



THE  
**GREATEST  
ESCAPE**

The Craziest Season in  
West Ham United's History

DANIEL HURLEY

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## CHAPTER ONE

### May – August (pre-season)

A COUPLE of quiet weeks followed the FA Cup Final. The only news was the England squad for the 2006 World Cup being finalised. It was devoid of any east London representation, which as any Hammers fan knows leaves the national side a minimum of three players short of the required number to win a major tournament.

Somewhat surprisingly after the season we'd had, only Nigel Reo-Coker got anywhere near the squad having been named as an eventually unused standby player. Marlon Harewood (16 goals in the previous season, 14 in the league), Bobby Zamora (ten goals) and Dean Ashton (six goals and man of the match in the cup final) were among the English strikers ignored in favour of 17-year-old new Arsenal signing Theo Walcott, who had made, erm, zero Premier League appearances. While I will no doubt use the benefit of hindsight from time to time during the writing of this book, on this occasion it isn't needed as it seemed as weird a decision then as it does now.

The only West Ham player going to that World Cup was the soon-to-be-released Shaka Hislop, who was going with first-time participants Trinidad & Tobago. The Trinidadians were grouped with England, where Shaka could without a doubt exact his revenge on Mr Gerrard.

Our first signing of the summer window was announced on 8 June, with confirmation that Lee Bowyer would be returning to the club for a second spell from Newcastle. He had joined the Geordies after his initial six-month stint with us ended in 2003, when we had somehow got relegated with a side that quite honestly should have been challenging the top six. The lifelong West Ham fan arrived back in east London no doubt aiming to avoid anything like that happening again.

Bowyer was a curious case. He was clearly blessed with substantial talent, as evidenced by his fantastic spell (on the pitch at least) with Leeds United, where he scored 55 goals in 265 games, consistently challenged at the top end of the league and even played in a Champions League semi-final. This should have translated to England honours but as alluded to above, off-field incidents such as a very public trial for GBH along with then-clubmate Jonathan Woodgate (he was eventually acquitted) played a role in him only earning one cap. By 2006, the midfielder was not the superstar signing he would have been in 2001 and not even the player he was when he first joined in 2003.

He was also still not free from controversy. An on-pitch fight with team-mate Kieron Dyer in 2005 was still fresh in people's memories and is still talked about to this day, mainly because of those cringe-inducing 'funny football

moments' programmes that Sky One seem to show on a loop. (Still, now Bowyer had left Newcastle nobody would ever reunite that pair at another club again, right? Right?)

For that reason, it seemed a somewhat odd signing at the time when so much of the 05/06 squad's success had been built on unity. It didn't come across as the wisest of moves to make a signing that requires your manager to tell your official website, 'I will not tolerate any other incidents. He now needs to have a clean bill of health. We had a fantastic disciplinary record last season. One sending-off all year speaks for itself. Lee has to understand they are the standards we have set and I expect him to abide by them.'

Bowyer at least was extremely positive about the move, insisting, 'I loved my time at Newcastle but this is my club. I didn't play well last time. I see this as unfinished business. I want to show the Hammers fans what I can do.' Reports of him taking a wage cut to rejoin the club, so eager was he to prove himself, also seemed like a positive sign, so most fans, myself included, were inclined to give Bowyer a chance and see how this panned out.

Two newsworthy incidents occurred on 15 June 2006; firstly, Steven Gerrard continued his public destruction of Shaka Hislop's self-confidence by volleying a picture-perfect 20-yard effort past him for England's second goal in their 2-0 World Cup group stage win over Shaka's Trinidad & Tobago.

In the 91st minute, of course, just to rub the pain in even further for both the goalkeeper and any West Ham fan with a functioning memory.

Watching the game in a pub in Canary Wharf, I refused to celebrate the goal. Christ knows what difference I thought it would make, but my stance was clear.

The second bit of news on the day was we announced the signing of Manchester United's versatile American-born defender Jonathan Spector. In no way, shape or form signed to justify a trip to America with certain club personnel, Pards was delighted with the capture of the 20-year-old, telling the BBC, 'He has huge potential and we hope that bears fruition at West Ham. He is a player we have been tracking for the past 18 months or so. He is definitely one for the future and, with the UEFA Cup campaign to look forward to, he will add to our defensive capacity. Having developed as a young player at Manchester United, he arrives with a fantastic pedigree. I was also very impressed by his character, which was a big factor in bringing him to the club.'

High praise indeed. Good to know we had sorted out the problematic right-back position so early in the close season as well.

The following day, I was at a friend's house in the evening watching Argentina dismantle Serbia 6-0 in their second World Cup group game. I remember thinking that their young midfielder Mascherano looked a good player and was also interested in a young forward, Carlos something or other, who I hadn't heard of before being brought on before Messi and then scoring their fifth goal with a lovely little finish. I had a brief conversation with my dad on the phone walking home from my friend's that night about how good the Argentina team looked,

mentioning those two players as well, and thought no more about it.

1 July was, I dare say, a bittersweet day for most Hammers fans due to events in Gelsenkirchen in the World Cup, where England did what England do in major tournament matches, namely underachieving, getting a man sent off and losing on penalties to a team they should beat. Portugal were the beneficiaries for the second big event in a row, with Wayne Rooney being the man dismissed and Cristiano Ronaldo becoming the pantomime villain for the British public and media. Safe to say, it didn't affect his career too much.

So why would people of a claret and blue persuasion have been cheered by this exactly? Mainly due to the identities of two of the players who missed their penalties, of course. The final pen was missed by apparently our specialist penalty taker, Jamie sodding Carragher, who having never taken a penalty anywhere other than in training, his garden or on a computer game, was for some reason brought on so he could take a penalty in a World Cup quarter-final. He, of course, missed, which as a Liverpool player in 2006 would have cheered up any West Ham fan, despite the sadness of England being eliminated from the tournament.

The main consolation in defeat, however, was the identity of the player who missed the preceding penalty: Shaka Hislop's nemesis, Steven Gerrard. I'm sure Shaka was delirious as Portuguese keeper Ricardo did what he couldn't do that day in Cardiff, or the day in Germany for that matter, and saved a Gerrard attempt on goal from