

PAUL McPARLAN



THE FORGOTTEN CHAMPIONS

WAS 1986/87 EVERTON'S LAST EVER TITLE?

**THE
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CHAMPIONS**
1986/87: EVERTON'S LAST TITLE

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Introduction

*I couldn't handle the thought of Liverpool
parading the FA Cup and league
championship that we'd lost.'*

Saturday, 10 May 1986 – the darkest day

When the final whistle blew to signal the end of the 1986 FA Cup Final, my friends and I were already walking along Wembley Way, our visages contorted with a mixture of rage and despondency that was perhaps best conveyed by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch in his masterpiece of the human condition *The Scream* almost 100 years earlier. If Munch had been at Wembley that day, he would have undoubtedly empathised with our plight.

Scurrying down the road towards Wembley Central station, the crescendo of joyous celebratory singing and cheering erupting from the stadium seemed to grow louder and louder the further we travelled, twisting another vicious knife into our wounds of despair. It reminded me of a scenario whereby the party of the year was happening in your next-door neighbour's house and your name was conspicuously absent from the guest list.

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As we boarded the train, a hideous ramshackle Home Counties commuter vehicle that appeared to have been dusted down from the nearest railway museum, we were still only halfway through the DAWA (Denial, Anger, Withdrawal, Acceptance) process of coming to terms with our loss. How could it be that Everton, despite leading 1-0, contrived to concede three goals in the final 30 minutes to Liverpool, not only handing them the FA Cup but the double as well? It should have been us! Only ten days earlier, on 30 April, needing just three wins from our final three games to seal the championship, we somehow managed to lose 1-0 to a struggling Oxford United side to blow top spot, handing it to the side across Stanley Park.

To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, 'To lose one trophy may be regarded as a misfortune, to lose both looks like carelessness.'

The journey back to Lime Street station seemed interminable, as though we were being transported by the ferryman Charon to the underworld without a coin in our mouths. On arrival in Liverpool we pounced on the nearest taxi, instructing the driver not to mention football if he wanted to get paid. I said goodbye to my friends. We knew. We just knew. It was a well-rehearsed routine from the previous decade of non-stop Liverpool success. Lock the door, cancel the papers, put the radio in the shed and unplug the television. To avoid awkward calls from any of our gloating red-loving friends, the phone would remain unanswered all day.

A victory parade was scheduled to take place in Liverpool city centre the following day to celebrate the achievements of the sides that season. This was a time when the idea of the Merseyside region being united against the rest of the country appeared to have engulfed both sets of fans. Perhaps the organisers were secretly praying for Everton to have won

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the FA Cup (I know I was), so that the two sets of supporters could participate in the revelries. Now that this was purely a lap of honour for Liverpool, no right-minded Blue had any intention of being seen in the vicinity of an open-top bus. I am still to this day dumbfounded by the number of Evertonians who showed such formidable powers of fortitude to show their support for the team. And I am still so glad that I was not one of them.

It is still a source of wonderment to me that the team went ahead with the previously agreed arrangements. Now crestfallen Everton players were having to cast envious glances at their Red counterparts who were displaying the two trophies that only a matter of weeks ago seemed destined to be in their own hands. I secretly admired the resilience and forbearance of those Blues who defiantly and stoically lined the route to cheer their team. The manager Howard Kendall, perhaps not wishing to renege on this long-standing agreement, insisted that all the squad would be present as arranged.

For one player it was too much to bear. Everton's midfield dynamo Peter Reid informed his boss that he would not be present as Liverpool celebrated their double. Kendall warned him that he would be fined if he failed to join his teammates on the bus. Reid did not care and as the rest of the squad returned to Merseyside, he headed back to his old stomping ground of Bolton with a friend where he drowned his sorrows in the Red Lion pub. He said in his book *Cheer Up Peter Reid*, 'I couldn't handle the thought of Liverpool parading the FA Cup and league championship that we'd lost.' His solicitor, Zac Harazi, told reporters that Reid was, 'Very upset. He comes from Liverpool, he's a winner and the result got to him.'

As ever, Reid's non-appearance sent the Everton fans' rumour mill into overdrive. It was alleged that the reason

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for his absence was that he was in the process of negotiating a transfer to the West German team, FC Cologne. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

Kendall publicly rebuked Reid for his no-show, telling fans, 'We deserved an explanation,' but it was only for the sake of appearances as he never did fine the England international. If Reid was not already a hero in the eyes of most Blues, he certainly was now.

As we came to terms with our loss, there was that nagging question at the back of the minds of most supporters. Was that glorious 1984/85 season a one-off? Would we ever reach those heights again? Four Everton players had been selected by the England manager Bobby Robson for the 1986 World Cup in Mexico. The last time Everton players had featured in a World Cup, in Mexico in 1970, the following campaign saw us slump from being league champions to finishing in 14th position. Would this fate befall us again?

Pessimism is a natural personality trait of any Everton fan. We anticipated the worst. The events of the summer months looked set to confirm those fears.

Catalonia calls

‘One day I was at Bellefield when I took a call from a Barcelona official.’

April 1986

Towards the finale of the 1985/86 campaign, whispers started to circulate in footballing circles and in the bars around Liverpool that Barcelona were on the verge of making an offer to appoint Howard Kendall as their new manager.

Terry Venables was the current incumbent in the Catalonian capital and had delivered Barcelona’s first title in 11 years in 1985. Nevertheless, after an underwhelming domestic campaign in which they were to finish as runners-up and 11 points behind their deadly rivals Real Madrid, questions were being asked about El Tel’s future. Ever since the Spanish Civil War, Barcelona has been a city where rumours can swiftly engulf a whole populace. So it was now with papers such as *Marca*, *Mundo Deportivo* and *Diario AS* speculating as to who was being lined up to replace Venables.

A month before the 1986 FA Cup Final, Kendall was quite nonplussed to receive a direct approach from Barcelona.

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As he recalled, 'One day I was at Bellefield [Everton's training complex] when I took a call from a Barcelona official, telling me that Terry Venables was likely to leave that summer and on Terry's recommendation they had identified me as the man to take over.' The Everton boss was certainly caught unawares by the approach and was surprised that El Tel would be audacious enough to suggest his own replacement.

Kendall's achievements had not gone unnoticed on the continent, where a growing number of potential suitors were keeping close tabs on him. Combining domestic honours with delivering the European Cup Winners' Cup cemented Kendall's reputation as an outstanding young coach, who would not turn 40 until May of that year. Barcelona were apparently eager to commence negotiations and tie up the deal. A massive salary increase would also be a bonus for Kendall.

Although Barcelona did not quite have the global standing that they do today, when one of the giants of European football comes calling it is hard to decline such an opportunity. This was exactly the situation Kendall found himself in. In addition, the Catalans could offer regular participation in the top European competitions, something that Kendall was anxious to savour again – the opportunity to test himself against the best managers and players on the continent.

Kendall was always indebted for the support that the Everton chairman, Sir Philip Carter, had steadfastly provided him when a large section of the Toffees' faithful was clamouring for his dismissal in October 1983. Therefore, he informed Sir Philip of the approach from Barcelona immediately. Although understandably reluctant to lose his manager, Sir Philip accepted that this was the type of job opportunity that only arrives once in a lifetime.

Kendall travelled down to the Connaught Hotel in London where he met the Barcelona club president, José Luis Núñez, and his delegation. Over the course of an afternoon's discussions, Kendall verbally agreed a deal for him to become the new manager at the end of the season. He was offered and accepted a provisional contract. The deal was apparently signed, sealed and delivered.

It is fair to say that at that time Kendall was not fully aware of the extent of machinations of club officials in Barcelona who would think nothing of offering the same position to two or three candidates at the same time. Venables himself had experienced this policy in practice first-hand when he joined Barcelona. He was waiting in a hotel in the city to acquire the Scottish striker Steve Archibald, while unbeknown to him club officials were in an adjoining room negotiating with the Real Madrid forward Hugo Sánchez who the club chairman wanted to sign in preference to the Tottenham Hotspur man.

Kendall informed his chairman of his decision to accept the position at Barcelona. Sir Philip had already anticipated such an outcome and approached Colin Harvey, who was Kendall's assistant, to take over the managerial reins. It seemed the logical choice and followed the long-established Liverpool tradition of appointing from within the confines of the club to ensure continuity. Kendall had hoped that Harvey would join him in Catalonia but when they discussed the possibility, Harvey made it clear that if Everton were to offer him the manager's job then he would stay.

It is still difficult to fully ascertain how aware the players were of the manager's impending departure, but there were rumours already circulating on Merseyside that Kendall was on his way out. It seems likely that many of the players who lived locally would have been aware of this development.

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After waiting for over a month for Barcelona to finalise the details of his new position, Kendall rang Venables to ask him what was happening. As he explained in an interview with *The Independent*, ‘It dragged on and on and in the end, I contacted Terry and asked, “Are you going or staying?” He said, “I think I’m staying.”’ That the move to Barcelona would not be happening was confirmed when the club extended El Tel’s contract after reaching the European Cup Final that same month. Venables blew his chance of lifting the European Cup after losing on penalties to the unfancied Steaua Bucharest from Romania, while Kendall was left to reflect on what might have been.

According to Harvey, Kendall kept his provisional contract to remind himself of the opportunity that had passed. There can be no disputing the fact this job had opened Kendall’s eyes to the prospect of testing himself as the boss of a European club, and he later said, ‘My chance to join Barcelona had gone but the seed had been planted; my appetite had been whetted and I knew that one day I would leave England to become a manager abroad.’ It would happen far sooner than the club or fans could have anticipated.

The lingering impact of the post-Heysel European ban had nearly cost Everton the services of their manager. The lack of participation in the UEFA tournaments meant that clubs on the continent realised they could attract the best managers and players from England, who wanted regular European competition. Barcelona would come calling again only this time it was not for ‘El Kel’.