

FOREWORD BY
COLIN SLATER MBE



RECORD BREAKERS

The Inside Story of Notts County's
Momentous 1997/98 Title Win

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Chapter 1

Past to present

'He just seemed a giant of a man. I had just turned 17, a skinny kid looking up and seeing this fella who had the worst moustache I had ever seen in my life!'

– Kevin Nolan

SITTING inside the office of the Notts County manager at Meadow Lane, the mind wanders back.

It visualises a time when, in the same room, almost 20 years earlier, a previous incumbent of the manager's chair reflected on the mightiest of seasons in the annals of this historic club.

That man was Sam Allardyce who, in 2016, would take charge of the England national side, the greatest honour in the game for an English manager. Yet it was at Notts County, in the basement division of the Football League, where Sam's journey to the very top job began in earnest.

Those reflections in the manager's office are depicted in a classic picture of the Allardyce of 1998. He sits, legs laid on his desk, with the Third Division trophy beside him, a black-and-white shirt signed by the Notts County players of that 1997/98 season hanging behind, and a cigar in his mouth. It's

a pose that epitomises the moniker ‘Big Sam’. As fate would have it, on the wall of his office is a poster featuring England’s fixtures for that year.

This Allardyce pose rather sums up the character of the man, but moreover it illustrates the fate that befell the Magpies during this particular campaign. The cigars were out in March, so quickly did Allardyce lead his men not only to promotion but also the title. It was a record-breaking season that not only goes down as one of the finest in the history of Notts, the world’s oldest professional Football League club, but in the English game too.

No post-war side before, or since, has won a championship so quickly. Saturday, 28 March 1998 and a 1-0 home win over Leyton Orient courtesy of a Mark Robson goal saw Allardyce’s men seal their record-breaking feat.

Back to the present, and I’m sat opposite the current Notts County manager as he prepares for an FA Cup tie against Bristol Rovers a night later. It’s a tie the Magpies go on to win with a remarkable comeback from 2-0 down to defeat their higher league opponents 4-2. The boss is Kevin Nolan, a man whose career is so intrinsically linked with that of one of his predecessors. Allardyce managed and gave Nolan the captaincy at both Bolton Wanderers and West Ham United.

Now, as Allardyce’s career enters its later years, Nolan is at the beginning of his own, attempting to follow what his former boss has achieved. Rather fittingly for the 20th anniversary season of Notts’s 1997/98 vintage, Nolan was given a chance to succeed at the very same level from which Allardyce led that fine championship-winning success. The Magpies were top of the League 2 table with 33 points after 16 games when I met Nolan. In Allardyce’s season, after 16 games Notts were second of what was then called the Third Division, on 32 points.

Unfortunately, Nolan was unable to repeat his mentor’s feats – it was always going to be some ask. However, he

enjoyed a fine first full season at the helm at Meadow Lane and came very close to at least emulating the promotion part of Allardyce's achievements.

Notts were in the hunt for automatic promotion until the penultimate match of the season, and eventually had to settle for the play-offs, where they were beaten over two legs by Coventry City.

It means, 20 years on, Notts have had just one more promotion since Allardyce's class of 1998 – the 2009/10 success under a raft of different managers following the controversial takeover by Munto Finance. It makes what that record-breaking squad did all the more remarkable.

When we spoke, Nolan acknowledged he expected similarities would be made with him and Allardyce given the relationship between the two of them. He admitted that, given it was 20 years on from Notts's historic title achievements, it would be a fitting promotion were he to achieve it too. Above all else, he gave no doubt that Allardyce had paved the way for his own shot at a successful management career.

'Sam is a massive part of why I got my opportunity and why I have been able to move into the management side of the game,' says Nolan. 'He taught me a lot of things and he believed in me when probably I didn't believe in myself until, in my younger years, he brought it out of me.'

'He brought out what was the best thing to do, when to do it, how to do it and the best way to do it. He played a massive part in why I had such a career; there is no doubt about that.'

'When he came back calling for me, to go to West Ham with him and be his captain there, I knew it was something I couldn't turn down. I was 28 when I left Newcastle. I thought, "I'm going into the better years of my career and there is no one better who is going to help me go further and further than Sam." Thankfully it was the right choice again.'

Nolan first met Allardyce in the days just after Sam had departed Meadow Lane, rather acrimoniously, before

taking the job as Bolton manager. It was 14 October 1999 when Allardyce resigned his position as Notts County manager. Five days later he was installed as Colin Todd's replacement at the Reebok Stadium, taking the helm at the club for whom he starred as a rugged no-nonsense centre-half in the 1970s.

In his book about his time covering the club, Colin Slater, Notts County's correspondent for BBC Radio Nottingham during the Allardyce era, takes up the story of his departure from Meadow Lane. It came ten games into the 1999/2000 season with Notts second in the Second Division (now League 1), two seasons after that record-breaking promotion.

'Notts had made a bright start, with only two defeats, when Allardyce caused a sensation by quite literally walking away from the club,' writes Slater. 'Notts played and won at Bury on 9 September. The Allardyce family home continued to be in the Bolton area and, as was fairly usual whenever Notts played in the north west, Sam's wife, Lynne, was at Gigg Lane. She and I afterwards reached the car park at the same time, Lynne arriving from the boardroom, me from the press box, and I was surprised to find her in tears.

'I've often wondered since whether this was linked with what happened the following Thursday. Having hosted the players and his staff the previous evening, buying several rounds of drinks for them – which he wasn't in the habit of doing! – Allardyce arrived very early at his office. He cleared his desk, pushed his keys under the door of managing director Geoff Davey and headed for his home in the north west.

'From the M6 he used his mobile phone to telephone chairman [Derek] Pavis to say, in effect, "I've left Notts County this morning and I'm not coming back." Pavis initially thought it was some kind of joke and was shaken to his roots to discover it was for real.'

Allardyce himself admitted he was 'in conflict' with Pavis. His Notts chapter was over, but his Bolton one was about to

begin. It wasn't long after his arrival in Lancashire when a 17-year-old Nolan first encountered Allardyce. He was someone the Liverpoolian knew very little about. He soon got to know him very well.

'I remember the first day he walked in when he was appointed at Bolton,' recalls Nolan. 'He just seemed a giant of a man. I had just turned 17, a skinny kid looking up and seeing this fella who had the worst moustache I had ever seen in my life! He was just a really commanding figure. When he talked, he talked with an authoritative voice but was really welcoming as well.'

'Those are my first memories of Sam. Phil Brown introduced us while the reserve team was training. I had just played, I think for the under-18s, and was just watching because I was very much involved in both [teams] at the time.'

'From then on, my career developed quite quickly and went the way and path I always hoped it would. It's a massive thank you to Sam but more than anything a massive reason because of him.'

'Phil Brown had taken over [as Bolton caretaker following Todd's departure] and wanted the job. He'd done quite well. The lads were really playing well but they went with Sam and it turned out to be an absolutely fantastic appointment by the late [chairman] Phil Gartside.'

'I didn't know a lot about Sam at the time and there wasn't Google then! You couldn't just Google and two seconds later the profile comes up. You had to do a bit of digging, but once you saw what he had achieved here at Notts County, you think he must have done something special at the club.'

Nolan had been appointed Notts manager as they found themselves back in the Third Division Allardyce had taken them out of – now known as League 2 – in January 2017. The club had suffered ten straight defeats and were staring down the barrel of a first relegation into non-league. Nolan had a

galvanising effect, and led a remarkable upturn in form that saw the relegation threat disappear. A full summer in charge then preceded his own tilt at promotion as he came so close to emulating Allardyce's achievements from his own first full season in Nottingham, before the heartbreaking play-off semi-final exit at the hands of Coventry City.

How much of Allardyce the manager exists in Nolan is difficult to say. Only someone who has played for both would be in a position to truly compare. However, Nolan himself knows he would be foolish not to take the best qualities from a man he spent 12 years playing for. Speaking to Nolan, it's clear which managerial facets of Allardyce he'd love his own players to see in him.

'He came in with his philosophy and how he was going to do it and then realised he probably had to change,' remembers Nolan. 'That's when you realised how good a manager he was. He could recognise the problem and wasn't so arrogant to think it's my way or the highway. He saw it, realised it and amended it.'

'Unless you have the backing of the board to spend 30, 40 or 50 million pounds, when you have got your set way you have to adapt to the squad you inherit and say, "This is how we're going to do it." You might not have the right pieces for that jigsaw, so you've got to make sure you try to find the right pieces. The best way to do it is to see what makes all of the players tick. That's what he was so good at. His management style.'

'When he was at Notts County he probably took a lot of control. He was in League 2 then. He probably took control of everything. When he took over at Bolton, he brought in good people around him. We had one of the biggest staff in the Championship, moving into the Premier League, and he entrusted his staff. He always strived to get better. He knew so much, but if he didn't know it he would learn that bit or that bit. He probably knew everything about League 2 and was

doing things in that division that no other club was. That's why he was able to do what he did and got the chance he did to get the job with Bolton.

'What he realised quite quickly [at Bolton] is that he didn't have all the answers. He brought people in next to him who could help. They weren't going to go, "Oh yes, Sam, you are the best and you know everything." He wanted you to go, "I don't agree with that." He wanted you to put your case to him. He was one who would say, "You are right, well done lad." And he would then try and take it to the next level. He came with that mentality. He was very comfortable in his own skin. He believed in his ability to take a lot on. He had a lot of football knowledge.

'At Notts was probably when he learned his trade. That was probably the time he realised what he was doing. When he went to Bolton he expanded on that and continued to learn and bring people in who were better in their field than he was, so he could learn off them to make sure he got better and could understand it a lot more.

'He never stood still. He was always on the move to try to make sure he could get better and continue to have this wider knowledge to keep improving himself, his team and his staff. He has got everything he deserves. It was just unfortunate that when he got that top job with England it ended so badly. I'm sure when all of the truth comes out they will realise what a big mistake it was.

'He was well ahead of a lot of people at that time. The things we used to do as a squad at Bolton, people were only doing it about five years later and then thinking they had come up with the science. We had been doing it for years and that is why we were able to achieve things that no one would have ever envisaged had it not been for Sam going in there and making us believe it.

'When we got promoted, it was the first time the three that went up from the Championship all stayed up, in

Premier League history. And we didn't make many changes. Fitness levels, his sports science side, he had masseurs, fitness conditioners, strength conditioners, physios – he had them all. He had a team behind the team that made us tick and allowed us to go again and again and again.

'Sam thought out every bit of pre-season with his team to make sure we were ready and rolling come day one of that season, because he realised at that time that if we got so many points in so many games, that gave him a better opportunity to make sure we wouldn't be in the bottom three come game 38.

'It was about making 25 professionals believe in that. Because of the way he is and his man-management style, people believed him and took it in. Then, when it came to fruition, a lot more people wanted to be involved in it. And that's why you saw a lot more people joining Bolton under Sam at the latter end of their top careers but then extending it for another year, two years, three years, because he gave you the tools to continue. If you did what he was asking of you, he'd give you the opportunity to stay in the game. Look at Campo, Hierro, Speed, Okocha, Djorkaeff and Giannakopoulos.'

Allardyce himself can remember first clasp eyes on a young Kevin Nolan as he attempted to make his way into the Bolton first team. It's difficult to imagine Allardyce believing he had seen, at that time, a player who would go on to be synonymous with his own career and help bring him such success, before ultimately following in his own footsteps.

'I'd converted him from a useless centre-back to an accomplished midfielder,' says Allardyce of Nolan's first forays into his Bolton side. Later he couldn't wait to take him to West Ham. 'I knew exactly the right man to lead us out of the Championship. Kevin Nolan. When I first saw him at Bolton, I wasn't even convinced he would make it as a pro. He was a terrible centre-back. He couldn't head it and couldn't tackle, and I could only think he was playing there because

of his size. But when I tried him in a midfield three he was a revelation. If you had a go at him, he came back stronger to prove you wrong.

‘Kevin brought with him leadership, character and goals and would sort out the dressing room by taking over the captaincy. I’d seen him grow after taking the armband at Bolton as a youngster. Some players lose focus when they become captain and their game suffers. But Kevin’s not like that; he revels in the role and his performance is better. His shoulders and chest stick out more. He enjoys being the boss on the field.’

Allardyce’s captain in the 1997/98 title-winning season was Ian Hendon. The east Londoner was given the armband in place of Gary Strodder, whose red card in a pre-season County Cup defeat against Nottingham Forest had tested the patience of Allardyce. It makes you wonder whether Allardyce thought of Hendon in a similar way to Nolan. Did he possess certain traits he required in a captain?

‘Strodds was a great lad who I got on well with,’ says Hendon. ‘I think it was Sam wanting to shake it up a bit. I was his first permanent signing and had a good rapport with him. I’d been a captain previously where I’d been, but whether that is because of performances or just having a big mouth, I don’t know. So Sam made me captain, but I’d speak to Strodds and he was great, we had a really good relationship.’

‘One thing I would say is, in that team, there was more than one captain. You had Ian Baraclough, Ian Richardson who led by example, myself and Sean Farrell, a different type of leader – a great lad.’

‘Then you had Shaun Derry and Steve Finnan. Dezza [Derry] was a digger in midfield and Finns went about his job and did what he did.’

‘It wasn’t hard to captain them. We’d walk on to the pitch thinking we’d win. If we drew or got beat, we’d think “How have we not won that?”’

Nolan recalls his early days as captain of Bolton to give an insight into what Allardyce would have demanded of Hendon during that title year.

‘I used to get a bit of stick being only 23 and one of the youngest members of his squad at the time, but being captain. I remember Per Frandsen asking what me and the gaffer had for breakfast that morning – it was tongue in cheek but real good banter.

‘He [Allardyce] just realised I had that respect for him and I had his back. I would never ever go against any of my players, which he loved. I would be the one arguing the point for anyone, but I also had the respect that he knew when my player was out of order, I’d be the one saying to the player you need to get in there and speak to the gaffer and give it the apologetic one.

‘I managed the dressing room for him. It’s another extension of him. He’d say “You manage it. Make sure you’re the one in the changing room and if anything goes on I will come over to you. You come to me if there are any problems.” He had it all over. We were all branches of his root. He’d give you time to flourish and blossom under him and, if you didn’t, and you took it a bit too far, he would rein you back in.

‘That’s what he was so good at. He realised what was needed – whether you were one who needed an arm around you, or one who needed putting up against a wall. I got it once and never got it again because I realised I didn’t want to piss him off. It never happened again. I remember having some real big ruckus with him in his office, but it was respectable – I never disrespected him and I never would in my career.’

Nolan surely did blossom under Allardyce, which has helped afford him the opportunity new owner Alan Hardy gave by appointing him as Notts manager to replace the sacked John Sheridan. Hardy described Nolan as ‘an outstanding leader’. He’s since gone on record as saying Nolan has the potential to be a future England manager, like his mentor.

Nolan, of course, consulted Allardyce before accepting the job. And Nolan isn't shy on leaning on him for advice.

'I'm really close with him,' he says. 'Any time I pick that up phone to him, if he doesn't answer he will call me right back. I know I have always got him there to give me that helping hand or a bit of advice and he has got my back. That is a fantastic thing to have when you are starting your career in management, especially as a young English manager. With the knowledge he has, when you have somebody of his calibre to be able to pick up the phone to and see how he would deal with it, then it is a massive weapon to have.'

Tony Cuthbert became Notts County secretary during Allardyce's tenure at the club. Nineteen years later he retired from that full-time position as Nolan completed the 2016/17 season.

'When I walked into the club, Tony said, "It's mad, Sam was my first manager and you'll be my last,"' recalls Nolan. 'We used to sit in my office and talk about Sam. He loved Sam and said he saw similarities between us – I told him, I hope not too many! But if I can have a career in management like he has had then I will be absolutely delighted.'

'I said to Sam "You've made it hard for me," but I want to try and make sure I beat his career. He is a great fellow and one I admire so much on and off the field.'

'I can only commend what he did here 20 years ago – he absolutely rocked it!'