



IAN HALL

REVIE'S BOYS

THE LOST HOPE
OF GLORY, GLORY
LEEDS UNITED

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Make Leads Great Again

1

‘I know I can do the job, Martin’

IN A long broadcasting career, Martin Tyler has covered multiple World Cups, Champions League finals and Premier League deciders. Back in September 1980, though, he was in his first major posting in the relative backwater of regional television. Tyler’s brief included commentating on home games for Leeds United, broadcast in the Yorkshire area and sometimes selected for ITV’s flagship Saturday night football programme, *The Big Match*, fronted by Brian Moore and Jim Rosenthal. By this stage, however, Leeds games were rarely used nationally. Post-Revie, the team had slumped into mid-table mediocrity at best, and six games into the 1980/81 season they were second from bottom of the First Division. On the evening of Saturday, 13 September, however, Tyler had something of a coup that not even his bosses in London could ignore: he was about to unveil the new Leeds manager live on their programme.

Sat opposite Tyler for the big reveal was former Leeds striker Allan Clarke. The club had sacked Jimmy

Adamson as manager just two weeks earlier and Clarke was now boss of Third Division Barnsley. Strictly speaking, Clarke shouldn't have been anywhere near a camera as the Elland Road position remained officially vacant. The Barnsley chairman might have given Leeds permission to talk, but that's as far as it had gone. Clarke still took the opportunity to tell Tyler he expected transfer money for new signings should he accept the post. When asked why he thought, with less than two years of experience of management, he was ready, Clarke shot back, 'I never think. You never think in this game. I know I can do the job, Martin.'

Two days later, Clarke was Leeds' new boss.

To those who knew him best, Clarke backing himself would have come as no surprise. Reading the collected thoughts of Clarke's former Revie team-mates, one character trait about him stands out among all others: his innate self-belief, confidence, even arrogance. Johnny Giles recalled how Clarke was in no way in awe of Revie's team of superstars when he turned up from lowly Leicester City in 1969, 'It was a hell of a job getting him to knuckle down and realise he was just another player.' For Eddie Gray, Clarke 'always thought he was the best', and Peter Lorimer felt, 'When he came to Leeds, it was evident that he was an arrogant lad, but in his arrogance was his confidence in himself. He had this amazing self-belief in his ability.'

There was solid ground on which Clarke's supreme confidence had been built. Don Revie picked him out as the best one-on-one striker he had come across in

the game. For England’s most-capped goalkeeper, Peter Shilton, it wasn’t Johan Cruyff, Gerd Müller, Kevin Keegan, Kenny Dalglish, George Best or Denis Law who he rated the highest, it was his former Leicester teammate Clarke. As a striker Clarke was in a league of his own, widely seen as the ‘missing piece in the Revie jigsaw’ that had taken Leeds from the so-called ‘bridesmaids’ of English football into a trophy-winning machine, the most feared side in the land.

It was Clarke who had scored the most famous goal in Leeds’ history, the glorious headed winner that had won the FA Cup in 1972, as well as the goal that had won the club their first European trophy. Take any poll to name the greatest striker in the Whites’ history and it is not Mark Viduka, Tony Yeboah, Lee Chapman or even the great John Charles who wins that accolade, but Allan Clarke, and by a landslide. In fact, it has become so common for Clarke to be named Leeds’ greatest ever striker, the answer to the question so obvious, that no one even bothers to ask it any more.

If Clarke was indeed full of self-confidence, even arrogance, who could blame him?

* * *

Manny Cussins knew all about Allan Clarke.

As chairman, he had hired Brian Clough in the summer of 1974 to replace Don Revie, and now he was about to sack him. On the eve of Clough’s dismissal, Clarke contacted Cussins to tell him he was making a big mistake. This set the striker apart from most of his team-

mates who hadn't taken to the new manager. It must have taken some guts to be a lone senior voice to stand up for Clough in a Leeds dressing room full of superstars. It must also have made an impression on the chairman even as he ignored Clarke's plea. The impression Cussins must have taken of Clarke was of a principled, high-achieving individual not afraid to speak his mind to power.

Clarke wouldn't play the supplicant this time. It was the Leeds board that had asked to meet him, not the other way around, and the meeting to discuss his return from Barnsley had been conducted at Oakwell, not Elland Road. This meant Cussins driving his Rolls-Royce to South Yorkshire to make his pitch. Clarke laid out his red lines for taking the job, already rehearsed during the Tyler interview: money to spend on new players and additionally to bring his own backroom team over with him. Cussins, with Leeds on the ropes, was hardly in a position to say no.

Cussins had been chairman since 1972. His involvement extended a long line of Jewish links that went back to the club's very formation. After Leeds City had been disbanded due to financial irregularities, the foundational meeting that had created Leeds United in 1919 took place in the offices of Jewish solicitor Alf Masser. By the mid-1960s, over half the board were Jewish, unprecedented in English football at that time. In 1983 he would be succeeded by another Jewish businessman, Leslie Silver. Cussins and Silver both saw football and Leeds United as a way of cementing Jewish relations within the city.

Cussins had begun work in the family furniture business straight after leaving school. By his early 20s he was the owner of four furniture stores sold in the mid-1950s for £1m with the young businessman using the capital to start up the John Peters chain that had morphed into Waring and Gillow (Holdings) at the time of Clarke’s arrival as Leeds manager. Cussins’s business empire consisted of over 50 furniture stores, 30 men’s clothing shops and close to 40 tailoring shops employing over 2,500 people. He was a multimillionaire and not out of place in the bevy of businessmen/owners who littered English football by the late 1970s and early 1980s – Peter Swales at Manchester City, Ken Bates at Chelsea, Doug Ellis at Aston Villa, Jim Gregory at Queens Park Rangers – chairmen who could be relied upon to generate headlines and had personas almost as big as the managers they hired and frequently fired.

Cussins’s business qualities were clear enough, but questions remained about his judgement and knowledge when it came to football. As Leeds chairman, Clarke was his sixth manager in as many years, part of an era that had seen Leeds’ fortunes plummet. In his autobiography, Jimmy Armfield – appointed by Cussins after Brian Clough’s departure – tells several funny stories about the chairman: Manny taking Jimmy to his favourite backstreet Italian restaurant and leaving Jimmy to pick up the bill; Manny moaning to Jimmy that he was never invited to the team’s pre-season jaunts to Marbella then leaving almost as soon as he had arrived; Manny complaining that even after

sacking him Jimmy should still have sent him a Christmas card.

Perhaps the most telling anecdote concerns a visit the two of them made to Scotland on a supposed scouting mission shortly after Armfield had been appointed. Cussins got Armfield out of bed at an unearthly hour so that he could fit in the time to purchase two factories in Glasgow. He then paid no attention whatsoever to the match, suggesting to Armfield the real purpose of the trip had nothing to do with football.

Cussins's history with managers after Don Revie was this: Brian Clough lasted just 44 days. Armfield had steadied the ship, but Cussins had set his sights on another Revie and dispensed with the man who had taken Leeds to a European Cup Final in his prime. Jock Stein, though, had played Cussins, using the Elland Road job as insurance on not getting the position he really wanted, that of Scotland manager, walking out after serving just one more day than Clough. Jimmy Adamson had arrived from Second Division Sunderland but had been hounded out after just over two seasons and relentless fan protests.

Politically, getting away from all of this and appointing Clarke would have made perfect sense to Cussins. Overnight, the return of a much-loved figure to Elland Road had ended the angry mass demonstrations against the board and Cussins personally that had characterised the late Adamson period. Playing the role of chairman as a populist, Cussins had given the fans what they wanted, first by getting rid of Adamson and then by bringing in a replacement they could truly identify with, unlike

Clough, Armfield, Stein or Adamson. Clarke’s arrival had been warmly welcomed by the local media.

The appointment just about passed the credibility test. Clarke might have been a Fourth Division manager as recently as two seasons earlier, but he had taken Barnsley up, and at the time of his appointment they were top of the Third Division. He looked well positioned to be a leading figure in the next generation of First Division coaches and Leeds had got ahead of the game in securing his services. Nothing in his two years as a boss would have told Cussins that Clarke’s managerial career wasn’t going to go on down the same yellow brick road as his playing career.

As for Clarke, despite his desire for new signings and the lowly position he inherited, he must have known the squad he was taking over was still packed full of quality players. His new team carried 11 full internationals including Eddie Gray, Arthur Graham, Paul Madeley, Trevor Cherry, Carl Harris, Byron Stevenson, Brian Flynn and strikers Derek Parlane and Alan Curtis – together with Adamson signings Alex Sabella, Gary Hamson, Brian Greenhoff, another international, and one-time club record signing Kevin Hird. Objectively, this was not a squad that should have been so low in the league.

There was also a group of promising youngsters coming through such as keeper John Lukic, defenders Martin Dickinson and Neil Aspin, and strikers Terry Connor, Steve Balcombe and Aidan Butterworth. Butterworth recalls Clarke’s first day, ‘He went around the dressing room and shook everyone’s hand and said

he would give everyone a chance to prove themselves to him. As a young player that was good to hear. Jimmy Adamson never said a word to me even after I had made my debut as a sub the previous season. Allan Clarke was more approachable and only 34 himself. We identified with him as a young manager more on our wavelength.'

Butterworth was also impressed with Clarke's world-class abilities in front of goal, 'In training, he would score these volleys ghosting in at the far post. It would take your breath away. As a striker, he was offering us a masterclass in how to put the ball in the back of the net day after day.' As a defender, Neil Aspin, given his debut by Clarke as a 16-year-old, saw the more competitive side to his new manager in training, 'I seem to remember a few elbows flying around!'

Centre-half Paul Hart had also been present when Clarke first introduced himself to the squad in September 1980. Hart had joined Leeds two years earlier, signed by Jimmy Armfield and making his debut marking Kenny Dalglish at Anfield. He recalled, 'I was personally delighted to see him come back as manager. Allan had really helped me settle in at Leeds and he was a hell of a professional. He was a very confident person but certainly not brash. He was just very focused, especially about Leeds United, hard as nails actually. I thought he was just what the club needed at the time.'

Apart from the depth and quality of the squad he was taking over, Clarke would also know that as recently as 1975 Leeds had reached a European Cup Final. They had also made it to two League Cup semi-finals and an FA

Cup semi-final post-Revie. They had qualified for the UEFA Cup just two seasons earlier. The previous five seasons had seen them finish fifth twice and no lower than 11th in the table. There was plenty for Clarke to work with, particularly with the promise of cash to add to it.

Knowing all of this might have prompted an already inherently confident Clarke to make two bold public statements of intent before even his first week was out. The first he was so sure of, he even put it in writing, ‘My first priority is obviously to get the team away from the wrong end of the table. Leeds United are a big club in name only at the moment, not performances, and while I do not want to make too many predictions or lay down too many targets, I shall regard myself as a failure if we have not won a major trophy in the next three years.’ This statement would be hung around his neck for the rest of his time at Elland Road.

The second statement was more performative. Emerging out of the Elland Road tunnel for his first match in charge, against Manchester United, Clarke hadn’t stopped at the home dugout but he had kept on walking ramrod straight to the packed-out Kop and raised both arms in salute: his classic celebration. The crowd went wild. Trevor Cherry, leading the players behind him as captain, could only smile at the chutzpah of it all. With Leeds on the ropes, in a relegation scrap, his former teammate was bringing the Revie swagger and arrogance back to Elland Road before a ball had even been kicked.

Clarke had clearly concentrated on the upsides in returning to Leeds, but what about the downsides?

Competition-wise, there were plenty. By 1980, to be the best side in England meant you were the best side in Europe. In eight seasons up to 1983/84, Liverpool, Nottingham Forest and Aston Villa would win the European Cup seven times. Ipswich Town under the management of Bobby Robson would win the UEFA Cup in 1980/81; Arsenal had only lost the Cup Winners' Cup Final in 1980 on penalties.

It wasn't just the top of the division that posed a threat. Manchester United then, as now, the richest club in the league, were spending big, and other traditional sides like Everton, Spurs and Manchester City were just as intent on reviving better days. City had spent millions in the preceding seasons on players like Steve Daley and Kevin Reeves yet had still fallen short. Even unfashionable sides like Southampton had a buzz about them led by England stalwarts Kevin Keegan, Mick Channon and Alan Ball.

Clarke would also have to deliver the glory he had promised on the back of falling gates at Elland Road. By this stage, Leeds' average attendance had slipped to just over 20,000. This put them way behind the clubs Clarke had just publicly pledged to overtake. Manchester United, for example, averaged over 50,000 for home matches. Leeds were smack bang in the middle of any league table of home support by numbers. Cussins had claimed average gates of over 30,000 were required just to break even. That meant the club was haemorrhaging big money every week. The maths was bleak.

The new boss would also be taking on rivals with vastly greater managerial experience. He was bringing

over Martin Wilkinson as his assistant, who had only played youth-team football at Rotherham but had impressed as a coach. Barry Murphy, a veteran defender of over 400 appearances in the lower leagues, also joined him. Murphy, for all his playing experience, was also new to coaching. Brian Clough had Peter Taylor at Forest, Terry Neill had England coach Don Howe at Arsenal, Liverpool’s Bob Paisley had the Anfield boot room to call on. This contrast in dugout experience, with some of Leeds’ key rivals, represented something of a mismatch from the off.

For Paul Hart, questions of inexperience and the risks it brings misses the point, ‘I dare say if you asked Allan or Martin today whether they would have ideally wanted more experience before taking on a big job like Leeds at that time, they would probably say yes. You rarely get the luxury in football, though, of perfect timing and everything falling into place as you would like it. I ended up working quite closely with Martin when I was manager at Barnsley [2004/05] and by then it’s never an issue. What were they supposed to do, turn the job at Leeds down? You might not get another shot at it.’

Clarke’s critics gave him no slack: they didn’t just see ambition, but hubris. Fast forward to 2024 and Ange Postecoglou, managing Spurs at the time, quickly found out how the English press don’t like perceived overconfidence. Postecoglou, a proven trophy winner across multiple leagues around the world, had only stated a fact in pointing out that he had won a trophy in his second season at whatever club he had managed. He had

made no claims about the future. He was still attacked for a lack of humility and set up to fail.

The novice Clarke had gone far further when pledging to take a spluttering Leeds back to the top table of English football in short order. This was red meat to his detractors, particularly given already entrenched anti-Leeds United sentiment thrown in, notably among the London press. Clarke might have been a great player but that meant nothing now, they whispered. He had just put a target on his back. Something to keep reminding him about.

Manny Cussins also had his work cut out. In appointing Clarke, he had brought a whole load more jeopardy than even the appointments of Clough, Armfield, Stein or Adamson to Elland Road whether he cared to admit it or not. For all Clarke's self-confidence, the chairman had just appointed a man whose management experience – prior to his brief turn at Barnsley – had amounted to running Collingham's under-18 side. However this was dressed up as a return of a 'Leeds great', one of England's' biggest clubs was now seeking salvation from an inexperienced manager of a provincial outfit from the backwaters of the Football League.

The risk was now all on Leeds.