

PRIDE BEFORE THE FALL

How Derby County
went from Play-Off Final
to Near Extinction



Ryan Conway

Ryan Conway

**PRIDE
BEFORE
THE
FALL**

How Derby County
went from Play-Off Final
to Near Extinction



Contents

Introduction	7
Acknowledgements	9
Prologue	10
1. A Silver Lining and New Beginnings	19
2. He Goes by the Name of Wayne Rooney	34
3. A Night of Madness	44
4. Teething Problems	62
5. The Youth Movement	84
6. The Charge	98
7. Morris v the EFL	109
8. Patience Wearing Thin.	113
9. Fitting in Rooney	118
10. They Couldn't – Could They?	130
11. Covid Puts a Halt to Things.	142
12. BLM, the Knee and Combatting Racial Injustice	152
13. Cocu's Demise	158
14. Derventio Holdings (UK) Limited	179
15. The Curious Case of the Co-Managers	189
16. Rooney the Manager.	197
17. The Final Day	206
18. Take(over) Two: Erik Alonso.	213
19. A New Dawn?	219
20. Administration.	227
21. The Kirchner Takeover	232
22. The March to Pride Park	241
23. Relegation	254
24. Enter Clowes.	263
25. Warne-ing to the Rest of the Division.	272

A Silver Lining and New Beginnings

EVEN IN the smouldering ashes of defeat, spirits were still high. After the 2-1 play-off final heartbreak against Aston Villa at Wembley, owner Mel Morris insisted the players and staff go back to Pride Park to celebrate what had been a successful season all told. Although the club had fallen short of their ultimate goal of Premier League football, now was not the time to dwell. The influx of youthful talent blended together by a young management team and coaching staff was something to be celebrated. Perhaps more so because Morris knew how short-lived the experience would be and he would soon have to go about the task of putting together a new coaching staff and investing once again in the squad. It was made clear early on that the funds would be a lot tighter than under Frank Lampard, though Morris did still find enough in the budget to bring in Krystian Bielik on a deal which could have reached as much as £10m with all add-ons included.

Lampard would soon be named the new manager of Chelsea and, with him, Mason Mount and Fikayo Tomori, two loan stars of the previous season, would return to

Stamford Bridge. The process was long and arduous, and the worst-kept secret in football. Once Chelsea made their interest in Lampard official, their former icon clearly wanted to return to the club with which he had had the most success on the pitch to see if he could replicate it in the dugout. But Morris was not a charity and while he himself loved the nice story of it all, the price still had to be right. Weeks of negotiations commenced with Morris refusing to budge on his compensation price of £4m. And while in the end he got it, one could argue it set the club back, as, when the players all returned for pre-season in Florida, they still had no manager – and the new man would have to fly from the Netherlands to London to Derby and, mercifully, to Florida.

The other outstanding borrowed talent to return to where he came from was Liverpool's Harry Wilson – who Derby did try to bring back for a second loan spell, but the price was too steep. Wilson could blow hot and cold. A streak of six goals in seven games would be followed by no goals or assists in ten – one such sequence also coincided with the team's worst run of the season. Derby was a test for the 20-year-old, not so much for his future there, but more so for what future he had at Liverpool the following season. Could he provide adequate cover for Mohamed Salah, Sadio Mané and Roberto Firmino? Wilson's spell at Derby was excellent – 18 goals and six assists in all competitions. But the number of games he truly dominated rather than decorated could probably be counted on one hand, and he could often bail out an average performance with a showstopping set piece. Nevertheless, he too departed after just one season.

With all of the outgoings, some incomings had to be made quickly. Waiting in the wings to sit in Lampard's dugout seat was former Barcelona captain and 100-cap Netherlands international midfielder Phillip Cocu.

Cocu's reputation was bruised following his sacking by Fenerbahçe in October 2018 after just four months in charge of the Turkish giants. Fenerbahçe were undergoing somewhat of an image change after a takeover and new chairman Ali Koç wanted the man who brought so much success to PSV Eindhoven and saw them as Ajax's great conquerors to bring some of that stardust to the Süper Lig and break up its monopolisation by Beşiktaş and Galatasaray. However, just four months into a three-year contract Cocu was sacked, with the club just one point and one place above the relegation zone.

Prior to that unremarkable stint, Cocu had captured three Eredivisie titles in four seasons as manager of PSV and oversaw the development of a clutch of young stars including Georginio Wijnaldum, Steven Bergwijn, Memphis Depay, Davy Pröpper and Hirving Lozano. Morris was banking on Cocu's time in Turkey being more an outlier rather than a true reflection of his coaching abilities. Plus, with a CV that included the development of such young players into talent stars on the world stage, Morris believed Cocu was the perfect foil to steer Derby away from big-money signings and into a more homegrown squad, such was his desire to see a return on his £30m investment into the club's academy.

Morris courted Cocu strongly. The pair met in a London hotel shortly after it was apparent that Lampard would be leaving for pastures new, and they talked football

for nearly three hours, during which time Morris became enthralled that Cocu's football philosophy lined up with what he had said he wanted to achieve for Derby going forward – attractive, possession-based performances with the lion's share of the squad made up from academy graduates.

'We could see straight away there was a connection with Phillip, and his assistant manager, Chris [van der Weerden]. What really impressed us was that they weren't just talking about their philosophy and the match was uncannily similar,' Morris told RamsTV of the Cocu hiring in 2019. 'The style of play, the inclusion of younger players in the mix. As the meeting went on we could see they weren't just talking about these things but it's what they do.'

Richard Keogh also pointed to the use of sports science – not uncommon in modern sport, but for some Derby players it was a slightly newer thing to how it had been used under Lampard: 'Being a world-class player and being at Barcelona for a long time, working with the Dutch national team – he's very technical and tactical and a lot of the sessions have been trying to find solutions to different problems. He's taught me things which I see differently in football.'

Cocu was in no hurry to return to coaching and had several offers from the UK and abroad to continue his managerial career. The brief spell at Fenerbahçe made him think twice before taking any job. In hindsight, he believed heading to Turkey was a mistake. A new owner with big ambitions who wanted to take the club in a radical new direction was not for him. He was a manager of evolution,

not revolution. And it seemed Morris wanted the same thing – for Derby to evolve from a club that spent big into a club which developed its own players and spent smart.

Perhaps all the noises about wanting to nurture younger players and have the first-team squad brimming with them was, in hindsight, a red flag as to how bad Derby's finances would become and an indicator of the need to cut back on spending in whatever areas the club could. But one could also argue it made sense. Any businessperson investing so heavily in one aspect of their business will, ultimately, wish to see a return on that investment. Morris had overseen Derby's biggest transformation yet behind the scenes, when it came to the academy and the training ground as a whole.

A quick trip around Moor Farm was all it took to realise the club's facilities were at an elite level. Some would often ask, 'What do we need 17 training pitches for?' but the answer was quite simple – it qualified Derby for tier one status as an academy and training ground. The highest there could be.

Max Bird, Jason Knight, Lee Buchanan, Archie Brown, Morgan Whittaker, Eiran Cashin and Louie Sibley highlighted a star-studded under-18s team which romped to the U18 Premier League title following a 5-2 thumping of Arsenal in the final. Some had seen a smattering of first-team training sessions and appearances from the bench under Lampard, but it was now time to give them more minutes in the senior squad under Cocu. The gaps which could not be filled in the transfer market would have to be filled internally – a formula which would put a huge strain on the club the worse the finances got over the coming

months. But for the time being, the message was one of sustainability and safeguarding the club's future.

Cocu would officially be hired on 5 July 2019 on a four-year contract believed to be worth in the region of £3m a year. With him came his two loyal assistants – Chris van der Weerden as assistant manager, and Twan Scheepers as a first-team coach. The pair formed an interesting foil around the usually reserved Cocu in that Van der Weerden was himself a tall, dark-haired, mild-mannered individual while Scheepers had long, flowing, blond hair and could often be seen playing air guitar on matchdays whenever Black Sabbath or Motörhead blared over the speakers. He was bombastic and brash and players grew to love him.

There was just one small problem – Derby's pre-season was beginning in earnest in Florida, and neither Cocu nor his assistant were there to oversee any of it.

'I signed for Derby and Frank [Lampard] was a massive part of me wanting to sign here and wanting to play for him,' midfielder Graeme Shinnie, a summer 2019 free transfer from Aberdeen, said during an interview with *The Athletic*. 'Then coming down and Lampard leaving – then coming into the first day of training with no manager in the building was such a strange feeling. I was a new face around the training ground and it was a weird vibe in general and one I've not been used to. Then the new manager came in and I felt everybody was in the same boat trying to impress him.'

'It was a bit of a strange pre-season. We went in on the first day and we had no manager. So we just did a lot of running in that first session. The academy coaches took the session,' Max Bird told *The Athletic* in June 2020. 'We

didn't really know what was going on in the off-season. We didn't know if we'd come back to a manager or not. Then we went out to Florida and the manager met us there – which is completely different to what's usually done.'

Not only was Cocu not there, it is believed he was not best pleased at having to undertake a pre-season in which he had no say in organising. Nevertheless, he and his team headed over to the US to press on with their preparation. Meanwhile, back at Moor Farm, plans were being made for the new manager and his staff. Cocu had the dynamics of the office spaces changed, with an interconnecting door between his office and that of the academy manager to create a more inclusive feel, but also to keep a close eye on the younger talents.

Academy staff marvelled at how involved Cocu, Scheepers and Van der Weerden were with all the youth squads. Scheepers could often be seen attending the academy games, even in the dugout for many, and would report back to Cocu with his assessments after the fact.

'We've had more meetings between the first team and the academy than we've ever had during my time at the club. We actually played his PSV youth team a couple of years ago ... we beat them,' a smiling academy director Darren Wassall said just six weeks after Cocu took over as manager. 'Phillip is really, really into development and growth. He's very clear what he wanted. He comes from a youth development background.'

'These changes and the development doesn't happen overnight. It's a fine balancing act between being too busy between the groups, and just letting the young lads develop. But on a daily basis, the academy boys are training with the

senior group and for us that's amazing. In the past we've had it whereby academy players would get a session here and there with the first-team lads, which is great, but it never really gave them any consistency, or some managers never got to see all the lads because they wouldn't have them as part of the group. Phillip wants to get all the academy lads mixing in with the first team and it's all about creating one club without any fractures between teams.'

Training was intense when Cocu arrived in the States. He immediately set to work on getting the squad up to speed with the level of technique he demanded from his players, and many struggled to begin with.

'The one that I recall the most was when we were in Florida, we played a lot of possession games,' Bird recalled in an interview with *The Athletic*. 'Somebody would kick the ball above head height and the whistle would go – he wanted the ball on the floor. A lot of the possession drills we'd have in triangle shapes, we'd do four against two in a box, one-touch stuff and move and create angles. At the start we couldn't really do it. But just before the [Covid] lockdown happened we were brilliant at it. Some of us thought it was a hard drill and that we'd never be able to do it but we've all developed as a group.'

Cocu wanted his team to play aggressively off the ball and press high up the pitch. If the opportunity to press did not present itself, he insisted on a compact shape in the middle to squeeze the opposition to the outside and limit their options in attack.

When on the ball, Cocu believed in a balance of structure and creativity to help create openings but also mitigate against opposition counterattacks.

‘I believe in setting up until the final third, more or less, and from the final third you can create,’ he told The Athletic in September 2020. ‘You can sometimes train an overlap or a switch but the intuition of a striker to make a run or a dribble is their call, it’s why they’re in that position. It’s their quality. Use it.’

Cocu also believed in creating overloads down the flanks to outnumber defenders, a typically Dutch tradition of football which, as the game itself has become more global, has been tweaked to reinvent it many times over. But, at its core, Cocu wanted to use it to provide Derby with advantages, open up running lanes and give opposition defenders problems when trying to make decisions.

‘It’s like a chain reaction,’ Cocu told The Athletic in September 2021. ‘When you have three against two, and then the next player also runs into the back of the defence and, by using a striker [dropping deep], then the winger makes a run beyond, it’s like you’re not creating only in midfield but you’re creative to be able to go into the final third. It’s something we use a lot in training and something we focus on because a lot of teams play quite deep so if you didn’t take the initiative to come out of smaller areas it was very hard to create.’

Those overloads were to be supplemented by positional switches. Again a staple of Dutch football, popularised by Johan Cruyff, Cocu believed that players should be comfortable in several positions and could use rotations to drag their markers out of position, which then runners could exploit. But he knew mastering such skills would take time.

‘It takes a lot [of work] because it’s about understanding between the players,’ he said. ‘To be dynamic and to rotate

and take over positions cannot be a casual coincidence that it happens and you score a goal.

‘I like it because if you’re static you get predictable, then you really need so much individual quality to create and score. So if you’re able to change position and make the opponent change and come out of their zone, you open up spaces and you can be more creative and a lot of players participate in the process.’

Of course, the positional switching wouldn’t work if Cocu had players who were only specialists in one area. Thankfully the squad featured several flexible players such as Duane Holmes, Tom Lawrence, Martyn Waghorn and Jason Knight, and he would also bring in Krystian Bielik to assist with that, while Wayne Rooney would of course later join the fold.

Cocu emphasised the ability to play multiple positions. It was not only good for the team, but it was good for the individual too, as they might see more minutes based on the fact they can cover more areas, ‘I think it makes you a more complete player. But in some positions you need a specialist who can make the difference. You need a combination of specialists in certain positions but also players who you can use in different positions are important in a team. The understanding of the game gets so much better because you play in all these different positions.

‘It might not be his favourite one but if he believes he can play well for the team then it’s important. So you have to have a dialogue and sit down with the player and talk about what is expected from him in that position, then they can enjoy themselves. But you have to be clear in your message as a coach what is expected as a player. You need

to have the physical profile to fit in, you need the tactical awareness to execute the job, the player has to believe in the position.’

Within the squad, Cocu had several players already who he believed could carry out such versatile jobs. Lawrence would often flit from inverted left-winger to number ten, and to a false nine at times. Waghorn would do the same jobs on the opposite wing. Striker Chris Martin would be less versatile but would still be used as an extra central midfielder to link play when dropping deep; meanwhile a deeper central midfielder would gallop forwards to fill the centre-forward space which Martin had vacated.

Perhaps no two players signified Cocu’s wish for versatility more than Holmes and Knight. The pair were similar, with some notable differences. In the academy setup Knight was part of a fearsome central midfielder duo with Bird in which the Irishman netted eight goals and laid on four assists in all youth competitions. However, with the centre of the park well stocked at senior level, Knight had to settle for more of a Swiss Army knife role – often playing a more defensive winger, but sometimes popping up as the number ten; he even had stints at right-back when required. The same could be said for Holmes. He had spoken with Cocu and told him of his desire to play as a number ten – Cocu retorted with a harsh assessment of Holmes, however, declaring he did not believe the US international was fit enough to carry out such a role on a full-time basis. As a result, the nippy, tenacious midfielder also had to settle for a do-it-all role in the squad, also playing at right-back, central midfield, on the right wing

and, on occasion, as a number ten. In total both Knight and Holmes each played in five separate positions during Cocu's first season – partly due to necessity with a shallow squad constantly besotted by injury, but partly also down to the Dutch manager's insistence that players be multiple in their uses for the team.

However, Cocu still felt more versatility was required and he set about finding some more players who fit a certain profile and could be versatile enough to carry out the ideals he clearly held in such high regards. The process was harmed by a lacklustre first transfer window.

Alongside Bielik, for an initial fee believed to be around £7.5 million and potentially rising to £10 million, attacker Jamie Paterson, playmaker Kieran Dowell and goalkeeper Ben Hamer all arrived on loan.

Bielik was the headline act of the bunch. The Polish international was thought of highly by Arsène Wenger at Arsenal and had previously enjoyed a good spell at Charlton Athletic, but then manager Lee Bowyer did have some concerns about the midfielder's fitness back then – indicating that Bielik would be good to miss at least ten games a season with niggling injuries. Nevertheless, Derby had snagged themselves an ascending young player with a high resale value if he was to hit his ceiling. And Bielik was ambitious, too. He had stated that if he was not playing in the Premier League within five years of him signing for Derby, he would consider it a huge failure.

Bielik also fit the profile of player Cocu was courting – a silky technician with the ability to dictate play from deep, but also with the versatility to play multiple positions.

Cocu initially played Bielik as a centre-back, as he found his way back to fitness after an early shoulder injury, but would later revert to playing him as a deep midfielder allowing the playmaker to dictate the tempo of the team.

There was still, though, a big belief that Cocu would open up his contacts book and bring in players he knew well from his time in the Netherlands. In fact it was one of the reasons for which Derby fans became increasingly excited by his hiring. Lampard had flexed his muscles to bring in players from his former clubs and leveraged great relationships he had in the industry; so would Cocu be making Derby County a Total Football side with a healthy smattering of Dutch distinction? To much bemusement, that did not prove to be the case. In fact Cocu was rather frosty when quizzed about his relationships with former clubs.

During his introductory press conference, Cocu was frosty and tight-lipped as to whether he would be ringing some old friends from PSV to take advantage of his connections and some of their budding stars with friendly loan deals, much like his predecessor had done. Cocu had made it clear that he would not be bringing in any of his former players and when pressed as to why he simply responded, 'Yes, there is a reason.' His demeanour until that point had been charming, full of smiles, warm eye-contact and glowing praise for his new employers. Yet the seemingly natural question about whether Cocu was going to leverage his past relationships brought a stonier gaze and a cold response designed to shut down any follow-up questions, and indeed the question disappeared almost as quickly as it had arrived.

Instead Derby settled for what they could get in the quick turnaround since Cocu had arrived and also being tighter with the purse strings.

Both Dowell and Paterson quickly fizzled out. The duo played just ten games each. In the case of the former, he started the first six matches of the season but after a particularly bruising 3-0 defeat away to Brentford at the end of August he would be dropped. It is believed Cocu would later privately proclaim that he 'didn't see it' in the midfielder, leading some to believe that the new boss was not all that involved with some of the recruitment process, save for Bielik whom he had identified and pushed hard for.

Dowell had arrived on loan from Everton after a middling second-half-of-the-season stint at Sheffield United in 2018/19. It was Derby's hope that he could fill the void left by Mason Mount, but he struggled to settle in and, while Cocu had reservations about his new signing, internally the players were left surprised that a player of such technical quality was being left out so consistently and puzzled as to why Cocu could not get the best out of him.

The same could be said of Paterson. After having an unconvincing season at Bristol City, the attacking midfielder was recruited in a bid to fill the Harry Wilson-shaped hole. He struggled mightily to even get minutes, often limited to substitute appearances for just 15 minutes here and there. However, his assist for a dramatic leveller against Leeds United at Elland Road was enough to propel him into the starting XI where he showed good chemistry with Chris Martin. It wasn't enough for Cocu, and Paterson's loan was also terminated and he returned to Bristol City, where he would become one of their best

players throughout the second half of the season – naturally.

If those signings were lukewarm at best, the next one was about to rock the entire football landscape.