstaff and Mark Gillespie straight away and am really close to Jacob Murphy as well. You'll always get little cliques in football, mostly because of the language that you speak and similar interests you have. I'm in my 30s now and have kids and stuff, so I can't relate as much to someone who's in their

20s. You also get people like Bruno Guimarães, Miguel Almirón and Joelinton, who spend a lot of time with each other, and then there are the younger lads – Sven Botman, Alexander Isak and Joe Willock are always together.

Almirón had a brilliant 2022/23 for us, but that ability has always been there and with him it's just a confidence thing. Miggy is a great player and every full-back in the league would struggle to play against him. It seemed everything he hit was going in and he obviously gained confidence from that, but people don't see how much work he puts in off the ball as well, with the way he leads the press. I was really happy for him as he had a tough start here when he first arrived, similar to 'Big Joe', who had a really tough start, so it was great to see them both thrive and do so well.

Isak possesses amazing ability. His pace is obviously a big factor, but also the way he can move the ball and how he glides. He's going to be a top player and even more popular with the fans than he is now. He's also a very good finisher and, as a defender, you wouldn't want to play against him.

Eddie is a very grounded manager, and I don't think he really spoke about us challenging for the top four until the last six or seven games of the season, once we were within touching distance. For me I think it was a couple of games after we lost the cup final. We had hard games against Manchester City and Liverpool and then started picking up some results. We needed things to go for us, but I thought we stood a chance, and it was just about consistency. We went out every single game with the same mindset, that we're going to play our way and attack, and if you were good enough to beat us, you were good enough to beat us. We were so consistent and that helped us pick up some big results against some of the top teams, which you need, and our home form was really good.

When things are going well at the club, there's a real connection between the fans and the team and, for me, there isn't a better place to play. The stuff 'Wor Flags' do gives us that extra bit of push and I think you feed off each other as well; the fans feed off the players and vice-versa. When I used to watch as a kid, you just wanted the

players to work hard and if they lost you could accept it as long as you thought they put it all out there. I think the way we played, the fans responded to that.

One of the games that really stands out for me was when facing Arsenal at home in May 2022 and we battered them, winning 2-0. The fans were electric that night and I think Arsenal were shocked at how much of a big night it was for us and how big the fans were. Another amazing atmosphere was Southampton at home in the League Cup semi-final second leg in January 2023. Before the game, I remember looking around the stadium and actually getting emotional at just how hyped everyone was for it; you could feel the energy in the crowd and it was amazing.

We'd claim Wembley wasn't a distraction to our league form, but I think it was, not only for us as players, but the city in general. There was such a lot of hype before the match, and it was all anyone was talking about. We did as much as we could to take the emotion out of it and just play it like another game, but that did affect us a bit and if we were to get to another final we'd have a totally different mindset of 'this is what we've got to do and we're going to win', rather than it just being a great weekend. I was gutted after the game, but I wasn't inconsolable because it was still an amazing achievement just to get there. It was a great day out for every generation of Newcastle fans and didn't really sink in until a few days later that we could have won – then you imagine how different it would have been if we had. It did hurt and, in general, it was a bit weird because I could sense how nervous the fans were. I thought we played well, but games are won in both boxes and you could just tell that Manchester United had been there and done that so many times, whereas we hadn't.

We tried to keep the build-up as normal as possible because we had been so good at taking every game as it came and being consistent with it. We had a leadership group made up of Callum Wilson, Kieran Trippier, Jamaal Lascelles, Matt Ritchie and me, who came up with a few things we thought would help. We wanted to see Wembley the day before the final, just to get a feel for it

because I'd been there before and knew what it was like. You want to see where your family will be sitting, and it's only when you get there that you realise the size of the stadium and how big the pitch is. You don't want to be doing that on the day of the game, so we did that and then I decided I wanted to speak. I'd written a speech, so gathered all the lads in the changing room, sat everyone down and delivered it as best I could. That was quite emotional for me, but I just felt like I was at that stage in my career where I had that experience and, being a local lad, wanted to let everyone know what it meant to me and to the club in general.

I wouldn't change anything we did, but, on the morning of the game, some letters from loved ones of the players were released on The Athletic's website and I remember people reading them and getting quite emotional. It was lovely and I'm not knocking it, but everyone was very emotionally charged.

Callum is a great guy, you can tell he's a striker as he has that swagger about him, but he's just one of these people always in the right place in the box and scored a lot of important goals for us. Trips is another great guy. That was a big help with our mentality, seeing someone who has played in a Euros final, a Champions League final, a World Cup semi-final and won La Liga and how he goes about his day-to-day business. There were a lot of clubs he could have joined but, when the takeover happened, we needed a big name to come and make other people want to do it. He set the tone for the likes of Bruno and Sven Botman to come in.

It's only natural that we get linked with pretty much every player in the world, but I think you've got to be a certain type to play in this team. I remember from when I came in, the gaffer is very strong on getting in touch with people from your hometown, to ask how my mates were, to see whether they'd be a bad influence on me and things like that, which seems ridiculous, but you want to make sure you've got the right characters who aren't going to upset the chemistry in the dressing room. Even when Alex Isak came in, he didn't play a lot at the start because you've got to get used to the way we play – and the same with Anthony Gordon. Bruno never

played when he first came in and it took him nine or ten games to sort of get used to it. You have to really buy into the way we work.

Bruno probably didn't know as much about the club as other people did, but he really invested in that and built a brilliant relationship with the fans. He loves the passion, and a lot of the South American lads are like that because they're quite similar to Geordies in that they're working class and want to work hard. The fans reciprocate that and have always loved the South American players who have come over.

After losing at Wembley, we had a few team meetings where we said we were quite happy to get the final out of the way. The manager said he didn't feel distracted, but he could sense that maybe we were a little. We always had this mentality where it was us against the world because nobody outside the club really wanted us to get into the top six or top four, so we had to fight against that and switch our focus back to the Premier League because that's all we could concentrate on.

We went on a really good run of form after that and needed to because Liverpool were coming up on the rails. As a team, we never really spoke about it and you always say, 'I'm not going to look at the league table,' but I'd sit there every night working out what we needed to do and what Liverpool required because I knew they were a team capable of stringing a run of wins together, so we just needed to get over the line. It's a different type of pressure because I've been the other way around, when you're in a relegation scrap and just praying for another win, but I knew we were playing well and picking up points.

We cemented ourselves in the top four in our last home game by drawing 0-0 with Leicester. It was nice to get it done before the end of the season, otherwise there would have been a lot of pressure going to Chelsea on the last day and needing a result.

It felt like Leicester came just not to lose, which was strange because it could have been an opportunity for them to get the win and save themselves from relegation. It would have helped us if they'd played for the victory because we were better suited to

teams coming on to us so we could attack them. It was a really strange game and I remember, with about two minutes left, we were standing with the ball for about 20 seconds at one point, just waiting for someone to come and press us, and then they nearly scored right at the end with their only attack of the game.

It was a bit surreal even after the match because we did the lap of honour with our families and everyone went back into the dressing room at different times, so didn't really get the chance to celebrate the achievement of qualifying for the Champions League. It was a bit of an anticlimax going home that night and, with hindsight, I think we could have done things a little bit better by just coming in five minutes earlier to congratulate each other.

That was the Monday night and some of us, but not everyone, went out for a little while on the Tuesday for a few drinks. We still had Chelsea to come and could mathematically take third place, but knew we couldn't drop out of the top four.

It was a great feeling for me personally because watching Newcastle play in the Champions League as a kid inspired me to be a footballer, seeing all those big teams come to St James' Park on a Tuesday or Wednesday night under the floodlights, the atmosphere was absolutely electric. I remember Andy Griffin scoring against Juventus and watching the Feyenoord game at home with my dad when we'd lost three matches in a row and had to win the next three to go through to the next round. Those were special games that stand out for me, so to know a whole new generation were going to get the chance to see that was really exciting.