

R O C C O   D E A N



SERGEANT  
WILKO'S

# DEFENDING CHAMPIONS



**LEEDS UNITED**  
AT THE DAWN OF MODERN FOOTBALL

# The **PITCH** Report

Love great sportswriting? So do we.

Every month, Pitch Publishing brings together the best of our world through our monthly newsletter — a space for readers, writers and fans to connect over the books, people and moments that make sport so captivating.

You'll find previews of new releases, extracts from our latest titles, behind-the-scenes interviews with authors and the occasional giveaway or competition thrown in for good measure.

We also dip into our back catalogue to unearth forgotten gems and celebrate timeless tales that shaped sporting culture.

Scan the **QR code** and join the growing Pitch Publishing reader community today.



SERGEANT  
WILKO'S  
**DEFENDING  
CHAMPIONS**

**LEEDS UNITED**  
AT THE DAWN OF MODERN FOOTBALL

R O C C O   D E A N



# Contents

When I were a lad . . . . .	7
Introduction: Sgt Wilko: The Godfather of Modern Leeds United . . . . .	9
Prologue: Becoming the Last Champions . . . . .	11
1. A Whole New Ball Game . . . . .	17
2. The Inaugural Champions League . . . . .	53
3. Au Revoir Cantona . . . . .	98
4. Up for the Cup . . . . .	124
5. Apathy, Anguish and Animosity . . . . .	153
6. The Kids are All Right . . . . .	177
Leeds United Roll Call 1992/93 . . . . .	204
Premier League Table 1992/93 . . . . .	205
Gate League . . . . .	206
Honours List 1992/93 . . . . .	207
Epilogue: The Aftermath: 1993–1996 . . . . .	208
Acknowledgements . . . . .	237

## A Whole New Ball Game

JON NEWSOME: ‘Nobody was looking over their shoulder at what had been before. It was an unbelievable feat to win the title but that was done and dusted, and we were all aware of how difficult playing at that level is. The focus was all about starting the new season on the front foot, and we did that at Wembley, which was such a great day to be a part of.

‘Wilkinson gave me the number 2 shirt when Mel Sterland got injured – probably because I was decent athletically and could deal with the ball – and, although I preferred to play centre-back, obviously I was just delighted to be playing, to be part of that title-winning team. Playing at Wembley for the first time and beating Liverpool to become a Wembley winner, it’s what you dream of as a kid, and I couldn’t wait for the real business of the Premier League to get under way.’

The summer of 1992 was the happiest of my life. Money was too tight to holiday abroad so I spent the six-week school holidays playing football in the garden; my idea of heaven. When I wasn’t playing football I would pass the

hours until the new season by writing imaginary match reports for the games to come, with team sheets that included players who were linked with Leeds or simply desired by me. The problem this summer was that any new signings would struggle to get into the Leeds team, and the two that were signed really had no chance at all.

Scott Sellars returned to the club from Blackburn Rovers, six years after being deemed surplus to requirements. Now 26 and without a top-flight appearance to his name, Sellars would act as backup to Gary Speed no matter how much he dazzled down the wing in my garden, while the other signing, David Rocastle, would be relying on the hands of time to break into the team ahead of Gordon Strachan, who was recovering well from back surgery at the grand old age of 35. A two-time champion with Arsenal, it had cost a club-record £2m fee to prise 'Rocky' away from his boyhood club, but even this giddy eight-year-old found it strange that Sgt Wilko had only strengthened the strongest area of the squad.

So, there would be no 'new-look' Leeds team this coming season, but they would be playing in a brand-new kit. I loved football kits – seeing the new kits of various teams was almost as exciting as the new season starting, and none were more dashing than Leeds's pristine white Admiral home kit; it oozed class. There was a new blue away kit and a yellow third kit too, and having more new kits than new signings was fine by me.

The story of the summer was undoubtedly the dawning of a new era in English football, as Sky television introduced 'a whole new ball game' in the form of the Premier League

and promised an exposure to football like we'd never seen before (at least those of us fortunate enough to have satellite TV, a technology that was still in its infancy). As one of the lucky Sky subscribers I would now be spoiled rotten with two live matches every week, as well as five separate weekly shows: *Sports Saturday*, *The Boot Room*, *Hold the Back Page*, *The Footballers' Football Show*, and my personal favourite, *Netbusters*. And if that wasn't enough, the BBC announced a regular Saturday lunchtime show called *Football Focus* to preview the weekend's action, along with the much-heralded return of *Match of the Day*, which would provide Saturday night highlights of the day's Premier League games. What a time to be alive!

Sky's repeated message of 'a whole new ball game' was conveniently reinforced by some minor tweaks – the referees wearing green instead of black, the introduction of substitute keepers to accompany the two outfield subs, and the extension of half-time breaks from 10 minutes to 15 – as well as one major rule change that would revolutionise the sport. The new backpass rule meant goalkeepers were unable to pick the ball up if played back to them by a defender, an innovation brought in to speed up the game and prevent time-wasting. Without the option of finding the safety of their keeper's gloves at any given moment, defenders would be far more reliant on their footballing ability, while goalkeepers would need skills in their feet far beyond punting drop-kicks in the general vicinity of the big man up front. Many pundits and pros scorned the new rule as needless and excessive; me, I was excited by the chaos it was expected to cause, and by the prospect

of more indirect free kicks in the box, which always captivated me.

The new era kicked off with the Charity Shield between Leeds and Liverpool at Wembley, two historic rivals who had contested the first Charity Shield played at the Twin Towers, back in 1974. Moving the fixture to the 'Home of Football' was the FA's attempt to boost its profile from a mere curtain-raiser to a showpiece event, though it never really worked, and today's Community Shield matches are pooh-poohed by the majority of fans. However, to an eight-year-old kid with a Liverpool-supporting brother, the 1992 Charity Shield was as big as the FA Cup Final, and what a corker it turned out to be.

**Saturday, 8 August 1992**

**Leeds United 4 Liverpool 3**

**Wembley (61,291)**

**FA Charity Shield**

It's the morning of the Charity Shield and after pestering our dad all week to get tickets, Gianni and I are aghast as he nonchalantly reveals he'd almost relented when driving past Elland Road on the M62 yesterday. Wembley is the mecca of football, so to see Leeds and Liverpool do battle there would have been mind-blowing, but I can have no complaints because the other day he came home and whipped out three little booklets, season tickets at Elland Road, bang on the halfway line and right behind manager Howard Wilkinson's dugout. 'The best seats in the house!' he exclaimed to his two stunned sons, me overjoyed by this magical news, wondering if I was dreaming, Gianni

underwhelmed and a bit miffed, still yearning to see his beloved Reds at Wembley. At least we can watch the full game on Sky Sports, live and exclusive, whatever that means.

Leading a team out at Wembley for the first time, Howard Wilkinson is dressed to the nines in a dashing beige suit and met by the sound of the Leeds fans chanting 'CHAMPIONS! CHAMPIONS! CHAMPIONS!' The Liverpool fans are in good voice too, and as the players are introduced to the dignitaries the whole stadium unites to bait the common enemy based between their cities, 'ARE YOU WATCHING, ARE YOU WATCHING, ARE YOU WATCHING MANCHESTER?' Sgt Wilko has named the same team that saw out the previous season, with Eric Cantona in Gordon Strachan's number 7 shirt and 21-year-old Jon Newsome covering for the injured Mel Sterland at right-back. The 6ft 2in centre-half is no like-for-like replacement, but having held his own in the pressure-cooker of last season's run-in there was never any doubt he would start the season at number 2. Leeds look resplendent in their beautiful new Admiral kits, and while the referee's outlandish green kit will take some getting used to, the little green scoreboard omnipresent in the top-left corner of the screen is such an obvious improvement it begs the question of how nobody thought of it before.

It's a helter-skelter battle from the off yet the commentators seem more bothered about the first backpass than the first goal, which duly comes from David Batty and is cleared into touch by Lukic. 'Is that making the game better?' quips co-commentator Andy Gray, who makes no

secret of his disdain for the new rule and lets out a sincere belly laugh when Martin Tyler suggests Lukic's passing may improve as the season wears on. Gray's rhetorical question looks silly as a wonderful game develops, although Liverpool's kamikaze 3-3-4 formation is probably the main reason for the non-stop entertainment. As well as being played with reckless abandon, the game is also played in a great spirit, which is perfectly demonstrated when Tony Dorigo plants his studs into Paul Stewart's chest and the referee only awards an indirect free kick inside the box, rather than a penalty. There's no furore, David Elleray's decision is final and there isn't a single complaint, perhaps helped by Elleray's headmasterly demeanour, honed from his day job as an actual headmaster.

Leeds survive the indirect free kick but are increasingly under the cosh, then take the lead against the run of play when Wallace beats the offside trap and squares for Cantona to clinically hammer home. I take as much delight in the goal as I did from Wallace's shin pad 'hilariously' popping out of his sock during his charge into the box. Gianni just shrugs, though his aloof pretence only fuels my gloating as I try to provoke a reaction, and within minutes he's off the sofa and celebrating a well-deserved equaliser by Ian Rush; not the reaction I was seeking. With half-time approaching Leeds regain the advantage through a deflected Tony Dorigo free kick, and this time I keep the gloating to a minimum, knowing that the Whites have ridden their luck. Nevertheless, Wilko's men head down the tunnel 2-1 to the good, serenaded by the same chant they took the pitch to, 'CHAMPIONS! CHAMPIONS! CHAMPIONS!'

In the second half Liverpool crank up the pressure, and by the 60th minute they're leading the corner-count 10-0, so it's pretty rich of me to bemoan the misfortune of a blocked shot presenting Dean Saunders with an open goal. He can't miss, and doesn't, squaring the match at 2-2. It's anyone's game now, the action is end-to-end, and in the 77th minute Cantona's knock-down rebounds back to the Frenchman off Rodney Wallace's legs; he thumps the ball past Grobbelaar before the keeper can flinch. United lead for the third time, but with chances on tap it's hard to envisage this being the end of the scoring, and it isn't. In the closing minutes a ball that appears to be rolling out for a rare Leeds corner bounces off the corner flag and back through the legs of the chasing Wallace, whose subsequent cross evades Grobbelaar and Cantona nods into the empty net to become only the fourth person to score a hat-trick in a Wembley final, and surely the first to do so from a hat-trick of assists by the same player. 'An extraordinary end to an extraordinary afternoon,' concludes Tyler, though his words prove uncharacteristically misguided.

The extraordinary end to an extraordinary afternoon actually comes two minutes later, when another Liverpool corner is drilled towards goal by Mark Wright and substitute Strachan, standing at the back post, fails to prevent the goal in comical fashion as the ball squirms from heel to heel three times before trickling over the line. There's still time for an equaliser too, but Wright heads Liverpool's 15th corner high over the bar and the game is done; Leeds have won the Charity Shield! Gianni can't hide his disappointment, and if I'm guilty of over-celebrating

then so too are the Leeds players. The delight on their faces is a joy to behold, though club captain Gordon Strachan must regret the decision to lift the shield together with the newly appointed team captain, Gary McAllister. The wee Scotsman can barely get fingertips on the silverware once his taller countryman hoists it above his head.

It's been a glorious start to the season, a 4-3 victory that vindicates the bookies' decision to install Leeds as favourites to retain their title. Manchester United will surely come on strong again, Blackburn Rovers and Aston Villa have splashed the cash, and Liverpool and Arsenal are always there or thereabouts, but I can't see past the last champions of the Football League becoming the first champions of the Premier League.

*'I thought the whole day reflected great credit on football in this country, and I'm pleased that I was able to take just about everything in. So many times I've heard people regret that their first official visit to Wembley had passed in a flash, persisting only as a faint blur in their memory.'*

Howard Wilkinson

**Saturday, 15 August 1992**

**Leeds United 2 Wimbledon 1**

**Elland Road (25,364)**

**Premier League – matchday 1 of 42**

The drive to Elland Road brings a queer juxtaposition of excitement slowing down time. The journey lasts little over an hour but seems never-ending until the glorious sight of the *Yorkshire Evening Post* tower confirms that we really

are ‘nearly there’. My dad, as always, is amazed that his lucky parking spot directly outside the Beeston Road off-licence is available, and I reap the benefit when he treats me to a Wispa and a carton of Ribena for the scenic walk down Beeston Hill. The stunning view of Elland Road will be even more compelling this season due to the ongoing construction of ‘The Magnificent New East Stand’, as the club continually calls it. Once complete, it will hold 17,000 people and boast the largest cantilever roof in Europe, but progress must have been very slow over the summer because on the opening day of the season it looks like they’ve only just begun the £5.6m project. Rather than building vertically from the ground up (like every other stand ever built) this is being built horizontally, from the south end of Lowfields Road to the north, and the two-tier structure hasn’t even reached the South Stand’s penalty box yet.

My dad’s claim that we have the best seats in the house certainly rings true for observing the new development; we’re bang on the halfway line at the front of the West Stand, from where you can most appreciate the enormity of the East Stand opposite. We aren’t on the very front row though, nor the second, because from those seats you can’t see anything without standing up to peer over Howard Wilkinson’s dugout. Our seats are classed as unobstructed, even though they’re so low down that the camber of the pitch obstructs our view of the opposite touchline; regardless, it’s thrilling to be so close to the grass, the substitutes, Sgt Wilko, and his more vocal assistant, Mick Hennigan.

After soaking up my new surroundings I peruse a matchday programme bursting with optimism. Gordon Strachan doesn't think there's any additional pressure on Leeds this season, David Batty can't imagine teams 'pulling out that much extra against Leeds just because we're champions', and Sgt Wilko believes there's not a player in the squad who isn't better than or as good as they were last season. So that bodes well. Wilkinson also raises a smirk from me when labelling today's opponents as 'party-poopers'. It's a fair assessment though. Wimbledon are the least glamorous and smallest club in the Premier League— they don't even have a home ground and instead borrow Crystal Palace's Selhurst Park – but they do have a new £1m striker in Dean Holdsworth, who scored 38 times in the Third Division for Brentford last season. They're also an established top-flight club of seven years despite only reaching the Football League 16 years ago, and four years ago they even won the FA Cup. Yep, the 'Crazy Gang' are certainly no slouches, and their unruly antics on and off the pitch ensures they will be an awkward opponent for anyone, even the Mighty Whites.

'Saturday, 15 August 1992, Leeds United against Wimbledon, here they come!' The announcer's routine introduction as the players sprint out of the tunnel gives me goosebumps every time, and as the ceremonial trumpets break into the hit song from *Rocky III*, 'Eye of the Tiger', fireworks are let off in an early taste of Premier League razzmatazz, befitting of champions. Less befitting are the rows of empty seats. Despite the lowered capacity of 31,000 fortress Elland Road is far from packed to the rafters, but

the Kop is full and salutes each of its heroes with a song of their own as they pass balls between each other while awaiting kick-off. My attention is fixated on the mascot warming up John Lukic with some simple shots into his midriff, and I wonder whether I'd be able to resist smashing one into the top corner if ever my dreams of becoming a mascot come true.

Once the game gets under way the atmosphere isn't as buoyant as I experienced in my previous trips to Elland Road, perhaps a touch of complacency is kicking in, but a crowd famed for lifting the players is lifted *by* the players when Lee Chapman opens the scoring in the 14th minute. The goal comes courtesy of the new backpass rule as Chapman, poacher supreme, nips in to nick the ball off a panicked defender, round the panicked goalkeeper, and convert into an empty net. The little cartoon characters on the scoreboard attached to the Kop roof jump and dance around but there's no such histrionics on the pitch, just a quick round of congratulatory handshakes before Chappy and his team-mates dash back for the restart.

Everyone loves a goal, but a good goalmouth scramble can be even more exhilarating, as is the case a few minutes later. Cantona's cross finds Chapman in his favourite spot six yards out, but his header is saved by Hans Segers, his volleyed rebound hits the post, McAllister's follow-up is blocked by a defender, and the skipper's second bite of the cherry flies inches wide. The Elland Road crowd responds with the loudest roar of the day but Wimbledon manage to cling to the ropes until half-time, and in the second half they make a much better fist of shackling United's

fearsome three-pronged attack of Chapman, Wallace and Cantona. McAllister almost puts daylight between the teams when he draws a fine save from Segers, and from the resulting corner Steve Hodge sweeps Chris Whyte's knock-down into the top corner, only for the offside flag to keep Wimbledon in the match. Then, in the 76th minute, Elland Road is stunned by an astonishing equaliser. From a position that feels merely yards in front of us, Wimbledon right-back Warren Barton hoists an up-and-under high into the air, over the back-peddalling Lukic and perfectly into the corner of the net. Talk about a bolt from the blue. Such a spectacular goal would usually bring polite applause from the home fans, but as nobody's quite sure if Barton meant it the Kop reverts straight to its default response to an opposition goal and delivers a rousing rendition of 'We are Leeds'. I'm impressed they can summon such enthusiasm.

Much has been made of Leeds's strength in depth this season, and with three of their seven international midfielders left out of the team, record signing David Rocastle isn't even on the bench today. England's Steve Hodge came on at half-time and Scotland's Gordon Strachan is summoned immediately after the equaliser. The wee man is clearly over his sciatica issues and injects the urgency demanded from the terraces, and with four minutes to go Leeds score a winning goal that is almost as unconventional as Wimbledon's equaliser. Those listening to Radio 5's *Sports Report* must think the reporter has mixed up his names when hearing that Chapman has thundered in a 20-yard volley from

Cantona's flick-on, but the rumours are true and what a great goal it was.

And what a great signing Chapman has been. Since dropping into the Second Division aged 30, Chappy has now notched 65 goals in 121 games for Leeds, making a mockery of the £450,000 fee Nottingham Forest accepted for him. He scored the goal that secured promotion, topped the scoring charts on his return to the First Division, fired Leeds to the title in his third season, and Strachan believes we'll see an even better version of him this season! Being a modest gentleman, Chapman would probably point to the fantastic service he receives when analysing his own contributions, and while it's true that the team is set up to enable a clinical number 9 to bag a boatload of goals, Chapman does far more than that. For starters, the majority of Leeds's attacks stem from his aerial prowess, and he's as brave as a lion, as hungry as a mule, and a fox in the box. My dad reckons he's the best number 9 Elland Road has seen since Mick Jones.

It may not have been the convincing scoreline we all expected, but Wilko's champions are up and running and 'Marching on Together' blares out of the stadium's PA system in celebration. So commences my dad's routine of dragging his two sons out of the ground by their collars, imitating a police officer chucking out naughty hoodlums, in the knowledge we would never agree to holding his hand. He won't drop the act all season.

*'The target of being better is to my mind the most sensible and meaningful target. With honest people it is also the most*

*demanding. If we achieve this, no one can ask for more. If others do better, good luck to them.'*

Howard Wilkinson

**Wednesday, 19 August 1992**

**Aston Villa 1 Leeds United 1**

**Villa Park (29,151)**

**Premier League – matchday 2 of 42**

I can't follow the game tonight, having been forced to attend a family event I'd have given my right arm to miss. My dad once told me he played out a full 90-minute match in his head when his dad took him to a concert against his will, so I spend the whole evening trying to do similar, though it's impossible to avoid conversation all night and the best I can muster is a series of imaginary highlights during the periods of tranquillity, when I don't have to answer the customary adult questions about whether I am enjoying school and which subjects I like the best.

Only while driving home do I find out that a late Gary Speed goal salvaged a 1-1 draw at Villa Park, and from all reports a point was the least United deserved. Thus, I refuse to pay any heed to the smart Alec on the radio who highlights the fact Leeds have needed late goals to bail them out in fixtures they'd won 5-1 and 4-1 last season. Winning at home and drawing away is the recipe for success, everyone knows that, so I am content with the result.

Howard Wilkinson, meanwhile, is practically delirious. The boss insists he's never seen his side play better than they did tonight, and affords Eric Cantona

some special, if somewhat peculiar, praise, ‘He did the job I asked him to do so well that I eventually had to take him off.’ The Radio Leeds pundits are surprised to hear such gushing comments – they thought it was a polished, not sparkling display – nevertheless, Wilko’s words have sucked me in and I can’t wait for the weekend, when the Mighty Whites are sure to bounce back to winning ways at Ayresome Park.

*‘More important than good results early doors are good performances. I was, therefore, very pleased with how we set about our work against Wimbledon and Aston Villa. I just hope we can deal with newcomers Middlesbrough as effectively.’*

Howard Wilkinson

**Saturday, 22 August 1992**

**Middlesbrough 4 Leeds United 1**

**Ayresome Park (18,649)**

**Premier League – matchday 3 of 42**

Following away games is tricky when you live on the fringes of the Radio Leeds bandwidth. It is possible to tune in to the 774AM frequency from the small village of Burnt Yates, but the reception is rarely clear, even with the aerial fully extended and the radio pointed in the optimal direction to catch the airwaves. There are no such problems today though. We’re spending the afternoon at Nanna and Grandad’s house in Leeds and the signal is crystal clear as the teams emerge to chants of ‘CHAMPIONS! CHAMPIONS! CHAMPIONS!’ from the travelling contingent.

This isn't my first time listening on the radio, but it is the first time I realise the words of the commentator only matter up until the point when a goal might be scored. Once his voice rises in excitement you simply tune in to the noise of the crowd, so when Wallace is sent clean through in the opening stages I already know he's missed by the mocking 'AAAH!' from the home fans, a split second before Radio Leeds commentator Peter Drury describes a finish dragged inches wide. And from the next attack I already know Boro have taken the lead before Drury describes how Paul Wilkinson escaped his marker to turn home a cross by ex-Leeds winger Tommy Wright. Amid the cheers I can still hear the Leeds fans chanting in the background, but they are well and truly silenced moments later when Wilkinson makes it 2-0 from another Wright cross. Not even ten minutes are on the clock and I am shell-shocked. There's plenty of time to turn things around, but the Leeds players are shell-shocked too and completely out of sorts. The closest they come to scoring is a weak Chapman header that draws more derisive 'aaahs' from the now buoyant home crowd, and at half-time I'm relieved to be only 2-0 down with a chance to regroup.

I can't imagine hurling teacups at the wall is really Howard Wilkinson's style, but whatever Sgt Wilko did or said in the changing room seems to be working when Cantona almost pulls a goal back straight from kick-off. Alas, moments later that dreaded roar goes up again and Boro are 3-0 to the good, and the fact that little Tommy Wright was able to head in from a corner turns my exasperation into anger. Middlesbrough should have been

no match for the mighty Leeds – instead Leeds have been no match for a rampant Boro, and when McAllister’s shot flies out of the stadium I know all hope is lost. The radio remains on but I’m no longer listening intently. Instead I seek solace from practising my putting, with an overturned plastic cup jammed under the armchair at the end of Grandad’s living room acting as the hole. It’s a wonder my putter isn’t hurled through the window when something as simple as a goalkeeper’s drop-kick breaches the Leeds defence again, and John Hendrie, another former Elland Road man, latches on to the ball and finishes past Lukic to make it 4-0 with half an hour still to go. My dad has heard enough and we say our goodbyes, driving home at the risk of (or in the hope of) losing Radio Leeds reception before the final whistle.

In the end we are subjected to the rest of the game without signal issues, and when Leeds do pull a goal back it consoles me far more than it should just because Cantona scored it, by angrily hammering the ball into the net with all the aggression I’d have liked to use on my putter. It also cheers me up to hear the Leeds fans still singing their hearts out amid this most embarrassing of defeats, brazenly milking their status as English champions right up until the final whistle. Once the players are put out of their misery we switch to Radio 5 on 909 AM for *Sports Report*, and the classified results, read as always by James Alexander Gordon, confirm that Manchester United couldn’t even beat newly promoted Ipswich Town at Old Trafford and have collected only one point from their first three games, further lifting my mood. Sgt Wilko does his

best to dampen my rising spirits in his post-match interview – ‘I wasn’t happy with anything we did. You name it, we didn’t do it’ – but by the time we arrive home I’m ready to follow my dad’s advice and file this game in the ‘freak results’ section.

*‘If anyone connected with Leeds United had any doubts about the challenge we were facing this season, their minds must be crystal clear now about what it means to be defending champions.’*

Howard Wilkinson

**Tuesday, 25 August 1992**

**Leeds United 5 Tottenham Hotspur 0**

**Elland Road (28,218)**

**Premier League – matchday 4 of 42**

Elland Road under the lights is special, even though two of the tallest floodlights in the world have been felled to make way for The Magnificent New East Stand. All four will be lost by the end of the season but the remaining marvels, supplemented by pathetic temporary floodlights that wouldn’t have reached their predecessors’ knees, still produce enough artificial light to get the luscious green pitch glistening and the all-white kit gleaming, and everyone inside Elland Road is expecting a statement display from their heroes tonight.

It would be fair to say Leeds are playing Tottenham Hotspur at an excellent time. They finished a miserable 15th last season and lost star players Gary Lineker and Paul Gascoigne in the summer, the England pair departing for pastures new in Japan and Italy respectively, and they are

yet to win a game this season. Even more disconcerting are their off-field shenanigans. Ex-boss and current chief executive Terry Venables has allegedly been meddling in team affairs and recently failed with an attempted takeover of the club from businessman Alan Sugar, which must be causing a toxic atmosphere in the boardroom. The atmosphere in the dressing room can't be much better, and the lilywhite lambs to the slaughter are facing a wounded animal at Elland Road. Sgt Wilko has picked an unchanged team, trusting and/or challenging his players to atone for their humiliation against Middlesbrough.

Spurs get a rare taste of that winning feeling at the coin toss and force Leeds to attack the Kop in the first half, though this is something that never seems to bother Wilko's team. If anything, attacking the more vociferous end of the ground aids their mission to bombard the opponent in the first 30 minutes. Tottenham survive the first 20 minutes unscathed, only to undo all their hard work when a poor backpass leads to a heavy touch from goalkeeper Erik Thorstvedt, which presents a clear sight of goal to Rodney Wallace. The chance is hardly gift-wrapped though. The net may be unguarded but the angle would even trouble England rugby union kicker Rob Andrew; still, Wallace finishes perfectly between the sticks and United have the early goal they craved.

The second goal arrives seven minutes later, originating from a breathtaking piece of improvisation when Gary Speed hooks a high looping ball over his head and into the danger zone while sat on his backside. Chapman wins the first header, Cantona the second, and although

Spurs defender Justin Edinburgh wins the third, his meek clearance becomes the perfect assist for Cantona to rifle home his fifth goal of the season with aplomb. Cue the Kop's iconic serenade, 'OOH AAH CANTONA, SAY OOH AHH CANTONA!' The second goal further demoralises the visitors, a team in turmoil who cannot cope with the vibrancy of the champions, and inside 30 minutes they find themselves three behind when another turnover of possession leads to a perfect Batty cross and an unstoppable Cantona header that finds the same square of netting he'd just volleyed into. 'OOH AAH CANTONA, SAY OOH AHH CANTONA!'

Leeds are on fire now, putting on the type of show that hasn't been seen at Elland Road since Don Revie's great side peaked 20 years earlier with a legendary 7-0 thrashing of Southampton. Gary McAllister comes close to making it 4-0 with a fantastic free kick that dips only an inch over the crossbar, then Speed comes closer still with an even more spectacular effort, drilling a first-time, 40-yard strike against the post after a mesmeric interchange of one-touch passing. At half-time Spurs must be wishing they could call it a night and get on the bus home, but when they concede another just a minute into the second half they must be worried about showing their faces in London at all once this trouncing is over. The goal is scored by Cantona again, volleying through a crowded penalty area to claim his second hat-trick in 17 days. What a player! 'OOH AAH CANTONA, SAY OOH AAH CANTONA!'

Cantona played an important role during Leeds's charge to the First Division title, but those contributions

were cameos compared to what he's producing now. The Frenchman is involved in everything and has the chance to bag his fourth of the night when Batty sends him clean through in the 66th minute. Instead, Eric puts side before self by teeing up his strike partner and English tutor, Lee Chapman, and raises his arms in celebration before Chappy has passed the ball into the empty net. *Tres bien!*

For the final 25 minutes a carnival atmosphere brings my first experience of a crowd cheering every pass. I'm also treated to Elland Road's first backpass violation, but McAllister's power drive can't find a way through the 11-man wall charging out from underneath the crossbar. In the end Tottenham are fortunate to escape with a 5-0 drubbing, and Wilko's decision to stick to the same team that received a similar beating at Middlesbrough has been emphatically vindicated. I am in awe of our brilliant team of champions, and as we applaud them off the pitch I glance to my left to see if my brother is revelling in the moment too. My dad and I had suspected, or hoped, that Gianni would be converted into a Leeds fan once subjected to them week-in, week-out, but there's been no hint of desertion so far. He spent this wonderful demolition job with his headphones on, listening to his Walkman for updates on the Liverpool score, and his face is as white as a Leeds shirt because news has reached him of a 90th-minute Chris Kiwomya goal that has denied the Reds all three points at Ipswich.

Back in the car, unanimous praise for the champions on the Radio Leeds phone-in is interrupted by an interview with a very chirpy Chappy. 'The dressing room banter is

a bit quick for Eric,' explains Chapman about his pupil's progress, 'but if you speak slowly you can get through to him. He seems to understand best when you're praising him!' Well, I'm sure Eric had a fluent understanding of English after this masterclass!

*'The lads were shocked after the Middlesbrough game and couldn't wait for the Tottenham game to come along. I thought it was as good a performance as when we won at Aston Villa and Sheffield Wednesday last season.'*

Chris Whyte

**Saturday, 29 August 1992**

**Leeds United 2 Liverpool 2**

**Elland Road (29,597)**

**Premier League – matchday 5 of 42**

Eric Cantona isn't the only foreign import taking the country by storm this season. *Gazzetta Football Italia*, a weekly show dedicated to Serie A, the greatest league in the world, has quickly become a staple of Saturday mornings. James Richardson reading the Italian sports papers over a cappuccino is a little too cultured for my taste, but his slapstick comedy routines with Gazza or another world superstar are hilarious and the goal round-ups seem to include another spectacular Giuseppe Signori bicycle kick every week. It's the perfect way to whet the appetite for an afternoon watching the champions strut their stuff at Elland Road.

We're back in Beeston just four days after the Tottenham massacre, with Liverpool the visitors in the

game that makes my brother's season ticket worthwhile. If not by the lure of Leeds, Gianni's loyalty to Liverpool is definitely being tested by Graeme Souness's lacklustre Anfield revolution. Last season was their worst league campaign since 1965 and they've only won once so far this time, so there's an air of confidence inside a lively Elland Road where, just like on Tuesday, United start with a spring in their step attacking the Kop.

One of my favourite Elland Road rituals is the chant of 'LEEDS, LEEDS, LEEDS', repeated at speed every time United win a corner. The same chant can also be heard when United win throw-ins near the corner flag, because David Batty can launch the ball deep into the box and create arguably more danger than Strachan's delicate near-post dinks. I love the way 'Batts' arches his back to create the required trajectory like a human catapult, and with just six minutes on the clock he hurls a trademark looping ball towards Chapman at the near post, who cleverly lofts the ball into the general direction of Gary McAllister, lurking on the edge of the box. As McAllister adjusts his feet it's clear he's about to let fly, and before anyone can get out of their seat in anticipation the Scot has unleashed a thunderous 25-yard volley that flies past David James into the top corner of the net. It's a sensational goal that would light up any highlights reel on *Gazzetta*, the best volley I've ever seen, and as the Leeds bench high-five each other and the rest of the ground basks in their common wonder, Gianni sits sullenly, unmoved by Macca's magic.

The atmosphere reaches boiling point but Liverpool hold firm under pressure, then deliver a sucker punch

just before half-time when Ronnie Whelan curls in an exquisite equaliser from the edge of the box. Now it's the Liverpool fans' turn to go potty, though Gianni, to his credit, manages to keep schtum. The deflation around the rest of the ground is compounded by the knowledge Leeds will be attacking the South Stand in the second half, during which things take another turn for the worse when Mark Walters's theatrical dive over the legs of Newsome is rewarded with a penalty. The Kopites are furious but 'WHO'S THE BASTARD IN THE GREEN?' doesn't quite have the same ring to it, and my finger of blame is pointing directly at David Batty, who could have cleared the danger instead of impersonating Eric Cantona's juggling skills deep inside his own box. Once the disappointment is swallowed, attention turns to the barrel-chested penalty taker, Jan Mølby, who receives a less polite description from the Kop before they begin frantically waving at him to try and put him off, accompanied by boos ringing out from around the ground. The noise intensifies during the big Dane's run-up, Lukic guesses right and gets a hand to the ball, but he can't stop it from nestling in the corner to the sound of 30,000 Yorkshire sighs, followed a split second later by cheers from the Scousers packed into two small pens of the Lowfields Road terracing.

Leeds haven't lost in the league at Elland Road since their epic 5-4 defeat to Liverpool 18 months earlier – a proud run of 25 games – and with time running out the record is in great peril. Souness's new £1m goalkeeper, David James, has pulled off four outstanding saves to deny Hodge, Cantona twice, and even Batty, but his heroics

are undone in the 87th minute when he's lured out of his goal by one of those dainty Strachan corners floated to the near post. Chris Whyte wins the flick-on before James can get a fist to the ball, and with the keeper in no man's land Lee Chapman does what he does best: bundling the ball into the net from inside the six-yard box. The relief is palpable and the noise cacophonous, and seconds later the ball is back in the Liverpool penalty area and then back in the net! Chapman has scored what appears to be a dramatic winner, but as he wheels away in celebration the referee's whistle stifles the pandemonium inside Elland Road. He's spotted a push and the goal won't stand. A wave of disappointment sweeps around the ground, and the crowd regain their composure and retake their seats while simultaneously cursing the bloody ref who is assumed to have cheated United out of all three points.

What a thrilling moment it almost was, a goal that would have lifted the champions up to second place in the early Premier League table. It wasn't to be, and I wonder whether any percentage of my dad is relieved for Gianni that the goal was ruled out. Judging by the look on his face there are no mixed emotions. He knows how special victories over Liverpool are and he's even more gutted than me.

*'I think it speaks a lot for our character. We've come back three times in the last few minutes and it's all credit to the lads, a pointer to our work rate and the will to win.'*

Gary Speed

**Tuesday, 1 September 1992**

**Oldham Athletic 2 Leeds United 2**

**Boundary Park (13,848)**

**Premier League – matchday 6 of 42**

United have recorded only one victory in 64 years at Boundary Park but that means nothing to me. It's nothing more than ancient history, and having conceded three goals in the opening 23 minutes against Manchester City at the weekend, little old Oldham must be quaking in their boots at the prospect of facing the champions' free-scoring three-pronged attack. With my 8pm bedtime relaxed during the school holidays I'm able to listen to the game on the wireless in my bedroom, once I've pinpointed the optimum angle for the aerial of course. The expected avalanche of goals fails to materialise during a frustrating first half, but the home side's stubborn resistance is quashed in the second half by Eric Cantona, whose brace takes him to nine goals in seven games this season and puts the Mighty Whites on course for a comfortable away win.

Swooping to sign Cantona for £900,000 is fast becoming one of the most inspired gambles the club has ever made, and to think, if it wasn't for the weather he could have been strutting his stuff 30 miles down the M1. Estranged from his French club Nîmes, Cantona arrived in England for a trial at Sheffield Wednesday, but a cold snap meant the trial took place indoors and manager Trevor Francis refused to commit to a deal until seeing him play on grass. Who knows what might have transpired but for Francis's anal hesitance (especially considering Wednesday finished just seven points behind the champions). When Francis finally

saw him on grass it was the hallowed turf of Wembley, with Cantona lining up for France against England in the week after his Leeds debut, which, ironically, came in the most recent of United's long list of dismal visits to Oldham since 1928.

Cantona's debut was also the last game before I became a Leeds fan, but rather than spare me from experiencing the Boundary Park blues, the football gods concoct a fiendish plan. In the 86th minute Ian Olney wipes out the tranquillity of a two-goal lead, and the remainder of the match becomes a blur of noise. The clamour of the crowd, the apprehension in the commentator's voice, the crackling on the airwaves; it all combines to amplify my anxiety, and the pressure increases as time ticks on, and on, and on, until deep into injury time when 'one last Oldham corner' falls to Olney, who drills the ball into the net like a dagger through my heart. Norman Hunter, expert summariser on Radio Leeds, blames the referee for an inordinate amount of stoppage time, then lambasts him for blowing up within five seconds of the restart, but the brunt of my anger is aimed at Olney. I'll never forgive him for this.

In the morning I still feel sick to the stomach, especially when checking the Premier League table on teletext. Leeds would have been third if they'd won last night, and if Chappy's winner against Liverpool hadn't been disallowed they'd be top! Instead, the champions have dropped to eighth, but nobody has scored more goals and they've only lost once, with another trophy already added to the cabinet as well. So it's not all doom and gloom, and the pain of Olney's last-gasp equaliser will be long forgotten if United

bring three points back over the Pennines from their next fixture – the Premier League's first Battle of the Roses.

*'It's been a frenzied, some might say madcap, start to the Premier League. Instead of preparing carefully and diligently we seem to have been dashing up and down motorways, living out of suitcases and staring at hotel walls.'*

Howard Wilkinson

**Sunday, 6 September 1992**

**Manchester United 2 Leeds United 0**

**Old Trafford (31,296)**

**Premier League – matchday 7 of 42**

An Easter collapse cost them their first title in 25 years, and to my delight Manchester United's misery has continued this season. They conceded the first goal of the Premier League era, went on to lose their opening two games, and after a dramatic 88th-minute goal secured their first Premier League win, goalscorer Dion Dublin, their only summer acquisition, fractured his leg in the next game. Tough break. Fergie's lot are on the road to recovery now, mind. Three successive victories without conceding a goal has catapulted them into mid-table, side by side with the champions, though their growing injury list has convinced me this is as good a time as any for the visit to Old Trafford.

Today is Leeds's first appearance on *Super Sunday*, which for reasons unknown dictates a 4pm kick-off time rather than the traditional 3pm. I'm certainly not complaining though. I love Sky's 'whole new ball game' and watch every minute of the excessive two-hour build-

up whoever is playing, without any consideration for the Serie A match that is broadcast in parallel live on Channel 4. All in all, the Sky coverage is a five-hour marathon, and there's also a weekly phone-in afterwards, though by that point my thirst for football will finally be quenched and *The Simpsons* will see out the weekend instead.

Another big change this season is the implementation of recommendations from the Taylor Report, which was published in the aftermath of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster and called for compulsory all-seater stadia in the top flight by 1994. As a result, building work is ongoing at grounds up and down the country, with clubs replacing crumbling old terraces with new all-seater stands, handily funded by the £304m Sky TV deal. Old Trafford's famous Stretford End is one such unsightly building site and, like at Elland Road, progress has been very slow. Unlike at Elland Road, this new stand is being built from the ground up and they've barely reached row C as summer turns to autumn. Despite the reduced capacity the ground isn't sold out; nevertheless, the atmosphere still sounds electric on TV, befitting of this clash of the titanic Uniteds: challengers vs champions, Lancashire vs Yorkshire, red vs white, Manchester vs Leeds.

The Manchester United Armchair Supporters' Club must feel a pang of guilt when Martin Tyler reveals Brian McClair is missing his sister's wedding to be here today, while the home fans who have bothered to turn up honour Eric Cantona with the first chant of the match, 'FUCK OFF CANTONA, SAY FUCK OFF CANTONA!' The Frenchman wastes a glorious early chance to silence the Old

Trafford boo-boys, and another opportunity goes begging after Wallace steals possession in a dangerous area. This proves to be a pivotal moment. Only 16 minutes are on the clock and Leeds have been the better side, but Wallace injured himself in the challenge and can't continue, forcing Howard Wilkinson (queerly holding the number boards up himself) into an early substitution. Fresh from receiving his first England call-up, this is a desperately cruel blow for 'Hot Rod', and the heartless home fans taunt the 22-year-old as he hobbles down the tunnel, chanting, 'YOU'LL NEVER PLAY FOR ENGLAND!'

Gordon Strachan is more than an able replacement for Wallace, but a change of formation to 4-4-2 is not ideal when the midfield trio of Batty, McAllister and Speed have been so dominant against Paul Ince and his boss's son, Darren Ferguson. Speed doesn't seem to get the memo about the switch to the left wing and continues popping up everywhere. He's having a blinder, and when his shot is blocked in the box by the raised hand of Steve Bruce I'm off the sofa and screaming for a penalty. Alas, the referee waves 'play on' and co-commentator Andy Gray is as perplexed as me at the decision. If they're not giving penalties for that, Manchester United might not concede another penalty at Old Trafford this century! The lucky escape jolts the home team into life, and their first period of pressure leads to the first goal. Teenage winger Ryan Giggs breaks free down the right and curls a sumptuous cross with the outside of his stronger left foot, beyond the reach of Lukic for his opposite winger Andrei Kanchelskis to nod in at the far post. Ferguson's peculiar tactic of switching his wingers to

their unnatural sides had looked silly up to this point, but now it looks like a masterstroke, and it rubs salt into the wounds when we discover through the action replays that Mark Hughes was three yards offside in the build-up and the goal shouldn't have counted.

Coulda, woulda, shoulda is a rapidly developing theme this afternoon, and no sooner has Peter Schmeichel's outstretched boot denied Strachan an equaliser than the builders in the Stretford End suck in a second goal. This time Leeds only have themselves to blame, firstly for releasing Denis Irwin on a free transfer six years ago. The Irishman's out-swinging corner deceives his former team-mate in the Leeds goal, and when the ball ricochets off the hapless Fairclough, Bruce's only challenge in the middle of the six-yard box comes from his team-mate McClair, who can't stop his captain turning the ball into the empty net. 'YOU'LL NEVER BE THE CHAMPIONS' sing the 700 relentless away fans, but a match I had been so excited and confident about has turned into an unmitigated disaster.

The second half begins like the first, with Cantona wasting a great opportunity, and his next effort brings his almost weekly attempt at scoring a spectacular bicycle kick. This one is well struck and well directed, but not well enough to beat Schmeichel. The visitors remain in the ascendancy but are running out of ideas, and it doesn't help their cause when Speed is moved to centre-back to fill in for the injured Newsome. Speed's quest to cover every blade of grass is now assured, but marking Mark Hughes is a tough assignment even for the most experienced Premier League defenders, so it's little surprise that a winger who

only turns 23 on Tuesday struggles to keep him at bay. In the space of ten minutes 'Sparky' misses the target with a trademark volley, sees another effort hit the post then forces a great save from Lukic, and when Speed's slip sends Hughes clean through in the closing stages, Lukic is equal to the task again.

Lukic's heroics are too little too late. His second-half performance has prevented an embarrassing result but his errors in the first half cost Leeds the match, and at the final whistle I'm hugely frustrated that everything that could go wrong has gone wrong for my beloved Whites. And to complete my misery, the summer holidays are over and it's back to school tomorrow.

*'The examination of a top-class football team like Leeds comes in very public circumstances: a noisy crowd, passionate fans, and the inevitable presence of television cameras. As such, the players feel as hurt and disappointed as any supporter. Fortunately, during the past three years and ten months we've not had too many setbacks to recover from, and when the time to show our resilience has arrived we have always produced the necessary tenacity and will to win.'*

Howard Wilkinson

**Sunday, 13 September 1992**

**Leeds United 1 Aston Villa 1**

**Elland Road (27,817)**

**Premier League – matchday 8 of 42**

Less than four weeks after rescuing a point at Villa Park, Leeds welcome Aston Villa to a bright and breezy Elland

Road for the champions' first *Super Sunday* on home soil. 'Big Ron' Atkinson is embarking upon his second season in charge of Villa, and he's completely rebuilt the team with the money raised by selling David Platt to Bari for a British record £5.5m fee. His latest addition, Dean Saunders, is considered to be the final piece of the jigsaw, and although he further strengthens an opponent Wilko had already earmarked as his 'ones to watch' this season, I'm pleased the £2.3m transfer from Liverpool was completed just in time to witness Saunders's debut today.

The lighter Sunday traffic brings an earlier arrival at the ground, so I pass the time until kick-off by reading the matchday programme, although 'reading' is doing a lot of heavy lifting here. More accurately, I read the headlines and look at the pictures, ruthlessly flicking the pages in my haste to reach the back page which contains all the facts and figures from the season. Certain small entries do prick my interest, like the regular 'Hooligan Hotline' column, advertising a phone number to call 'if you hear of any plans for organised hooliganism inside or outside grounds'. I smirk to myself, wondering whether they've ever received anything other than a prank call. I pay more serious attention to an article that proudly proclaims the new Admiral home kit is 'selling like hotcakes'. The first batch of 1,000 has sold out in two days (at £29.99 a pop!), making it the best-selling sportswear item on the market, apparently. Sadly, there are still six weeks until my birthday, when I hope to finally get my hands on one.

The back page of the programme lists the expected starting line-up, and it's no surprise that Wilkinson has

been forced into his first change of the season following Rod Wallace's torn hamstring at Old Trafford. Gordon Strachan is correctly listed as Wallace's replacement in the side, but the programme fails to predict Wilko's second change of the season, with Scott Sellars making his second Leeds debut in place of Tony Dorigo at left-back. Sellars was out of contract when leaving newly promoted Blackburn for Leeds, so the transfer fee was left in the hands of a tribunal and just last week the fee was set at a hefty £950,000. Leeds had inserted a 25 per cent sell-on clause when Sellars left for Blackburn, so the amount owing was reduced to a more palatable £715,000; still, it feels an inflated fee for a Second Division player.

Sellars isn't the only debutant today of course, and Dean Saunders is booed with every touch for no other reason than being under the spotlight, as far as I'm aware. You can't boo an off-the-ball run though, and when Saunders's clever movement drags the Leeds defence out of shape, Garry Parker latches on to Ray Houghton's through ball and opens the scoring with a clinical finish. Leeds respond well and their best efforts come from three volleys, each more acrobatic than the last. Chapman's powerful drive goes straight down the throat of goalkeeper Nigel Spink, McAllister's flying effort sails over, and Cantona's bicycle kick is well held again by Spink. At half-time Leeds trail, yet I remain optimistic and strangely comforted by the assumption that the rest of the country has been well entertained by an action-packed half.

Less comforting is the fact I'm sitting in the front row directly behind the dugout during a televised match, and

as the second half wears on I begin to dread the first Leeds substitution. Even without substitutions I'm incredibly self-conscious, knowing that my chubby cheeks and bushy black hair (leading to playground nicknames such as 'Big Wig' and 'Mop Head') will be beamed around the country every time the camera pans to Howard Wilkinson. You'd never get me standing up and excitedly waving my arms above my head like other kids do, and yet, against my introverted tendencies, when Leeds do make their first substitution I allow myself to meekly wave, with my hand no higher than chest height and probably not even visible to the camera. I breathe a sigh of relief when Steve Hodge runs on to the pitch, happy the ordeal is over and proud of myself for facing my fears.

Hodge is a goalscoring midfielder and was Wilko's highest-profile signing when joining for £900,000 last summer, having made over 300 top-flight appearances and represented England at two World Cups, famously setting up Maradona's 'Hand of God' goal at Mexico 86. Now approaching his 30th birthday, Hodge played a vital role in Leeds's title win despite never becoming a regular, netting seven goals in his 23 league appearances, and he plays a vital role today by calmly slotting home an 86th minute equaliser at the Kop end. It's lovely to see the ball nestled deep in the baggy Elland Road nets, right in the corner, but I'm less enamoured by the equaliser than most in the ground. I wanted a win, and the 1-1 draw means United are now four games without one.

Back home, I rush to the TV and excitedly rewind the VCR that had been set to record the match. I'm not

bothered about rewatching the game for any tactical reason, I simply flick through to see if I can spot myself in the crowd at any point. I'm part relieved and part disappointed that I only appear on screen once, and feel stupid for failing to realise I was wearing a bright orange coat that makes me stand out a mile. I wonder whether the coat might distract people from my stupid hair, then decide it would more likely draw attention to it, and worst of all my 15 seconds of fame happened while scoffing a bag of Hula Hoops. At least my pathetic attempt of a wave wasn't captured.

*'The determination to put one over Leeds United has become even more marked since we were crowned the best team in England. That statement has been vividly supported in our opening games this season and the mantle of being champions is one we will have to grow into.'*

Howard Wilkinson