

**Johnny Phillips
and Paul Berry**

REVOLUTION OF

WOLVES

A Premier League Trilogy 2003-2023

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Part One

Chapter 1

Nineteen Years, 13 Days, 22 Hours and 20 Minutes

THE BUSTLING market on Peel Street, Wolverhampton, just next to the ring road, had for many years been a regular haunt for the surrounding local community. On this particular morning in late May 2003, a young artist was wandering among the stalls. He knew exactly what he was looking for.

‘The Wolves colour is old gold, but everyone knows that changes all the time with the different kits and different shades of gold,’ he explains. ‘In Wolverhampton there is a big Sikh community, and in the markets, you find people selling material that is the Wolves colour because it is a significant colour in their community.’

The colour gold is important in the Sikh community, and it features most recognisably at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India, the spiritual home of Sikhism. It is a colour that represents healing and deep happiness. Similarly, orange represents deep joy and bliss, and it is the colour of Sikh turbans.

‘The material was really cheap to buy; I don’t think it cost more than £1.50 a yard, it wasn’t much at all. So, at that price I bought plenty of it to make sure that we had too much. I laid it all out on the floor in my living room. At first I began spray-painting it but that started going everywhere so I changed to a paint marker, which

was more like a marker pen. It was made literally the day before the game on the Sunday.’

Little did the artist know that his creation would become one of the most recognisable images of the most famous day in Wolves’ modern history. Toaster, as he prefers to be known in public, was in his mid-20s at the time. A Wolves season-ticket holder, he had been working on a mural for a venue in Worcester when his thoughts turned to making a banner.

‘The idea came about really close to the game. It was all a bit of a whirlwind as until we’d beaten Reading in the semi-final there were no plans for the play-off final, so it was all about getting tickets sorted at first. As a kid I used to take a small banner to games, and I’ve always been into European football culture. I was fascinated by those banners in Italy by the ultras and the *tifo* displays, which years ago I used to see snapshots of on the Channel 4 programme *Gazzetta Football Italia*. In Italy, you could buy this magazine called *Supertifo* from the newsstands and it would be collections of all the fans’ displays from the previous few weeks and I used to love the choreography of it. Because I painted for a living and could make letters and fonts, I knew I was capable of doing a good-sized banner.’

Toaster attended games with a group of mates he’d known since his schooldays. There was a thriving matchday pub scene in Wolverhampton, and they would often meet up in the Great Western or the Varsity before heading to Molineux.

‘An ongoing narrative of the build-up to the final was how Wolves always messed it up and it had been so many years of struggles, going on and on and on. Back then, it was seemingly a lifetime since we’d been in the top flight. We got talking about how long it had been. Then I had a look at the last game we played in the top division, and I remembered it being against Stoke City, which we lost. Wouldn’t it be fun to work out how long it had actually been between the last kick in that match to the play-off final whistle in Cardiff, we thought. It was easy enough to work out the years and

months, then we looked at the days, which got trickier with the leap years. We didn't want to get it wrong.

'I remember finishing it off and having no expectations. I'd done a big banner, that was it. If we lost the game or were losing from early on, then the whole day becomes about Sheffield United and not Wolves. A victory makes the banner way more important.'

On 12 May 1984, Wolves lost their final game of a dreadful season, 4-0 away at Stoke. They finished the old First Division (its name before it became the Premier League in 1992) campaign bottom of the table with 29 points from 42 games, an incredible 21 points below Coventry City, the team who finished fourth from bottom, one place out of the relegation zone.

Nineteen years, 13 days, 22 hours and 20 minutes later, on 26 May 2003, Wolves lined up against Sheffield United in the First Division (which became known as the Championship in 2004) play-off final at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff, with the famous banner displaying that exact time frame, either side of a wolf head logo and a toaster symbol.

Striker Nathan Blake was familiar with the venue. A Cardiff-born Welsh international, it was his country's home ground, and he had been telling his team-mates that they would see Wolves fans everywhere as the coach made its way from the squad's training base at the Vale of Glamorgan resort 12 miles west of the city.

'As we came off the motorway and into town towards the stadium, it was just the red and white of Sheffield United fans,' he recalls. 'The lads were having a go at me, "Oi, Blakey, where's all the Wolves fans?" I couldn't work it out, but then as we came over the River Taff bridge and turned right into Westgate, it was just a sea of gold. It was wall-to-wall; even speaking about it now makes me tingle. You could feel it on the bus. Driving through those crowds, it was overwhelming. It just gives you that sense of a gladiator going into the arena with the crowd making you feel untouchable. We got into the stadium and the dressing room was buzzing.'

Midfielder Colin Cameron knew all about laying ghosts to rest in big games. He had scored at Celtic Park against the all-conquering Glasgow Rangers team to help Heart of Midlothian win the 1998 Scottish Cup, their first major trophy in 36 years.

‘When we got to the stadium, we went to have a look at the pitch,’ he says. ‘We walked up to the steps into the stadium, and I remember looking at my watch thinking, “We’re an hour and a half before kick-off and this place sounds like it’s half full.” It was a beautiful day; the sun was beating down. There were only about 5,000 Wolves fans in the stadium at that time, but the noise was phenomenal. I knew it would be some day, that we could enjoy ourselves and make the most of it if we played the way we knew we were capable of doing.

‘Then we went into the dressing room and by the time we went back out on to the pitch again to warm up the noise was unbelievable. And come the start of the game, the whole stadium was erupting as you had both sets of fans in. I remember my wife saying to me after the game that she was glad we hadn’t scored any more goals as she felt the stands moving with the fans bouncing around. We could feel the atmosphere of that one half of the stadium, with the gold colours as well, everything was right for us.’

‘I remember arriving at Cardiff Central station and it was just full of Wolves fans,’ recalls Toaster. ‘The sun was out and the day had that summer feel. I’d been to big matches before, but this felt different, it was really special. The adrenaline was next level. We got into the ground about half an hour before kick-off; we hadn’t even got a place to put the banner, we hadn’t really thought about it. It was just spine-tingling when you walked into the ground and saw the three tiers of Wolves fans. It was absolutely nuts.’

Twenty years on from the promotion season, Paul Ince looks out over the training pitches at Reading’s Bearwood Park from his office. Ince became the relegation-threatened club’s interim manager in February 2022 before being given the role permanently in May, after securing their Championship survival. ‘The fact I’m

sitting here now, you couldn't write it,' Ince says, reflecting how life pans out.

'Hang on a sec,' he continues, before getting to his feet, opening the door and shouting across the corridor. 'Al, come here!'

Ince took Alex Rae to Reading with him, as assistant manager, and now the pair are smiling as they recall the night they helped take Wolves to the play-off final, at the expense of their employers at the time of our interview. Rae had been the hero of the semi-final. The Scot's 81st-minute goal in the second leg at Reading secured a 3-1 aggregate victory. It was not the best goal of his career but, by some distance, it was the most memorable.

'I hadn't been on the pitch long and I did a little pirouette to celebrate the goal,' Rae explains. 'There's a little story about that celebration. About 45 minutes before kick-off, we all went out to warm up at the Madejski Stadium. The way we used to set up then with the fitness guy was that we'd begin near the touchline and run into the 18-yard box, spin around and run back to the touchline. We'd gone out early to get a feel for the place and there weren't many fans in at all. There was a guy sat by the Reading dugout, and he came running along the front of the stand. It was always Paul and me who took the warm-up, partly because we didn't want anyone to go too fast. As we're running back towards the touchline this guy is getting closer, shouting, "Ince, you're an asshole!"'

'There was no crowd in yet, so you could just hear him bellowing, "Incey you're shit, Incey you're crap!" and on it went,' adds Ince. 'I was just thinking, "For fuck's sake, will you shut up?"'

'I'm buckled over laughing, we were all battering Incey,' Rae continues. 'This fan gets to within about ten feet of us and he's still screaming at Incey, who is raging, I thought he was going to hit him. We then move into the penalty area to do the stretches, just to get away from him. Incey gets us all together and says, "If any of us score, make sure that fucker gets it, make sure he gets some abuse."'

'About two hours later I've scored the goal that secures it [the victory], and as I jump up to celebrate, I see the guy, and Incey

is straight there with me too. We're all pointing at him shouting, "You mug!" The guy is sat there with his head in his hands. It was great, a wee bit of karma, that little bit of retribution. This is the thing that gets me about football, it's OK for fans to give dog's abuse to individuals but as soon as you give a little back they are screaming blue murder. That was the highlight of the whole promotion run.'

For the final, Wolves based themselves at the Vale of Glamorgan resort for a couple of nights. The atmosphere was relaxed as a group of senior professionals and talented youngsters focused on the task in hand.

'We got down to Vale of Glamorgan and we had dinner, and everything was OK,' Ince says. 'Then that evening I got a phone call from [goalkeeper] Matt Murray. It must have been about half nine and he just said something like, "I'm a bit nervous, I've got the game on my mind." So, I rounded up a few boys, Blakey and a couple of others. All of a sudden there's about seven of us in Matt Murray's room, just talking. I was sitting there with a glass of wine, a couple of the lads had a little beer. Matty wouldn't touch anything, but it was just to show that we were calm and that we'd be OK, and we were up until just after midnight.'

'I remember Blakey and Incey being quite chilled,' Murray recalls. 'All I could think about was the game, though, I was so nervous.'

Murray was a product of the club's youth system. The 2002/03 season saw his debut in the first team. An injury to the senior keeper, Michael Oakes, in late August had opened the door. Murray never looked back. But come the eve of the final, he was starting to feel anxious. Blake was in a far more relaxed mood and had invited a couple of his old friends to the hotel, including the Welsh athletes Christian Malcolm and Darren Campbell.

Campbell, an Olympic sprinter who would go on to win 4x100m relay gold at the Athens Olympics the following year, found himself chatting to Murray.

‘He helped me, I’ll never forget the chat we had the night before,’ Murray adds. ‘I always remember him asking me, “Have you just arrived to this point where you are going to be plonked in a final tomorrow or have you been on a journey to get here?” He asked what age I had joined Wolves and explained that since then, all those days, months and years at training, all the games I had played at every level, that was why I was ready for this moment. I had the tools for this moment.’

Blake was delighted to see his mate offering an arm around the shoulder of the novice keeper ahead of the match, ‘If Darren can help someone younger than him he will, he’s been in a situation in a race where he’s dropped the baton and it’s felt like the whole country was against him. He knows what it’s like.’

‘Darren explained that he trains and trains and trains, but his Olympics comes once every four years, with a ten-second race and a 20-second race,’ Murray continues. ‘A false start or a poor start and the race is done. He had all that pressure, but he told me it was all the positives in his career that had got him to that moment, and it was exactly the same for me. When he put it like that, I had the best night’s sleep you could imagine. I felt so relaxed. And the match itself? It was the most in-check with my game I’d ever felt.’

‘Matty’s performance was ridiculous; it’s not often that you win 3-0 and dominate like that but the goalkeeper gets man of the match,’ explains Joleon Lescott. Another Wolves youth-team graduate, Lescott had established himself as first-choice centre-back following his debut in August 2000. ‘Sheffield United had a really long throw so every time the ball went out of play level with the 18-yard box it would just get thrown in flat and feel like a corner. But because Matty was so dominant we just got out of the way every time we heard “Keeper’s”. The throw just wasn’t working for them; they ended up having to throw it back into the midfield as Matty was dealing with everything so well.’

Wolves were an unstoppable force in the opening 45 minutes of the final. Mark Kennedy had given them a sixth-minute lead before

Blake made it two on 22 minutes. Kenny Miller's strike in the final minute of the half ended the match as a contest.

'At half-time, when we came off 3-0 up, I turned to Nayls [Lee Naylor] and said, "We're up,"' Lescott continues. "Calm down, man," he said, but I was just convinced we were up, and I don't usually get like that.'

'It's interesting hearing that,' says Kennedy. 'Because I actually came into the dressing room and said a prayer. I was thinking, "Please, please, don't let us mess this up." I was really worried about not seeing it through.'

A penalty save from Murray early in the second half stifled any hope Sheffield United had of getting back into the game.

'I was pleased about the penalty save because Matty was so nervous the night before,' Ince adds. 'Once Matty saved the penalty I couldn't see us getting beaten. Was I nervous for the fans? No, my history wasn't with the Wolves fans, as much as I love and adore them, I didn't know about the 20 years of hurt. I knew about the importance of going up and the hurt from the previous year when they should have gone up, but if you start thinking about what it means to the fans you've got too many things going on in your mind.'

'There are very few times as a manager where you get a warm glow in your belly,' says Dave Jones, the man who masterminded it all. 'I had that warm glow all week. I could tell by the way they were training. If we turned up on the day, I knew Sheffield United weren't good enough to beat us.'

'I got tickets for loads of my mates – one of them had been watching me for 20 years, playing for all my clubs and for Wales at the Millennium Stadium,' Blake recalls. 'His words were, "Nathan, I've never experienced an atmosphere like that before. When the fans were singing 'Hi Ho Wolverhampton', you could feel the stadium swaying, the stand was actually swaying." When he said that I wished I was a fan.'

Catherine Hickman was working in the club's media department at the time. As the match drew to a close, she needed to get pitchside

to film some post-match interviews for the club's in-house channel, Wolves TV. She was escorted out from the press box on the upper levels of the stadium, through the concourses and down to the tunnel area, but then the problems began.

'The stewards said I couldn't stand in the tunnel,' she explains. 'I told them I needed to reach Dave Jones at full time to sort the post-match reaction for Wolves TV, so a big discussion took place among the stewards and they came back to me and said, "We've found you a seat." They took me through the tunnel to the side of the pitch and turned right and pointed to the Sheffield United bench. The seat they found was a couple of rows back from the pitch on the bench for their backroom staff. The Sheffield United staff just looked at me as if to say, "Who the hell is she?" and it felt very awkward. When the full-time whistle went everybody on the Wolves bench was going crazy and I just had to sit on my hands. It was bizarre, everyone next to me was really disappointed and I just wanted to get out on to the pitch with Dave and the players. It felt like I had to wait ages to get out there but, in reality, it wasn't that long. Professionally, it's probably the greatest day that I've ever had.'

Captain Ince and the man he succeeded in the role, Paul Butler, lifted the trophy in front of tens of thousands of Wolves supporters including owner Sir Jack Hayward, three weeks before his 80th birthday, whose millions of pounds of investment had made it all possible.

'The best thing about that was seeing Sir Jack,' Butler recalls. 'We'd spoken about it a week before with Dave saying that if we did manage to get up, we wanted him to come down to the pitch and join us with the trophy. But he was adamant he wouldn't come down and do it. But then, it might have been Jez Moxey [Wolves chief executive] who persuaded him, and we saw him walking down after the final whistle. He stood on the pitch in front of masses and masses of Wolves fans, that was the best bit. That colour of gold and him stood there. We walked off thinking, "He's fulfilled

now. Whatever happens in his life, he's got his wish." Seeing him afterwards in the dressing room he couldn't say anything to us, he was just stood there. I don't think it had sunk in that we'd gone up on the day.'

'I remember going back into the changing room,' Ince continues. 'All the lads were jumping around going mad, screaming and hollering, and I'm just sitting on a massage bed getting my calves massaged, cool as anything, with a can of Stella in my hand. Matty came up to me and said, "Are you not excited?" I said, "Yeah, I am, Matty, but I'm fucked! I had half a bottle of wine last night, it's roasting hot, I'm 34 and my legs are knackered, I just want to sit here and watch you guys savour the moment." But deep down I was buzzing, and then we had the party afterwards.'

There was one unlikely visitor to the dressing room as the celebrations continued. Blades manager Neil Warnock had been sent off at half-time by referee Steve Bennett for his conduct towards the match officials, but now he found time to congratulate the victorious team.

'They were all cheering and I went in and said, "Listen lads, you deserved that, it's a great club, I hope you do well,"' Warnock reveals. 'The only thing I would say about that game is that Michael Brown missed a penalty early in the second half and if he had scored that, it would have been a different game, it would have been close. When he missed that, I just thought, "Oh, bloody hell, that's it."'

The celebrations at the Vale of Glamorgan resort went on long into the night. 'The club had already booked rooms for the players and families to go back there. It was a big show of faith from Sir Jack that they felt it was our time as well,' Cameron recalls. 'My daughter was there as well. I'd split up with her mum by then, and I was due to go to a caravan park in Cornwall for a week's holiday with my wife and daughter after the final, so they came to the afterparty. It was pretty special; Beverley Knight came to sing as she was a Wolves fan. Needless to say, my wife had to drive the next day.'

‘I remember when Manchester United lost to Everton in the FA Cup Final at Wembley in 1995,’ Ince adds. ‘You always have to organise a party, and I remember what it felt like turning up after losing the FA Cup Final. But that night at the Vale of Glamorgan, everyone was on fire, all the smiles on everyone’s faces. All the people that matter, the ground staff, the kit men, that was the most enjoyable thing for me; it was a collective. They are special, special moments.’

Lee Naylor, the final member of the youth-team trio with Lescott and Miller who played in the final, headed off in a different direction, ‘Joleon, Kenny and I decided to go back to Wolves for a night out. It was actually a bit quieter than I thought it would be, but there were still quite a few people out and they just couldn’t get enough of us. It was free drinks all night.’

An open-top bus tour was arranged in Wolverhampton, with one member of the team away from it all in the more sedate surroundings of Perranporth, a small seaside town on the north coast of Cornwall.

‘That’s my only regret, in a way, that I wasn’t on the open-top bus they had in Wolverhampton,’ Cameron concludes. ‘But I only got to go on holiday with my daughter once a year and that was precious to me. Maybe some Wolves fans won’t accept that, and I do regret it a wee bit as we had done the same thing at Hearts when we won the cup, and it’s a great feeling, but it’s all about priorities. At the caravan park people were oblivious to the fact that I’d played in the play-off final the day before, which I loved as we just relaxed and enjoyed it. It was from one extreme to the other; the euphoria of the day before to the peace and quiet of the caravan park.’

For the national media, Toaster’s banner had become the symbol of Wolves’ return to the big time. ‘I woke up the next morning in a bit of a daze, having had a fair few drinks on the train back from Cardiff,’ he remembers. ‘None of my mates went to work the next day and the whole game was replayed on Sky Sports so we all arranged to meet up and watch it. I nipped out beforehand to buy

some papers to read the reports and three or four of them had a photograph of the banner. I couldn't believe it; these weren't the local papers, it was the national press. Then on the Wednesday morning, a guy from the *Daily Mail* phoned me up wanting to do a story. It was all quite full-on.'

As intriguing as the time stamp referencing Wolves' time away from the top flight was the logo of a toaster that had been added to the end of the banner. The creator has used it to preserve his anonymity ever since.

'Do you remember *Question of Sport* when they had a mystery guest round and the theme tune to the montage was "There Are More Questions Than Answers" by Johnny Nash?' he explains. 'That was what I wanted to do, something that was recognisable but didn't mean anything and would just get people asking questions. That would be our signature. It was almost an afterthought as I'd bought too much material at the market, so I put the wolf head badge on one end and then the toaster logo on the other.

'Over time, it progressed to doing other banners for the club; I never saw that coming. When we were in the Premier League and weren't doing very well, I did another one that just said "Believe". I never set out for it with a grand plan, it was all a bit organic really. When we went down to League One there was a bit of a negative feel around the club. Wolves' marketing manager approached me about doing another banner to get some positivity among the fans, so I did one that said, "This is our love and it knows no division." The idea for that came from a place of having personally seen Wolves in all four divisions. Lots of fans had been to all 92 league grounds following Wolves, it's quite a unique history, so it referenced that as well as the recent relegations at the time. That banner went along the length of the Stan Cullis Stand.'

The play-off final day captured the imagination of all who were there; a city-centre stadium packed to the rafters with an atmosphere enhanced by the close proximity of the stands to the pitch. It was Wolves' first final of any description for 15 years,

since the 1988 Sherpa Van Trophy (now the EFL Trophy) win as a Fourth Division club.

‘I can’t believe how they fitted that stadium into the space, with the River Taff running right next to it,’ remembers Toaster. ‘It’s so close to the train station, too, it’s just a great location. That day was spectacular. We drank in the Borough Arms on the main drag in town before the match and I actually went back there a couple of years ago just for old times. I was on a train journey and had a wait at Cardiff station so I thought I’d tick a box and bring back some memories, so I nipped out of the station for a drink in there. There was nobody else inside apart from the bar staff, though. It was just me and a pint.’