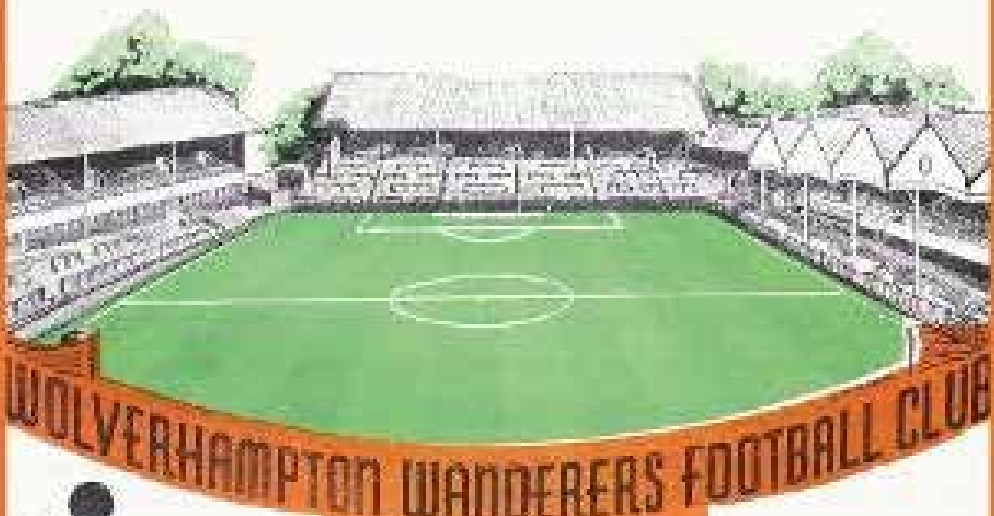
JAKE PERRY

NIGHTS IN GOLD SATIN



WHEN WOLVERHAMPTON WANDERERS RULED THE WORLD

FOREWORD BY PETER CRUMP

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pitch

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Cullis's Wolves

'IT WASN'T that Wolves at that time were a "better" team [than Honvéd]: it was that they had more determination jointly. It's not always the better team that wins a game, and the reason is something which is emotional and difficult to translate into words.'

Amid all the praise that was lavished on his team after its most celebrated and momentous win, Stan Cullis would have been pleased with that more level-headed assessment of what it was that lay behind its success. Plenty of clubs had talent – and fight to go with it, too – but supporter Percy Young, quoted in Taylor and Ward's *Kicking and Screaming: An Oral History of Football in England*, got to the nub of the elusive extra something that put Wolves in a class of their own. 'We didn't think we were ever going to get beaten,' said Peter Broadbent, one of the heroes of that night, in an interview featured in *The Official Video History of Wolverhampton Wanderers*. 'That was the relationship amongst the players: we just thought, we're going to win today. We knew it before we went out. It was lovely to play in a team like that, where everybody knew what they were doing and why they were there. The atmosphere in the changing room was marvellous.'

They were already the side to beat in the First Division: the team that had shaken off its tag of 'nearly men' to become English football's premier force[1]. They did it through a combination of sweat and toil and a perfectly executed tactical plan: one that upset the purists, to be sure, but gave the public the goals and excitement they craved. 'I had to endure the arrows that were hurled at me for our so-called long-ball game,' said Cullis in 1992, when the phrase carried even more loaded connotations. 'But it was a bit naughty to suggest we were a kick-and-rush side because we had players in the England team for so many years.' Billy Wright, Jimmy Mullen, Ron Flowers and Bert Williams were just a few of those to wear the three lions in that time: Wolves played direct football, it's true, but there was much more to them than that.

Cullis hadn't inherited the style when he was appointed manager of the club in the summer of 1948; nor, indeed, had he been drawn to it by the way he played the game himself. He was, in his decade as Wolves captain under the formidable Major Frank Buckley, a tough but cultured number 5, not afraid to take a risk, described by Ferenc Puskás as the most classical of his time, but all in the team's

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1 A 2014 study – led by Dr Ian McHale, then director of the Centre for Sports Business at the Salford Business School – named Cullis's Wolves as the third-most successful English side of all time. Every league and cup match from the foundation of the Football League in 1888 to the end of the 2011/12 season had been analysed using a mathematical formula that took into account the relative performance of each team against the quality of opposition they faced. When assessing ten-year dominance rather than single-season strength, only Manchester United (1992–2002) and Liverpool (1979–1989) fared better than Wolves in the years between 1951 and 1961.

orthodox W-M formation[2] and approach that, in practice, had little to differentiate it from half a dozen of its peers. But the influence of the Major could be seen in the way Cullis set about devising a method that put efficiency, not aesthetics, at its core: Buckley had never liked 'no conclusion' flourishes on the field, but Cullis would make an even greater virtue of substance over style.

A kindred spirit in the uncompromising attitude he brought to the role, Cullis's experience with the Major had taught him to think beyond the norm. One of the more adventurous managers of his time, Buckley had brought several innovations into his players' daily routine: rowing machines for fitness, a ball-dispenser for training and, in the dressing room at Molineux, equipment to deliver the very latest in electrical therapies for recovery and conditioning. He was among the first to recognise the value of what we now call sports psychology, employing a counsellor to work with the team more than two decades before Brazil more famously did the same. There were more radical interventions, too, most notoriously the so-called 'animal secretion' injections he introduced to Molineux in the summer of 1937: a monkey-gland extraction, it was reported, though Cullis later shared his belief that it had been a ruse, designed to give the players a psychological rather than chemical edge on the field. 'The Major … did not lack a sense of publicity at this time,' he wrote in

2 Created by Herbert Chapman at Arsenal in the mid-1920s, the W-M formation consisted of four lines: a right-back (wearing the number 2 shirt), centre-back (5) and left-back (3) behind two half-backs (4 and 6) and a pair of inside-forwards (8 and 10) supporting the front three – the outside-right (7), centre-forward (9) and outside-left (11) – making a 3-2-2-3 shape overall.

his 1960 autobiography *All For The Wolves*, 'or, for that matter, at any other time. The injections … were nothing more potent than an immunisation against the common cold, and certainly I do not think they ever helped or hindered me.'

But where Buckley had delighted in his place in football's avant garde, Cullis, on becoming manager, went back to basics instead. 'There is no substitute for hard work,' he declared, gathering the playing staff together to spell out exactly what that meant. 'I want – and I am going to get – 100 per cent effort from you all both on and off the field,' he said. 'If I get this support, you can take it from me that I will be 100 per cent behind you. Nothing else is going to be enough.' He could forgive a shortcoming or a mistake honestly made, but woe betide anyone giving less than his best. 'Never did I know him verbally lash a player whose skill had broken down in a game,' remembered Dennis Wilshaw in an interview quoted in Jim Holden's fine book *The Iron Manager*, 'but I did hear him give some tremendous lashings to players who did not give everything they had when it came to effort.'

Cullis's motto – painted in block capitals on a board fixed to the dressing room door – became Wolves' mantra. As a PT instructor during the war, he had seen the transformative effect of physical training on the stamina of new soldiers for himself, and, with trainer Joe Gardiner at his side, he was determined to bring similar rigour to Wolves' fitness regime. Former Amateur Athletic Association (AAA) champion Frank Morris was employed to lead the squad in twice-weekly track sessions at nearby Aldersley Stadium, while a further hour was set aside for

weight training when that, too, was a novelty. 'At Molineux, we strive to make the abnormal an everyday achievement,' said the manager in *All For The Wolves*. 'I tell my players that they must train until it hurts because it makes them better players on Saturday.'

'We trained very, very hard,' Billy Wright told the BBC's Gerald Sinstadt. 'We'd open up on Tuesday morning by running about three miles: then we'd go down to a mile, then 800 [yards], then 200, and then the sprints. [We saw the ball] for about five minutes afterwards, that's all we got! But the number of times we won our matches in the latter stages of the game purely and simply [because] we were the fitter side, [was enormous].'

'Our main [advantage] was our fitness,' said Ted Farmer, who made his first-team debut in 1960. 'We had the athletics sessions, but the big secret was the pre-season training. At a little village called Brocton there was a three-mile cross-country course which we had to go round twice every Tuesday for the month before the season started. And if I tell you it was a killer: well, it was a real, real killer.' The military-style circuit over the heathland of Cannock Chase took in three hills, each to be scaled at speed. 'By the time the season opens, the players are as hard as nails,' Cullis proudly said in his autobiography, 'able to play at a cracking pace not only for 90 minutes but for 120 if necessary.'

There were minimum targets to be reached – 100 yards in 10.5 seconds, 220 yards in 24 seconds, 440 yards in 55 seconds, 880 yards in two minutes five seconds, one mile in four minutes 50 seconds, three miles in 15 minutes 45 seconds, six miles in 34 minutes, and, in the high jump, 4ft 9in – all to be achieved within 18 months of arriving at Molineux, while

further drills addressed identified flaws in individual skill or technique: for Eddie Clamp, his running posture; for Jimmy Murray, his balance; and for Ted, a customised piece of agility to enhance his natural eye for a goal.

'They knew I'd always give a hundred per cent, was quick in the penalty area and would score goals,' he told me, 'but they saw straight away that when I was left up front on my own, I didn't have any tricks. I didn't have the skills of a Peter Broadbent or a Denis Law or Bobby Charlton, so if my speed and strength was matched by the defenders I couldn't keep the ball long enough for people to come up [and support].

'So they had me back in the afternoon with a goalkeeper – Bert Williams, it was, he had retired by then but he still came down to help with training – and a corner stick, which they put on the edge of the penalty area in line with the middle of the goal. They would hit balls up to me on the halfway line, and I would control them, turn and run towards the corner stick then feint to the right by moving my right foot over the top of the ball then collect it with my left and go the other way. The stick beat me nine times out of ten to begin with, but I slowly got the hang of it. The first time I did it in a practice match I sent the centre-half the wrong way, which helped my confidence a lot.'

'I could quote many instances of the dividends Wolves have drawn from the work of our trainers and coaches,' Cullis wrote. 'Often I tell my players that there is no substitute for hard work, although hard work in itself is not enough. It must be work designed specifically to bring every footballer on to the field in a state of perfect mental and physical fitness.'

The value of the training programme, fuelled by the sense of unity and common purpose that had been instilled in the team from the start, could be seen in the execution of a strategy that was a good deal more sophisticated than the manager was often given credit for. Far from crude or obvious, charges that were routinely laid at his door by journalists comparing his approach with that of Matt Busby, whose multi-passing style had made Manchester United the darlings of the press and crowds, Wolves' 'so-called' long-ball game, as Cullis pointedly put it, was the result of countless hours of careful deliberation and equally scrupulous research. Always thirsty for information (and meticulous in the way he collected it: as a player, he had kept a diary in which he recorded his post-match appraisal of every centre-forward he faced) Cullis had analysed the tactical approach of every other First Division side, factoring in the issues that were affecting the wider game in England as well: the general dip in quality that the post-war years had brought, the effect of heavy pitches on particular styles of play and, far from least in those days of economic hardship, the need to provide the paying public with as much value for money as possible. The result was a system tailor-made to Wolves' strengths: direct, fast-moving, and full of goals for the fans.

'Basically, we rely on a framework of tactics which gives ample scope to the operation of the law of averages in football,' he explained. 'The number of scoring chances which will arrive during the course of a match is in direct proportion to the amount of time which the ball spends in front of goal. If the defenders in the Wolves team delay their clearances, the ball will be in front of our goal for

too long a period and the scoring chances will go to the other team.

'If too much time is spent building up our own attacks, the ball will spend less of the game in the other team's goal-area. Then the chances of our own forwards to score will become substantially fewer and, of course, we shall score fewer goals.'

'He used to say: "Cut [the pitch] into three,"' Ron Flowers told Mike Crump in an interview for *Champions of the World*. '"That third, we're attacking, we're going to score in that third: get it in there as quick as you can. That third, we're defending: get it out of there as quick as you can. And I'm not interested in the middle one." It was attack all the time.'

But it was never 'hit and hope' with Cullis: the booming kick from goalkeeper to target man that characterised the 'route one' football of the 80s and early 90s. Wolves played, instead, a long-passing game, designed to turn defence into attack with precision as well as speed. In Johnny Hancocks and Jimmy Mullen they had one of the greatest wing pairings of any club and any era: as the attack began with a ball from the back, their role in leading it was key.

'On many occasions I pushed the ball up to Mullen and then watched as he moved smoothly into our opponents' half,' wrote Billy Wright in *One Hundred Caps and All That*, 'waited until their defence started pivoting and then switched the focal point of attack with a long diagonal pass to Hancocks, who, more often than not, was standing quite unmarked. If the left-back was slow to move there would be a thunderbolt of a shot from Johnny's little right foot [not much more than five feet tall, Hancocks wore boots that

were around size four and a half]. If the full-back was in position there would be a finely controlled ball to the head of Roy Swinbourne or Jesse Pye or even another cross-field pass, shorter this time, to Mullen, who by now was streaking in hungrily from the left in the hope of snatching a goal.' The addition of Peter Broadbent, signed from Brentford in 1950, brought a further variation to the routine: used as an advanced winger lying 20 or so yards ahead of Hancocks on the right, he would often find himself in the clear when Hancocks chipped the ball on to him having just received it out of defence. The opposing full-back, caught between the two, was played out of the game.

'The Wolves' strength of those days lay in a number of things,' *The Times*'s Geoffrey Green later wrote in *Soccer in the Fifties*. 'The penetration of Hancocks and Mullen down the wings; the goalscoring of Swinbourne, Wilshaw, and, later, Murray through the middle; the subtle prompting from inside-forward by Broadbent; but most of all the power and grit generated by a succession of fine half-backs from Billy Wright … Flowers, Slater and Clamp, all of them internationals. The half-back lines of those years were the backbone of the side: long, swift passing, the avoidance of unnecessary frills and first-time shooting gave the whole machine its teeth.

'There was a hunger about those Wolves.'

That appetite was sharpened when Europe's best came to town. But the story of the floodlit friendlies is about more than the matches alone: it charts, from Wolves' perspective, a period that forever changed our national game.

Because floodlighting is so integral to the sport as we know it today, it is easy to forget that there was a time when

it was not only discouraged but resisted. When league and cup football restarted after the war, playing under lights was banned, the result of a ruling by the Football Association dating back to August 1930. 'Attention having been called to the fact that the playing of matches under artificial light is being organised,' it had said, 'the council express their opinion that the playing of such matches is undesirable, and that clubs are prohibited from taking part.' FA Cup holders Arsenal had wanted to play Scottish Cup winners Rangers in challenge matches at Wembley and Ibrox Park. 'It is understood,' reported the *Dundee Courier* in August 1930, 'that the Association [has] come to this decision on the grounds it would tend to commercialise the game.'

But by the start of the 50s things were changing: not through any sudden shift in the FA's position on the subject, but because of the initiative clubs were now taking for themselves. Several had already lit their practice facilities – Manchester United's junior sides were playing floodlit football at The Cliff, their training ground in Salford, for example, long before lights were installed at Old Trafford – while the growing number of foreign tours to Europe and North America had opened eyes to the opportunities lighting stadia, too, could bring. In January 1951 the governing body finally gave some ground, passing an amendment permitting floodlighting 'under certain circumstances': it was still forbidden for competitive matches – unless special permission had been given – but clubs could now play friendlies, at least, without the need for prior approval.

It would do – for the moment – but the chance to prove the worth of floodlit football was there. What happened next would make sure it was taken.