



**GREATEST  
GAMES**

# **SHEFFIELD UNITED**

**BLADES' FIFTY  
FINEST MATCHES**



**MATT ANSON**

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**SHEFFIELD**  
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# Introduction

This book began as another idea, namely, to choose the best game of each season of United's history, but Paul at Pitch Publishing didn't think the idea would work. In fairness, he was right. How do you pick a highlight from 1980/81 or 2010/11, for instance?

Paul pointed me in the direction of the 'Greatest Games' series, which is a much better format than the one I had in mind, so then it was a matter of selecting the games. One difficulty was that the heyday of both Sheffield clubs was before the Second World War. They won 12 major trophies between them before 1939, one since (and that was just a League Cup), and United's golden period was at the turn of the last century, and this was also part of a 41-year unbroken spell in the top flight. It would be wrong not to include the trophy wins, and some key matches from that era, and I know I found a lot of the stories fascinating. I hope I conveyed them well here, and that readers find the balance right between nostalgia and history.

League championships and FA Cups apart, success is relative. To help me pick the more recent games, I posted on a large Blades social media group to list their favourites and Darlington away in the Fourth Division was a consistent choice with Blades of a certain age. Many neutrals may also be surprised at the inclusion of a defeat, against Hull in the 2014 FA Cup semi, but, again, context is everything and the goals and performance in that game meant so much to Blades fans.

I was also pleased that the 6-3 win against Orient in 1984 kept coming up on people's lists, as I had procrastinated on its inclusion in case it was just a case of self-indulgence, as I was fortunate enough that this was my first Blades match.

Probably the biggest internal debate I had was around the 2002/03 season, which is represented by four games here, when

## Sheffield United Greatest Games

no other season had more than two games included. It was an incredible season, but that is tempered by the fact that it finished empty-handed, but which game of the four included here could I leave out?

Of course, being a book about Sheffield United, our neighbours from South Barnsley (sorry, Sheffield 6) loom large, and nine of the games are against our city rivals. I questioned whether to include each one, not least to avoid any accusation of the Blades support being 'obsessed' by them. But both Sheffield clubs ARE defined by the other, like it or not. Your city rivals are your yardstick for success, and the balance of power in Sheffield has shifted so many times, that it is impossible not to measure yourself against the other team. Any Wednesdayite (or Blade for that matter) who says they do not is not being honest with you or themselves, and deep down we're all thankful that we are a two-club city and not, say, Leeds, as being able to put one over our friends, colleagues and family who support the other lot adds that bit more spice to matchdays.

I have to say the process of writing this book has been hugely enjoyable, if at times a bit of a slog (the completist in me just had to know who managed Bradford PA in 1946, that one-line gap in the book would have haunted me forever), and I hope it is both informative as well as bringing back great memories, and reminds us all why we are Blades in the first place.

Matt Anson, March 2019  
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## v The Wednesday 3-2

Friendly Match  
12 January 1891  
Bramall Lane  
Attendance: 14,000

<b>SHEFFIELD UNITED</b>	<b>THE WEDNESDAY</b>
Howlett	Smith
Whitham	Thompson
Lilley	Brayshaw
Cross	Brandon, H.
Howell	Ingram
Groves	Cawley
Shaw	Winterbottom
Bridgewater	Mumford
Robertson	Brandon, R.
Watson	Woolhouse
Calder	Hodder
Secretary: J.B. Wolstenholm	Club Captain: Haydn Morley

If a Sheffielder responds to a question of where they are from, more often than not the next question will be ‘United or Wednesday?’ This happens to people from the city wherever they travel in the world. It is hard to imagine a time in Sheffield without the two clubs, but people have lived in or around the area for 12 millennia, and the existence of the two clubs is a small fraction of this time. But football is part of the city’s DNA now, arguably these days more synonymous with Sheffield than steel or cutlery.

The city that is the home of the world’s oldest club (1857) also boasts a number of other football firsts: the first codified rules of football (1858); the first game between two clubs (1860) which is also the oldest local derby (Sheffield against Hallam); the first cup competition, the Youdan Cup (1867); the first floodlit game (1878), which was played at Bramall Lane.

In 1867, The Wednesday Cricket Club decided to form a football offshoot, playing at Bramall Lane. After moving to professional status, the club decided they would be unable to continue paying their landlords and would need to develop their own ground, eventually moving just down the road to Olive Grove in 1887.

The loss of rental income from Wednesday led to discussions by the Bramall Lane committee, led by Charles Clegg, of forming their

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own club. On 16 March 1889, the stadium held the FA Cup semi-final between 'The Invincibles', Preston, and West Brom, attracting a huge crowd of 22,688. This was the catalyst that Clegg needed and six days later the club was founded.

By August they were playing their first official game, a 4-1 reversal at Notts Rangers with a side containing a mixture of local players and Scottish professionals. Although United's first signings would prove inadequate, two of them would have an impact on the club's early history. Charlie Howlett was their first goalkeeper, and he continued to play while United rose to the top flight of the Football League, while forward W. Robertson, one of the Scottish professionals, had the unique combined honour of scoring United's first-ever goal, first hat-trick, and first FA Cup goal.

As United found their feet, Wednesday had become members of the Football Alliance, winning it at the first attempt and also reaching the FA Cup Final, losing 6-1 to Blackburn Rovers in 1890.

United, perhaps understandably given that Wednesday were playing a higher quality of opposition, were charging half the price for tickets compared to Wednesday, but the older club saw this as an attempt to undercut them. United, meanwhile, felt that Wednesday were using more than their fair share of free Saturdays. They had also attempted to sign four Wednesday players in the summer of 1890, including future United trainer George Waller, only thwarted by incorrect paperwork! This was a fight for the supremacy of the city, perhaps even for survival, and the Sheffield public were desperate to see a meeting of the two clubs. Two 'friendly' games were arranged for the 1890/91 season, the first at Olive Grove in December, with the reverse fixture the following month.

After 20 minutes of the Olive Grove fixture, Robertson added to his already impressive list of 'firsts' by scoring the first-ever goal in a Sheffield derby. Despite this opener, Wednesday scored two second-half goals in fading light to win the game, although the local press felt that United deserved to draw the game.

This had taken place in what was known locally as the Calf, Cow and Bull weeks, when local workers allowed themselves no time off work to save up for Christmas, but the game was so eagerly anticipated that, even with kick-off at 2.30pm on a Monday, it proved too strong to resist for 10,000 supporters, undeterred



## Sheffield United 3 The Wednesday 2

by some really miserable weather. United had undergone squad strengthening during the year, having joined the Midland League, and only Robertson and Howlett had survived from the first-ever game. Perhaps the most notable of the signings were midfielder Rab Howell and defender Mick Whitham, both signed from Rotherham Swifts, and full-back Harry Lilley from Staveley.

Lilley and Whitham would become, in 1892, the first United players to be selected for England. Howell came from a local gypsy family, and he would feature for United for the next eight years, winning two England caps.

With first blood going to Wednesday at Olive Grove, and neither team making any progress in their leagues, the return fixture was the main attraction for Sheffield football fans in the second half of the season. Would Wednesday do the double, or would United gain revenge and make it 'honours even'?

Such was the interest that house windows and telegraph poles surrounding Bramall Lane were utilised by those unable to gain entry to the packed ground. The reported attendance was 14,000, which was to this point the largest crowd to attend a Sheffield club game.

An even first half finished goalless, but wasn't without incident, including the inevitable dog on the pitch and a mini pitch invasion from supporters at the Shoreham Street end. Wednesday, however, took the lead after 61 minutes. Ingram, who had swapped positions with Mumford at half-time, scored the goal with a fast, low shot. Three minutes later, it was 2-0 to the team in blue and white, Cawley's free kick put home by Bob Brandon. The double, and Sheffield supremacy, was in Wednesday's hands.

The game opened up, and another goal came just six minutes later. United won a corner, which George Groves played to Arthur Watson, who shot quickly to pull a goal back. This electrified United, who began to cause Wednesday problems with attack after attack until a high shot by Howell beat Smith in the Wednesday goal to level the scores. Both teams dug deep into their reserves of stamina.

With five minutes remaining, United won the ball in midfield and Bridgewater played a through-ball to Calder, who hit the ball sweetly to put United in the lead for the first time. Wednesday defenders appealed for an offside decision. It was

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close, according to contemporary accounts, but the goal was awarded by the officials.

‘This led,’ wrote the *Sheffield Independent*, ‘to a throwing up of hats and a very peculiar sort of joyful exclamation – I am unable to spell the sound.’

United held on, and, as the full-time whistle sounded, the spectators swarmed on to the pitch to cheer off both teams. Over the two games, honours were even, but United had, not for the last time, come back from two goals behind in a derby game.

United applied to join the Football Alliance the following season but were rejected on the grounds that they didn’t want multiple teams from the same city. This argument was weak considering that they already had both Birmingham St George’s and Small Heath in the league, and at the same time as rejecting United, had agreed to admit Ardwick (the future Manchester City) – despite Newton Heath (the future Manchester United) already being members.

United felt that Wednesday had a hand in the rejection, although they firmly denied this, but bad feeling between the two teams continued to grow. The next season, they faced one another again in ‘friendly’ games, United triumphed 5-0 at Bramall Lane but lost 4-1 at Olive Grove, and there were reports of fighting amongst supporters. By 1893, the two teams were facing each in league football at last, in the First Division of the Football League. The first game at Bramall Lane ended in a 1-1 draw in front of, to that point, a Sheffield record 27,000 crowd, while United won 2-1 at Olive Grove.

Football has changed hugely since those early days, but, still, no fixture is so eagerly anticipated, or dreaded, by Sheffield football fans as when the two teams face one another. If the teams are in the same division, they will always be the first dates looked for when the fixture list is published. In this aspect, nothing has changed in over a century.