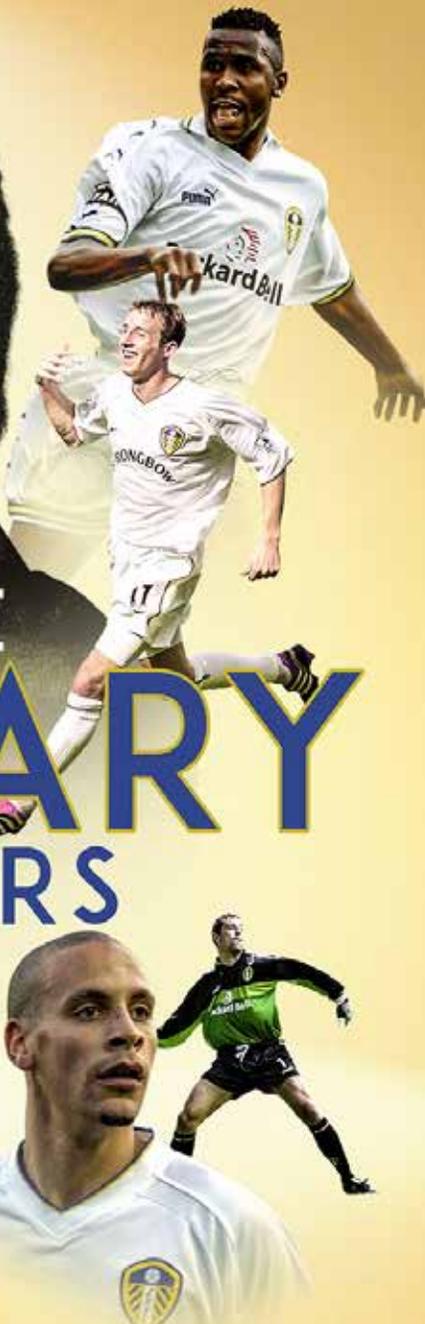


ROCCO DEAN



THE
O'LEARY
YEARS



FOOTBALL'S GREATEST
BOOM AND BUST

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BOOM AND BUST

R O C C O D E A N



Contents

Prologue: Sgt Wilko's Ten-Year Plan	9
Act I	
1998/99 – O'Leary's Babies	13
Act II	
1999/00 – Coming of Age	57
Act III	
2000/01 – Living the Dream	115
Act IV	
2001/02 – The Fall	177
Act V	
What Became of the Likely Lads?	223
Epilogue: Leeds United on Trial	247

ACT I

1998/99 – O’Leary’s Babies

Tottenham Hotspur 3-3 Leeds United

Leeds United 0-1 Leicester City

Leeds United 2-1 Sheffield Wednesday

Leicester City 2-1 Leeds United

Liverpool 1-3 Leeds United

Manchester United 3-2 Leeds United

Leeds United 4-0 West Ham United

Newcastle United 0-3 Leeds United

Leeds United 1-1 Tottenham Hotspur

Aston Villa 1-2 Leeds United

Leeds United 0-0 Liverpool

Leeds United 1-1 Manchester United

Leeds United 1-0 Arsenal

Tottenham Hotspur 3-3 Leeds United

Saturday, 26 September 1998

White Hart Lane – 3pm

FA Carling Premiership

George Graham was our idol. My dad loved him from the moment he arrived, and I did too. He called for 'Yorkshire Grit' in an irresistible Scottish accent and boasted a proud managerial record, having led Arsenal to two league championships, an FA Cup, a League Cup and the UEFA Cup Winners' Cup. Not so proud was his departure from Arsenal in 1995. George was accused of accepting a 'bung' from his agent, Rune Hauge, and was sacked even before he was found guilty and banned from football for 12 months. In his autobiography, George claimed the £425k was just a thank you present, not a 'bung', but as defences go it was even weaker than the recurring joke on the hit comedy of the time, *Father Ted* ('The money was just resting in my account').

George was left devastated at the way he was treated by his beloved Arsenal. He believed they should have stood by him, in fact he believed there should have been a bust of him in Highbury's famous marble halls (he was probably right on the second count). He spent his exile scouring the European market in preparation for building his next great team, wherever that would be, and two months after his sentence was served George Graham replaced Howard Wilkinson in the Elland Road hotseat. Leeds United had ambitious new owners and a rich history; a top club for a top manager, and vice versa.

Graham did little to endear himself to the Leeds faithful in his first season, which turned into a war of attrition against relegation. The war was won despite Leeds scoring just 28 goals. The manager was keen to explain that great teams are built from the back (and his Leeds team kept a whopping 20 clean sheets), but he didn't help his relationship with the Leeds fans by decimating the attack. The club's record signing, Tomas Brodin,

TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR 3-3 LEEDS UNITED

refused to turn up for training under Graham, while his poor treatment of legendary striker Tony Yeboah drew derision from the terraces and resulted in the Ghanaian hurling his shirt at the manager when substituted at Spurs. An acrimonious end for an unforgettable player. Nevertheless, the Leeds fans accepted the dismal season as a necessary evil and eventually made light of the dire football on show, singing 'We'll score again, don't know where, don't know when, but I know we'll score again some sunny day!'

Mine and my dad's faith never waned, and the following season Leeds enjoyed their best campaign since winning the league title in 1992. The hands of time have been cruel to the team George built, their reputation tarnished by the hideous 28-goal season that preceded it, and the electrifying era that followed. Leeds finished fifth and were mesmeric going forward at times, with Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink and Rodney Wallace striking up a terrific partnership, and teenage sensation Harry Kewell in support. They had a world-class goalkeeper in Nigel Martyn, while in defence the newly appointed captain, Lucas Radebe, was emerging as one of the best centre-backs in the country and Gary Kelly was already one of the best right-backs. Leeds also had Britain's most expensive teenager, having paid £2.7m to win the race for Lee Bowyer, a box-to-box midfielder with an eye for goal. Alongside the star players were the bargains Graham had scouted during his exile: Robert Molenaar, Bruno Ribeiro and Martin Hiden from the continent (the aforementioned Hasselbaink could join this list too, having cost only £2m from Boavista in Portugal), plus Gunnar Halle, Alfie Haaland and David Hopkin, who were picked up from struggling English clubs.

I had such faith in George's expertise that I expected him to guide Leeds all the way to European Cup glory, but the man we loved didn't share the same vision – he was using us all along. George saw Leeds only as a stepping-stone back to London,

and with the 1998/99 season only six games old and Leeds still undefeated, George's head was well and truly turned when Christian Gross was sacked by Tottenham Hotspur.

Research will tell you that Graham believed Spurs were a bigger club with more potential, yet Leeds United had a bigger stadium, a bigger fan base, a richer history and were already in Europe. When talking of the season ahead George had listed Spurs as 'one of the wealthy clubs', while referring to 'clubs like us' needing to develop their own players, yet in the five years since the Premiership had been formed, Leeds United had a net spend of £23.4m (the fifth most in the division) while Spurs had a net spend of just £4.7m (the fifth least). Plus, George was also leaving behind the best group of youngsters in the country. All this led me to an alternative theory, that George's broken heart was ruling his head, and the opportunity to serve up his revenge on Arsenal from the home of their bitterest rivals was just too sweet to pass up.

For a while the Leeds fans fought for their manager by singing their support from the terraces, but amid growing speculation their patience snapped when Graham refused to deny that he'd like the opportunity to speak with Tottenham. It was a stab in the back for the supporters, and a stab in the heart for me and my dad. An ironic twist of fate offered some consolation – Leeds were heading to Tottenham in their next fixture, the perfect venue to give George Graham the send-off he deserved.

I loved away games. My dad had started taking me the previous season, though initially he wouldn't allow us to sit with the Leeds fans; 'too dangerous' he said. Our third away trip was to Villa Park, where we had tickets in the Holte End. What a horrible experience that was, having to stand, clap and pretend to be happy when Dwight Yorke scored the only goal of the game. We were low down and right behind the goal, and I could almost feel the ball being sucked into Nigel Martyn's

net. Thankfully my dad realised that football was safe enough for a 14-year-old, even surrounded by his own supporters, and we were in with the Leeds fans thereafter. It was such a thrill being amongst the travelling army, singing our hearts out and humiliating home fans up and down the country.

I loved getting tickets for away games too. They would go on sale on a Saturday morning a few weeks before the game, and my dad and I would set off at 6am to get to the ticket office nice and early. I'd join the queue and my dad would go to *The Cracked Egg* to get the hot sandwiches; Bacon-Egg-Sausage for me, Full House for my dad. We would then stand and wait patiently, exposed to the elements for two hours, plus another half-hour or so depending on how close we were to the front of the queue. I loved the camaraderie between the early-morning queuers, watching the line grow as the sun came up, the excitement of the ticket office lights coming on, the thrill of the shutters going up, and finally the joy of having the tickets in your hands. Ah, them were t'days.

The journeys to away games were not so great, though we would always try and start with a hot sandwich from *The Cracked Egg*, if logistics allowed. I would clock-watch from the passenger seat while my dad listened to Radio Two, until 1pm, when 5Live Sport would finally come on, though the pre-match chitter-chatter never lived up to the brilliance of the opening theme tune. Once off the motorway it was map duties for me. My mission wasn't precise, I just needed to find the vicinity of the ground. Once we saw fans walking we would park up and join the herd, knowing it must be a walkable distance, and the sooner you parked the more of the traffic you would avoid after the game.

I was a bit of a saddo really: I loved football grounds (I still do I suppose, the old ones anyway), so it was always a thrill to see a stadium in real life for the first time. White Hart Lane was impressive, right in the heart of the community, surrounded by

homes, shops and life, just as it should be. Inside was even more impressive, an enclosed two-tiered structure all the way round. It felt modern, the stands behind the goal were quite new at least, and right on top of the pitch. The Leeds fans were housed in the corner of the ground and me and my dad were in the top tier, while my friends, Lewis and Joe, were in the bottom tier. I'd been friends with Lewis since primary school and he came with us to all the home games, but for away games he would go on the supporters' coach with Joe, to practically every game. Joe was in the year above us at school and new on the scene, but he would become a friend for life. These were the days before mobile phones, but we were all at the ground so early that we were able to have a little chat by shouting between tiers.

Having spent all day waiting for kick-off (all week actually, if not longer), now came the hard yards. The clock would tick so slowly during the wait for the game to begin. I passed the time by reading the programme while ticking off all the little milestones. Out came the goalkeepers first, for a bit of kicking and catching with their coach, soon followed by the players, individually or in little clusters, each getting their own little ovation on to the pitch from the growing travelling army. After a kick-about and a few sprinting drills they would all head back to the dressing room together to get ready for the match, accompanied by the first meaningful chant of the day, always 'We are Leeds'. As the clock inevitably ticked around to 3pm the anticipation grew, and by the time the teams re-emerged it was a white-hot atmosphere at White Hart Lane.

Straight from the kick-off Spurs started up their anti-George Graham chants. They hated the man, not only for his Arsenal links but also for his reputation as a shrewd tactician, which contrasted with the Tottenham ideology of free-flowing, attacking football. The home fans were doing all they could to let Graham know he wasn't welcome at their club and the away fans were on the same page, chanting, 'You can stick George

TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR 3-3 LEEDS UNITED

Graham up your arse, you can stick George Graham up your arse, you can stick George Graham, stick George Graham, stick George Graham up your arse. SIDEWAYS!’ Just four minutes later the Leeds fans were asking, ‘Georgie, Georgie, what’s the score?’ as utility man Gunnar Halle headed their team into the lead. Spurs soon equalised with a carbon copy goal by Ramon Vega, a Swiss defender who had chosen Spurs over Leeds earlier in the year, just as John Scales had done the year before, and just as George Graham was about to do. The Leeds fans found other ways to abuse their manager while they were unable to goad him about the scoreline; however, just before half-time Hasselbaink restored the lead, and the joyful travelling fans enquired once more, ‘Georgie, Georgie, what’s the score?’

At half-time, chairman Peter Ridsdale made his way from the directors’ box over to the away end to appeal for calm, pleading with the fans to stop abusing the manager. We were having none of it. In the second half it was as you were, abuse for George Graham from all corners of the ground, with a Spurs fan even invading the pitch and sitting in silent protest in front of the Leeds dugout, until he was dragged away by the stewards.

The second half turned into a real ding-dong battle. Clyde Wijnhard extended the lead, before Steffen Iversen’s unstoppable half-volley set up a frantic last 20 minutes. In the last of those minutes Leeds were still hanging on to a 3-2 lead that would send them second in the table, but Spurs hadn’t given up. It was a horrible sight when Nigel Martyn failed to gather the last high ball pumped into the penalty area, a horrible sound when the excitement rose around the stadium as the ball bounced loose in the box, and a horrible feeling when Sol Campbell headed it past the green flash of Martyn’s desperate dive. The net bulged and White Hart Lane erupted. I was devastated. It was a long journey home, and the pantomime of George Graham’s protracted move to Spurs dominated the airwaves.

The million-dollar question that George couldn't answer, 'Was that a point gained, or two points dropped?'

After the match Graham confirmed to Peter Ridsdale that he wanted to go to Tottenham, citing family reasons; they were all in London, including his soon-to-be wife, and soon-to-arrive first grandchild. In a last-ditch attempt to keep him at the club, Ridsdale offered George a director of football role, so that he could still move to London but continue his work at Elland Road. The offer was rejected. Within days a £3m compensation fee had been agreed with Spurs, and George Graham was heading back to the capital (and straight to the top of my blacklist, even ahead of Eric Cantona). Everyone expected Graham to take his young assistant with him, but David O'Leary had just bought a lovely house in Harrogate and remained at Leeds United, in temporary charge of the first team.

Leeds United 0-1 Leicester City

Saturday, 3 October 1998

Elland Road – 3pm

FA Carling Premiership

If it wasn't ironic enough that Leeds had just played the team that was trying to steal their manager, next up in the Premiership was the team whose manager they were trying to steal. Peter Ridsdale drew up a three-man shortlist to replace George Graham: former Leeds captain Gordon Strachan was believed to be one candidate, caretaker manager David O'Leary was another, but top of the list was Leicester City's Martin O'Neill. Having angrily accused Alan Sugar of 'tapping up' George Graham, Ridsdale was adamant he would go about his pursuit of O'Neill 'in the right way', so Leeds politely requested Leicester's permission to speak with their manager, and Leicester politely refused.

Meanwhile, David O'Leary was preparing George Graham's Leeds team for his first match in management. Lee Sharpe

was dragged from the wilderness into the first 11, perhaps an indication of O'Leary's deepest desires to add flair to the side, but otherwise this was George's line-up. It was a poor performance. Leeds looked lethargic and flat. With the headmaster gone their application and commitment seemed to desert them and Martin O'Neill pulled off an impressive 1-0 away victory, thanks to Tony Cottee's second-half strike.

As a 'George Graham man', David O'Leary had expected to be jeered by the Elland Road crowd, so he was deeply moved by the hero's reception he received despite the disappointing defeat. He shouldn't have been too surprised. Only six months earlier, after an away defeat to West Ham, Leeds United's chartered flight back to Yorkshire crash landed moments after take-off, a fall of 150 feet. The pilot was the hero of the hour, his snap decision to pull the plane back down to earth when the engine exploded saving all 44 lives on board, but O'Leary was lauded as a hero too. The Irishman had barged open the emergency doors to get everyone off the plane, with the wing on fire and the flames spreading.

O'Leary had initially ruled himself out of the running for the manager's job but receiving such backing from the Elland Road faithful gave him a hunger for it, although in reality the fans were just respectfully wishing him a fond farewell. Everyone presumed Martin O'Neill would be back at Elland Road, in the home dugout, after the first international break of the season.

When the domestic season resumed the managerial saga was still deadlocked. The boot was firmly on the other foot but Leeds were still on the receiving end of a kicking. Where George Graham had a clause that enabled him to speak with other clubs, O'Neill only had a gentlemen's agreement, which his chairman John Elsom refused to honour, against his manager's wishes. In his desperation, Ridsdale reached out to the Premier League and League Managers' Association to try

and find a solution, but they couldn't help. The chairman's hands were tied.

Leicester's next game was live on Sky, at home against, yep, you've guessed it, George Graham's Spurs. The home fans spent the whole match showering loving adulation on their manager, begging him to stay with thousands of 'Don't Go Martin' banners. Leicester grabbed a late 2-1 victory on an emotionally charged evening, and an emotionally charged manager announced afterwards that he had decided to stay, as a thank you to the wonderful fans. Maybe if Leicester hadn't scored late O'Neill would have given a goodbye speech, maybe if he'd slept on it, he would have seen sense, but it was done now and Leeds had lost out again.

Out of the ashes came a knight in shining armour. In David O'Leary's second match, at Nottingham Forest, he thought, 'ah bollocks to it', and brought two 18-year-olds into the team; Jonathan Woodgate and Stephen McPhail. The two debutants didn't just improve the team, they looked like the best players. Woodgate was so commanding at the back, McPhail so composed in midfield, and despite playing with ten men for most of the match it took a late goal to deny Leeds victory.

Then came Roma away in the UEFA Cup second round, on the night after Leicester's victory over Spurs. The mighty Italians were building a team that would win the Scudetto in two years' time but were already formidable opponents, with the legendary Francesco Totti alongside Marco Delvecchio up front, and World Cup winners Cafu and Candela patrolling the wings. O'Leary's young team were magnificent. They conceded early and had Bruno Ribeiro sent off, but they hit the post twice, rattling the frame of the goal as much as their glamorous opponents. Delvecchio's goal was enough to win the game, but it was a moral victory for O'Leary, and with Martin O'Neill now out of the picture there was only one man for the job.

Leeds United 2-1 Sheffield Wednesday

Sunday, 8 November 1998

Elland Road – 4pm

FA Carling Premiership

David O'Leary was thrilled when he landed the Leeds job and was setting his sights high. He expected European qualification year after year and he wanted to do it in style, with a team that always played on the front foot, with freedom and without fear. This was in stark contrast to his predecessor, and his vision didn't stop there. O'Leary wanted to transform the whole culture of the club and turn Leeds United into everybody's second team. Leeds United had never been anybody's second team. For over 30 years they had been the most loathed team in the country, starting when Don Revie's young upstarts hijacked the top flight in 1965 with an uncompromising style of never-say-die football. But O'Leary's dream didn't seem so crazy based on the snippet we had seen in his time as caretaker.

The new manager also talked up the young talent in the squad, reiterating that he would not be afraid to give them a chance, having himself been thrown into the Arsenal team at 17 years old, yet his overriding message was that the board would need to get 'better quality players' into the club if they wanted to progress to the next level. It was a point O'Leary felt so strongly about that he only accepted the job once assurances over transfer funds were given.

His chairman was happy to oblige. Peter Ridsdale was a huge Leeds fan, whose teenage years had been spent watching Don Revie's team dominate English football. Ridsdale was determined to bring the good times back to Elland Road and passionately believed in the potential of the club; after all, he had seen for himself the heights that Leeds could hit. He was sold on O'Leary's philosophy and vision, and hailed his new manager's integrity, honesty and enthusiasm, and also his decision to promote Eddie Gray to assistant manager, where he

THE O'LEARY YEARS

could continue to nurture the young players as they made the final step into first-team football.

Two draws in the league preceded a 0-0 draw in the second leg against Roma, a result that brought an early but dignified exit from the UEFA Cup. Despite the defeat it was a fantastic night at Elland Road, and I was completely intoxicated by the electric atmosphere, especially as it was my first big game in the Kop. I had always sat in the East Stand – the family stand – since it was completed in 1993, but I was now deemed old enough to join the ranters and chanters behind the goal. I was thrilled when my dad authorised the move – it completely revolutionised the matchday experience.

Roma was also my first classic 'European night' at Elland Road. I suppose you could call the 1992 'Battle of Britain' against Rangers a classic European night, but it didn't feel like that with Leeds whimpering out of the first ever Champions League before the group stages commenced. There was nothing whimperish about Leeds against Roma, they were desperately unlucky to be held to a goalless draw. The closest they came to levelling the tie was a chance akin to Gazza vs Germany in Euro '96; Kewell sliding in at the back post was unable to reach the low cross. Wijnhard behind him could reach it, but Kewell's momentum caused him to inadvertently block the ball before Wijnhard's effort could cross the line. Leeds had done themselves proud, but the result brought a very odd juxtaposition. O'Leary had only won once in his first seven games as a manager – a 1-0 victory over Bradford City in the League Cup – yet he was already being lauded as the new messiah. Talk about a knowledgeable crowd.

Next up was the Yorkshire derby with Sheffield Wednesday, live on *Super Sunday*. The Roma games had been televised on BBC, but this was the grand unveiling of 'O'Leary's Babies' to the Premiership audience and felt like an occasion in itself. It

LEEDS UNITED 2-1 SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY

was also the day that my dad, Lewis and I moved into our new season ticket seats. The seats we initially selected in the Kop looked great on paper – low down and right behind the goal – but in reality they were a nightmare. You had to watch the whole match through the net, worse still, the crossbar blocked almost the whole goal at the other end. We requested a move, so the ticket office stuck us on trial on the very back row of the Kop, to the left of the goal in block N11.

It was brilliant. The atmosphere didn't sound quite as loud as you were behind all the shouting, but I loved being able to see the whole Kop in front of me, and from higher up we had a much better view of the action; you could actually see what was going on at the other end. Being on the back row also meant we could stand up for the whole game, which had not yet become standard practice throughout the stand. The three blokes in front of us were a hoot too, amazing characters led by the enigmatic Gerry, who once took such offence at a Tony Adams foul that he launched himself forward, clambering over people to get all the way down to the pitch. He only made it down about five rows, but every contentious incident thereafter had the people in front nervously peering over their shoulders, and us trying to control our laughter. I was worried what my dad would think of me being surrounded by their crude banter, but he loved it too, and there we would stay throughout the O'Leary years.

The match itself was no classic, but Leeds took all three points thanks to a gangly teenager with peroxide blond hair, Jonathan Woodgate. Woodgate was impeccable in defence and scored the winning goal too with a lovely looping header over Kevin Pressman, thus receiving the man of the match champagne he was barely old enough to drink. 'We were worthy winners,' proclaimed David O'Leary for the first time. They were words we would hear almost as often as his go-to filler, 'as I say'.

Leicester City 2-1 Leeds United

Wednesday, 11 November 1998

Filbert Street – 7.45pm

League Cup, Fourth Round

It was my 15th birthday and I got exactly what I wanted, a trip to Filbert Street for the League Cup fourth round. These were the days when the domestic cups meant something, a good cup run could keep a manager in his job, and if you actually won a cup the manager would be bullet-proof. With fewer spots available through the league, the cups were also an important route into Europe, and English clubs had recently voted in favour of the League Cup winners retaining UEFA Cup qualification. Martin O'Neill praised the decision in his programme notes, though his reasoning was quite unique – he felt it would have been unfair to block one of only two routes into Europe for lower league clubs.

The domestic cups also presented players and fans with the opportunity to visit the most iconic stadium in the world. I'd never been to Wembley and I was desperate to go with Leeds, but the clock was ticking on its existence, with only four more cup finals before the Twin Towers would be scandalously demolished. There were only three rounds to navigate before O'Leary could lead his babies out at Wembley, but this would be a tough tie. Leicester were a dangerous team under Martin O'Neill, and only behind Leeds on goal difference in the Premiership. Matt Elliott was a man-mountain at the back and Emile Heskey a man-mountain up front, but their real strength was the midfield quartet of Robbie Savage, Muzzy Izzet, Neil Lennon and Steve Guppy.

Filbert Street was a funny old stadium. The away fans were given a tiny shed of a stand that stretched down the touchline, adjoined to terraced housing which you had to go through to access the ground. My first visit had been one of the worst games of my life; it was on the 40th anniversary of the Munich

Air Disaster and there was a minute's silence before the game. Well, that was the plan, but the Leeds fans dishonoured it, and they continued to mock the dead throughout the game. It was as toxic an atmosphere as I had experienced, and to top it all off Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink fired a 90th-minute penalty wide. Such was the behaviour of the Leeds fans it almost felt like justice had been done, but I still felt desolate on the way home. Surely tonight couldn't be worse than that, could it? Sadly, it could.

O'Leary's babies were terrific, dominating the match with slick passing that left Leicester chasing shadows all night. Harry Kewell was imperious going forward, and with two minutes remaining it looked like the Australian's first-half header would be enough to seal a quarter-final spot. Then, out of nothing, Leeds crumbled. A long clearance enticed Nigel Martyn into racing out of his box. He reached the ball ahead of the attacker but headed it straight to Muzzy Izzet, who lobbed home from 40 yards. Filbert Street was rocking, and I was reeling. Then, three minutes later, 'Big Bob' Molenaar gave away a penalty and suddenly it was all over, Leeds were out. I couldn't believe what I'd witnessed. The Leicester fans were going crazy, and Martin O'Neill's name was ringing around Filbert Street as the dejected Leeds players trudged off the pitch. Football had been nothing but cruel to me all my life, and now this, on my birthday. Brutal.

That wasn't even the end of it. On the way back to the car we stopped off for a kebab to cheer up the birthday boy, and as we waited for our order some meathead confronted my dad, 'Are you a Leeds fan?' Cool as a cucumber, my dad turned and pointed to his heartbroken son, 'He is.' I was gobsmacked, thankfully only metaphorically. It was out-the-box thinking and it did the trick. The neanderthal wouldn't reduce himself to attacking a child so there were no further birthday bumps. I'd already had my lot.