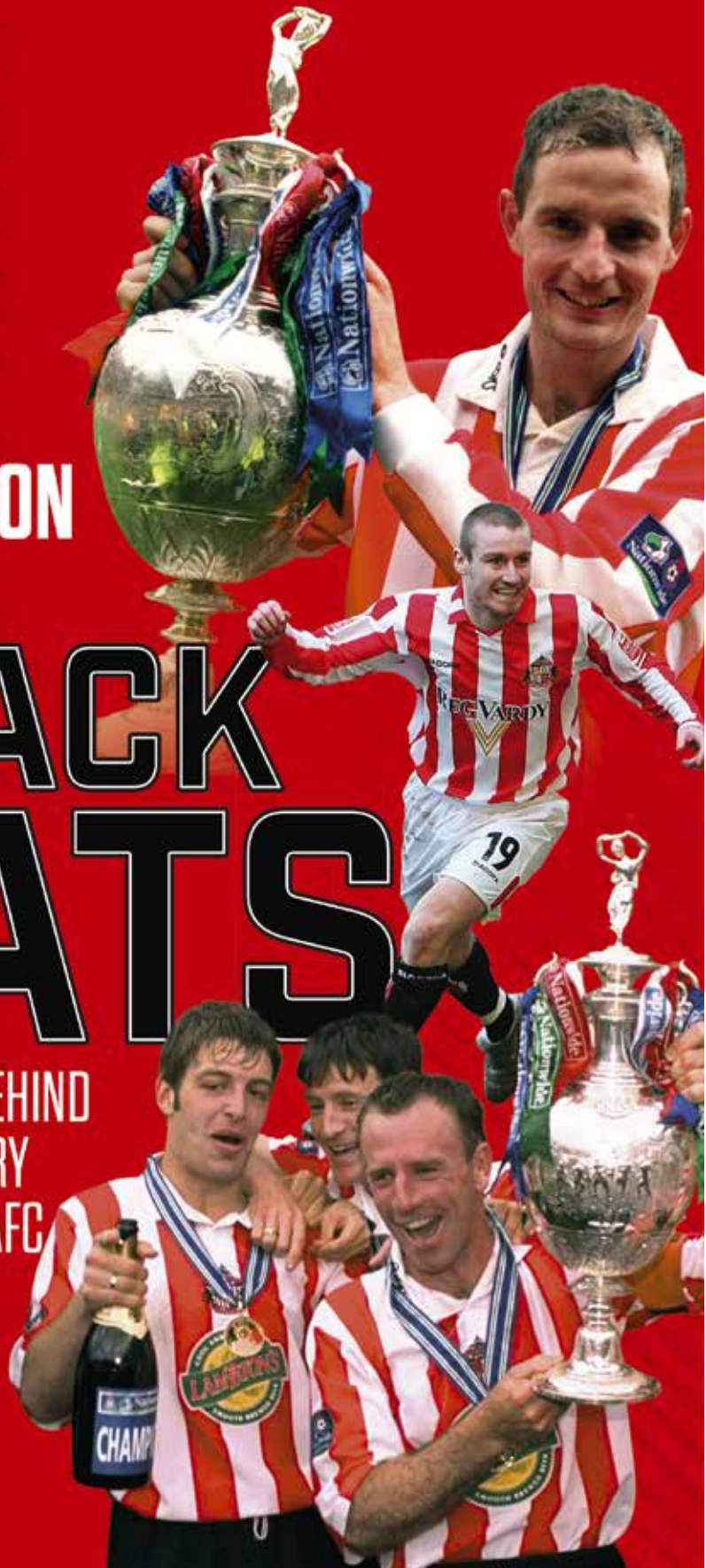


ROB MASON

PROMOTION
WINNING

BLACK CATS

THE STORIES BEHIND
EACH AND EVERY
SUNDERLAND AFC
PROMOTION
SEASON



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1963/64 DIVISION TWO RUNNERS-UP

Winger Brian Usher debuted on the opening day of the season and went on to miss just one game as Sunderland won promotion and reached the FA Cup quarter-final.

MONTGOMERY, IRWIN, Ashurst, Harvey, Hurley, McNab, Usher, Herd, Sharkey, Crossan and Mulhall. The names of Sunderland's first-ever promotion team roll off the tongues of Sunderland supporters old enough to have seen them more easily than any of the club's other promotion sides. This is partly because they were such a settled XI in the days before substitutes and partly because they remain to this day a team deeply loved by the people who watched them.

Sunderland's first promotion didn't arrive until 1964 because, having become the first club to join the Football League's founder members in 1890, they had been the last club to lose the proud boast of only ever having played at the top level. That first relegation came in 1958. After two seasons struggling in the lower reaches they finished sixth in 1961 and had consecutive third-placed finishes before returning to what was considered their rightful place with promotion in 1963/64.

1962 had seen the Wearsiders miss out by a point after being held at lowly Swansea Town on the final day. A year later there was an

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even closer call. Top of the table with a game to go, just one point was needed from a home match with promotion rivals Chelsea, only for the Londoners to win with the scrappiest of goals. They went on to pip Sunderland to promotion on goal average after winning their outstanding game in hand 7-0 against Portsmouth.

Brian Clough had scored 24 goals in 24 games by Boxing Day 1962, when he suffered what was ultimately a career-ending injury. Later renowned as one of the game's most successful and charismatic managers, Cloughie had scored 63 times in 74 games for Sunderland. His place was taken by up-and-coming youngster Nick Sharkey, who soon became the only post-war player to score five times in a game for Sunderland, but inevitably he couldn't replace Clough's goals to games ratio and ultimately the Black Cats missed promotion by a whisker.

Having gone so close to promotion two years running in the days when only two teams went up and there were no play-offs, Sunderland and their fans were desperate to win a first-ever promotion. The opening fixture of 1963/64 took Sunderland to Huddersfield Town, a team who would have been in the play-offs the previous term had they existed. No easy start then, but goals in each half from Andy Kerr and George Mulhall got the campaign off to a fine start with a 2-0 victory.

Making his debut at Huddersfield was teenage winger Brian Usher. He would do so well he would miss just one of the 49 league and cup games. 'I remember Ray Wilson was left-back,' says Brian of his debut as a right-winger up against the man who would become a World Cup winner with England three years later. 'I got called into the practice games before the season started and it went from there,' Brian continues. His debut could have come earlier. 'I'd been down to make my debut at Rotherham before they signed George Mulhall. If George hadn't signed I would have played. I travelled with the team.'

That had been almost a year earlier. Scotland international Mulhall had signed the previous September and since then hadn't missed a game. Mulhall was a left-winger, whereas Usher came into the team on the right and played all but the last of his 71 games for the club on the right. 'Actually, left-wing was my best position I think,

but I didn't play there,' explains Brian. 'I could kick with both feet but when I first started playing school football I began at left-back and from then on until I made my debut as a right-winger I always played left side. I played left-wing in the youth team at Sunderland. I found it easier playing on the left wing because my stride pattern meant that I always ran off my left foot. This meant that if the ball came to me quickly on the left I was already into my stride.

'I didn't play more than the very odd game on the left wing until I joined Doncaster. I played there for George Raynor, who had managed Sweden to the final of the World Cup in 1958. He asked me which I preferred so I played on the left.' In between his time with Sunderland and Doncaster – where he still lives – Brian had played for his promotion-winning Sunderland manager Alan Brown at Sheffield Wednesday, but it was future Sunderland boss Lawrie McMenemy who continued with him on his chosen flank after taking over at Doncaster. 'I knew Lawrie from the north-east because he used to be coach at Gateshead and Bishop Auckland, and then he'd worked with Alan Brown at Sheffield Wednesday when I was at Hillsborough.'

Regardless of being on the 'wrong' wing, when he first came into the team at Sunderland Usher provided the sort of youthful energy that Gary Owers would do after making his debut on the opening day of the 1987/88 promotion season. Manager Brown had a simple instruction for young Brian: 'He always said to me, "Take them on. You won't get by every time but it's when you do that counts." That's what I like nowadays, to see wingers taking people on. There's plenty of space out there. These days you watch games and there's about 12 people in the penalty box. There's no room, but there's stacks on the wings.'

Three of the first four games were won before Brian got his first goal. It was the winner in a 1-0 victory at Bury – 'I didn't score a lot but I remember that one,' smiles Brian. 'It was played back to me as I was in the six-yard box.'

A week later a 2-0 home win over Manchester City took Sunderland into the promotion positions for the first time. Backing that up with another home victory against Scunthorpe, Brown's boys

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had dropped only three points (just two for a win then) from their opening eight games before the first blip of the season. Defeats at Swindon and Swansea – the latter in the League Cup – were followed by a couple of draws, but the start had been so good Sunderland were still second, two points behind early pacesetters Swindon.

Significantly, after the first of those draws at home to Cardiff Martin Harvey came into the team to replace the legendary Stan Anderson. The former skipper was controversially transferred to Newcastle but remained so popular he was warmly welcomed back to Roker for his own testimonial on the Monday before the final home game when promotion was finally sealed.

Colossal centre-half Charlie Hurley captained the side majestically. A towering presence at the back, ‘King’ Charlie was not the kind of defender who simply cleared the ball as far as he could kick it. The Republic of Ireland international liked to play constructively. In the early 60s he also set the tone for centre-halves going forward for corner kicks, something that is taken for granted now. Capped at international level as a centre-forward as well as at centre-half, Hurley created havoc whenever he went forward. Nippy centre-forward Nicky Sharkey always used to say he got a lot of his goals by being ready to pounce on rebounds from Hurley headers.

Charlie scored seven times in the promotion season. Two of his five league goals started and ended a sequence of four successive wins that took Sunderland to the top of the table. In between those Hurley-inspired victories at Norwich and at home to Plymouth Sunderland won two derby matches: one at Derby County and the other a real derby against Newcastle United.

Despite playing second division football, Sunderland averaged home gates of 41,258 over the season. 56,903 came through the doors to see a thunderbolt from left-back Len Ashurst equalise an early Newcastle goal by Colin Taylor. Derbies are often tense, scrappy affairs but this one was a rip-roaring game of football won for Sunderland nine minutes from time when George Herd fired home after George Mulhall threaded a pass across the box.

Inside-right Herd was one of Sunderland’s finest footballers of the 60s. A clever technician, the Scotland international also possessed

immense stamina. At times teams tried to man-mark him, but in this pre-substitute era when that happened George's policy was to just keep running all afternoon and then take advantage in the closing stages when the poor soul trying to keep up with him was worn out.

'Who could play with a better player than George Herd?' asks Usher, who linked with Herd on the right flank. 'At right-back big Cec [Irwin] would get the ball and give it to you early when the full-back was off you, so you had time to turn. If Cec played a ball up to me, all I had to do was play it inside and George Herd was there and he'd play it back to me inside the full-back. I'd just come into the team but all the players were good at helping me through games. They were smashing lads.'

Young Usher did so well that he was brought straight back into the side after missing his only competitive game of the campaign, despite Sunderland winning 4-1 in his absence. Tommy Mitchinson stood in for Brian as Leyton Orient were well beaten in mid-November – as he had 48 hours earlier when Sharkey struck a hat-trick in a friendly with Eusébio's Benfica where Sunderland won 5-3. But Brian was back in the number 7 shirt as Sunderland won at Swansea, the scene of their League Cup exit.

Brown stuck with Brian and indeed the rest of the team as just one game out of five was won following the trip to South Wales. The Saturday before Christmas brought a 5-1 loss on an icy pitch at Northampton where the team struggled in the wrong footwear. That wasn't the ideal preparation for the Christmas double-header with arch-rivals Leeds United.

Managed by Roker old boy Don Revie, Leeds were in the process of making enemies across the footballing world. Their rough play and gamesmanship – at a time when gamesmanship was largely yet to rear its ugly head – made them an unpopular club. As Sunderland stepped foot in Elland Road on Boxing Day, Leeds topped the table, three points ahead of second-placed Sunderland and with a game in hand.

In the final analysis both Leeds and Sunderland would go up, in that order. The following seasons would see Leeds become one of the dominant clubs in the country, while Sunderland struggled.

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Losing manager Brown at the end of the season was a contributory factor in that. During the promotion campaign Sunderland would become involved in a demanding cup run that undoubtedly cost league points. Leeds would pip Sunderland to the title by two points but arguments over who was the better team of the two will always be open to debate. In the head-to-head Sunderland unquestionably came out on top.

At Leeds only a late equaliser from Ian Lawson protected United's unbeaten home record that they would carry through to the end of the season. In the return at Roker Park 24 hours later George Herd scored in the first minute and Nicky Sharkey doubled the lead before the game was a quarter of the way through. With over 55,000 inside Roker Park Leeds had the Roker Roar to contend with as well as the Lads as Sunderland triumphed 2-0.

Victory over Leeds sparked the best run of the season. It was the first of eight successive wins, five of these being in the league. Twelve goals were scored in two games, a 6-1 cup win over Bristol City and a 6-0 league triumph over one-time leaders Swindon, with Sharkey getting a hat-trick and Usher also hitting the mark.

By this time Sunderland topped the table but still had Leeds breathing down their necks. Revie's Leeds had been held at home by Cardiff as Swindon were being slaughtered at Sunderland to leave the Wearsiders a point ahead but having played a game more. Ultimately, what mattered most was not the distance between Sunderland and Leeds but the gap between Sunderland and the team in third place. That was Preston, who were just two points behind but like Leeds had a game in hand.

Having held Leeds at Elland Road, Cardiff might have fancied their chances of stopping Sunderland the following weekend, but goals from Mulhall and Sharkey eased the red and whites to a 2-0 win.

Sunderland were then in buoyant mood as they welcomed league champions Everton to Roker for an FA Cup fifth-round tie. The Toffees had eliminated Leeds in the fourth round but were blown away as Sunderland established a 3-0 half-time advantage and eventually won 3-1 in front of 62,851.

Cup fever could have damaged the promotion charge. The same regular XI were turning out week in, week out – and, of course, playing the full 90 minutes each time, often on heavy pitches. With an epic three games – plus two extra-time periods – to come against cup holders Manchester United in the quarter-final, ten of the regular XI played every cup game, left-half Jim McNab missing the Manchester United games through injury.

Sunderland led 3-1 with four minutes to go in the initial tie at Old Trafford, only to draw 3-3 following an injury to goalkeeper Jim Montgomery. United left it just as late in the replay, Bobby Charlton equalising in the last minute of extra time to force a second replay after a 2-2 draw.

Sunderland's record attendance of 75,118 is commonly believed to have been exceeded by many thousands that night according to many eyewitnesses. The official attendance was 10,000 fewer than the 56,675 who saw the Good Friday league game against Rotherham. Gates at both ends were broken down as the crowd clamoured for admission. The second replay saw Sunderland eventually well beaten at Huddersfield in a game sandwiched between league games with Middlesbrough and Newcastle in which just one point was gleaned by a tired team.

'I remember the games with Man U well,' recalls Brian Usher. 'We had already knocked out Everton who were the league champions. Had we beaten Man U I think we would have gone on to win the cup. We had special players like George Herd, George Mulhall and Charlie Hurley. They were as good as anybody.'

Defeat by a single goal on a wicked day at Newcastle, when many thought the game was to be postponed, was the only league reverse after Christmas. The result deposed Sunderland from the top of the table. On the same day Leeds leapfrogged Sunderland by winning at Middlesbrough. Preston remained hot on the heels of the top two. They were due to be the next visitors to Roker Park and by the time they got there were just a point behind after a comfortable midweek win over Norwich.

North End's visit sticks in Brian's memory: 'The game from the season that stands out has got to be the 4-0 win over Preston. They

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were third and we were second. We were 4-0 up by half-time. It was so important to win that game.'

Managed by Jimmy Milne (whose son Gordon managed Coventry in 1977 on the night of the scoreboard controversy as Sunderland were relegated), Preston were enjoying a cup run of their own and would reach the final. They put up stern resistance early on, but once Crossan opened the scoring in the 25th minute the floodgates opened as four goals came in 12 minutes. Mulhall and a couple from Sharkey put Sunderland in total control. The game did not secure promotion but it was a gigantic stride towards it.

After a win and a draw with Rotherham Usher notched the only goal of a home game with relegation-threatened Swansea. 'They always criticised the goalkeeper but I was always taught as a winger, "When you get near the line, smash it!" This was because you had forwards running in and defenders running back and anything could happen. It might have been a fluke but it did what I intended it to do. I hit it hard and low and it went in.'

With the finishing line in sight Sunderland won 5-2 at Leyton Orient and took a point from a goalless draw at Southampton to go into the final home game against fourth-placed Charlton Athletic needing a point (from their last two games) to be mathematically certain of a first-ever promotion. Given the frustratingly narrow near misses of the previous two seasons nerves jangled as the Addicks took an early lead, but George Herd levelled just before half-time. Former Sunderland goalkeeper Peter Wakeham produced an outstanding display to try and thwart his old team-mates, but a minute from time top scorer Johnny Crossan settled matters by making it 2-1 to take away any worries of conceding a late winner.

Sunderland were up. It was a feeling never experienced before. Before the war there had been six league titles and an FA Cup triumph but post-war only promises and broken dreams. For war babies like Brian Usher it was the first time the club had achieved anything in their lifetime. 'I remember running around the field with big Charlie and everybody,' he says of the lap of honour. 'I think it's everybody's ambition when they join a club to get into the first team and then hope for the best. It was the first time it

was ever done because they had never been out of the first division until 1958.

‘I was from Easington Lane. My dad worked at the pit at Elemore and then he got transferred to Murton when that closed. I used to live at the Brick Garth. It was terrific playing at Roker Park. I supported Sunderland as a boy. There were about six of us used to leave at about 11 o’clock on a Saturday morning when they were at home. We’d get to Park Lane on the bus and then make our way over to the ground. I used to watch players like Billy Bingham, Billy Elliott, Charlie Fleming, Ted Purdon and Ken Chisholm. It was a terrific place, Sunderland. It was the one team that I played for that I wished I could have been good enough to stop there but it wasn’t to be.’

Brian scored Sunderland’s final goal of the season in a 2-2 draw at Grimsby, who went down after failing to win. He then got on the scoresheet twice more, in a testimonial at Hartlepool and at Linfield in the final game of a three-match end-of-season tour of Ireland.

After being just one game short of joining Jim Montgomery, Len Ashurst, Johnny Crossan and George Mulhall as an ever-present in the promotion team, Brian went on to play 20 times in the top flight before being sold to Sheffield Wednesday for £18,000 in the summer of 1965.

Promotion-winning manager Alan Brown had joined Wednesday after leaving Sunderland following the promotion win, having had a disagreement with the directors who refused to let him purchase his club-owned house at a preferential rate. At Hillsborough Usher vied with future Sunderland manager Howard Wilkinson for the right-wing berth. In his second season in Sheffield he played in a big 5-0 Hillsborough win against his old club, while his third year with the Owls was his best, a highlight being a goal in a 1-1 draw against Manchester United at a time Wednesday were third in the league.

Nonetheless, Brian Usher’s proudest moments in football were as a young local lad who came into the team at the right time and became part of that never-to-be-forgotten side: Montgomery, Irwin, Ashurst, Harvey, Hurley, McNab, Usher, Herd, Sharkey, Crossan and Mulhall.