

FOREWORD BY  
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THE YEAR WE  
*(Nearly)*  
**WON THE LEAGUE**

**STOKE CITY**

AND THE 1974/75 SEASON

**JONATHAN BAKER**

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## STUCK WITH STOKE

THE RACE for the First Division title in 1974/75 was one of the tightest there has ever been. The lead at the top of the table changed hands more than 20 times over the course of the season. At the beginning of April, six teams still had a genuine chance of winning, and only a single point covered the top three. The eventual winning points total was the lowest for more than two decades. It was a dynamic and pulsating campaign from start to finish.

Of those top six still battling it out at the death, only Stoke City had never won the championship before. And, as the title of this book suggests, they were destined to come up short once again. In the view of most Stoke fans of any vintage, the team that came so close in the spring of 1975 was the best in the club's history. In the previous couple of years, that team had won one cup – the club's first major trophy – and twice come close to winning another. Now it was involved in a serious tilt at the biggest prize in English football. But after failing narrowly to reach the summit, the descent would be swift and pitiless. Within two years, the architect of the team had gone and many of the players had gone too. Relegation swiftly followed. It was a classic tale of rise and fall.

## THE YEAR WE (NEARLY) WON THE LEAGUE

In following the twists and turns of the 1974/75 season, this book tells several stories. It recounts the tale of Tony Waddington, the manager who revived an unfashionable provincial club that was dying on its feet, and built a team capable of winning trophies and – nearly! – winning the league. It reflects on the last hurrah of that team, their final thrilling full season together before a freak of nature and financial overstretch sent the club into free-fall. It details a nerve-jangling race to the finish line, with six runners more or less in line abreast as they entered the final straight. And it recalls a vintage era of footballers and of football – well within memory, but light years away from the game we know today.

This book is not just for Stokies. It is for every fan of a ‘nearly’ club – one that has never risen to the heights of being named English champions. By my reckoning, that embraces supporters of no fewer than 68 of the 92 clubs that currently sit in the four top tiers of English football. In the 93 seasons of the old First Division, there were only 23 different winners. The Premier League has been even more of a closed shop. In 30 years, there have been just seven different names on the trophy.

That means that nearly four in five league clubs and their supporters have never known what they can only imagine to be the giddy joys of winning the title. The experiences they *have* all shared, and continue to share, are depressingly familiar ones: hope and disappointment; occasional joy and more frequent despair; anger, frustration and shattered dreams; but always, always, affection and loyalty; and never, never, the smallest suggestion that allegiances might be abandoned or transferred elsewhere.

It was not written in the stars that I would spend my own footballing life as one of this large and permanently exasperated majority following the also-rans. As far as football went, I grew up in a divided household. My mother came from Leek, not far from the Potteries, and we were told that our grandfather

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had played in goal for Leek FC. His team was Stoke City. The family later moved to Uttoxeter, located at the midway point between Stoke-on-Trent and Derby, and right on the border between Staffordshire and Derbyshire. I was born in Derby, but brought up in Uttoxeter, on the Staffordshire side.

On the other side of the family, my grandmother came from Chellaston, five miles from Derby, and moved with my grandfather to Uttoxeter at about the time my father was born, a century ago. This grandfather was a Londoner, from Dulwich: I don't like to think about who he might have supported. But my father grew up as a Derby County man.

We might have been a house divided, but there was no real tension involved: no one of that generation in either family was all that interested in football, still less obsessed by it. I was about ten years old when Stanley Matthews helped Stoke City win promotion back to the First Division. It was a massive story that must surely have had the red and white households of Uttoxeter buzzing for months. Yet I have no memory of it.

I came late to the party. The first match I remember attending was on 30 December 1967, when I was already 14. It was Stoke City against Nottingham Forest at the Victoria Ground, and there were 20,948 of us there. The reverse fixture had taken place four days earlier, on Boxing Day, and Forest had won it 3-0. It must have been my father who took my cousin and me to the game, since my 'Stoke' grandfather, the goalkeeper, had died by this time. Why did my dad take us to see Stoke, and not his own team, Derby County? I suppose it might have been that Derby were in the Second Division at that time, and not faring too well. Whatever it was, my father must surely have known he was making a fateful decision, and that he would be setting us both on a course for life. Every football fan knows that your first team is your only team, and once you are stuck with it there is no escape.

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So, from then on, I was Stuck with Stoke – even though they lost 3-1 that day, even though Forest had a striker with the same surname as me, and Baker scored. It didn't matter. It was already too late. To compound matters, I had a friend at school who was a Stoke City fanatic. Sensing a new recruit to the cause, he fatally infected me with his enthusiasm. From then on it was always Stoke, and to be honest, in spite of everything, I really wouldn't have had it any other way. That's another feeling all fans are familiar with, which is why I address this account of heroic failure to them, and not just to my fellow sufferers among the Stoke faithful. The team may often be useless, but they're *our* useless. They are our children. However disappointingly they turn out, we never give up on them.

Visits to the Vic were fitful in the early days of this growing attachment. It was a while before my cousin and I were considered old enough to go to games on our own. At first, we caught the train from Uttoxeter to Stoke, and took the half-hour walk to the ground. But the station was often full of opposing fans, and the atmosphere there, and on the way to the ground, was not always pleasant. So we switched to the Stevenson's football bus from Uttoxeter – 'Stevenson's Rocket' as it was known – which dropped us in the car park right next to the ground but took an eternity to get out of it once the game was over. Later still, we went by car. We parked up outside a pub and walked a mile or so through the streets of back-to-back houses to the ground.

Our first vantage point was the Juniors' Enclosure, until we were too old to be eligible for entry and switched instead to the Stoke End – a standing terrace open to the elements and facing the Boothen End, where the diehard faithful gathered.

We didn't go to many away games, but when we did they were memorable. An FA Cup third-round tie against Liverpool at Anfield, described later in this book, was one. The atmosphere was so partisan that we were terrified for our

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welfare if we won, and were almost relieved to go down 2-0 and to get home unscathed. I was working in Liverpool by that stage as a young newspaper reporter, and was witnessing daily a level of football fanaticism way beyond anything I had seen before. It was fuelled by the ferocious rivalry between the red and the blue areas of the city, at a time when both Liverpool and Everton were strong and often vying with each other for the top prizes. Both were in the mix as the 1974/75 season reached its climax.

Of greater significance for us was a trip to Sheffield Wednesday's Hillsborough for the FA Cup semi-final against Arsenal in March 1971. It was the furthest Stoke had advanced in the competition since 1899, and we were beside ourselves with excitement. We were the first ones into the ground when it opened at midday, a full three hours before a kick-off we thought would never arrive. Stoke surged into a two-goal lead, missed two glorious chances to settle the tie, and were then pegged back to 2-2 by a controversial last-gasp penalty. There would be a replay, but we knew the chance had gone. It was at once the most memorable and most heartbreaking day of my football life. It was also my 18th birthday.

The fun of following Stoke, going to the games and discussing the ups and downs that are a part of any football fan's life, was all the more enjoyable because I had someone with whom to share them. My cousin Jeremy was just over a year younger than me, and we had many enthusiasms in common, for The Beatles, for books and for Bob Dylan, and above all for the growing strength and success of the Stoke team at the start of the 1970s. Our joy was unconfined when the goals went in – especially if they were from the boot of Jimmy Greenhoff, our hero – and we consoled each other when they didn't. Even in the lean decades that followed the downfall of 'our' team, when we saw fewer games and much less of each other, we were always keen to catch up on the latest



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Stoke gossip, recall the halcyon days and speculate about the possibility of their return. We celebrated Stoke's promotion to the Premier League in 2008. And there was one glorious final flourish, a sun-soaked day at Wembley in the spring of 2011. Forty years after we had endured the heartbreak of Arsenal at Hillsborough, we were at another FA Cup semi-final, against Bolton Wanderers. This time there was to be no last-minute slip-up as the Potters powered to a scarcely believable 5-0 victory, the largest in a post-war semi-final.

Once we had come back down to earth from this astonishing outcome, a process that took some time, Jeremy took the view that the experience could never be surpassed, and that the final itself would be an anti-climax. I suspected that he was right, but felt that as it had taken the club 150 years to reach the final, this would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience that I could not afford to miss. So I went, and he didn't. We went down 1-0 in an undistinguished match against Manchester City, but both of us were happy we had made the right decision.

We went to only a couple of matches together after that, although we still exchanged Stoke lore at regular intervals. We were still stuck with Stoke. His sad and premature death brought an end to this 50-year conversation. For me, much of the thrill of following the team through good times and bad has gone with him. So many memories, once shared and repeatedly returned to, are now mine alone. As I recall those heady days for you, so I dedicate this book to him.