



# We Were Really There

The Rebirth of  
Manchester City

DAVID BERNSTEIN

with Tim Rich

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## 89.25

WEMBLEY FORMS a huge part of my life. Although I was born in Lancashire and fervently supported Manchester City, I grew up in London, a few miles from the Empire Stadium, as it was then called. I would in time become chairman of a very different Wembley Stadium and then chairman of the Football Association. On the day of my bar mitzvah, the Jewish coming-of-age ceremony, I had watched black-and-white television pictures of Manchester City winning the 1956 FA Cup. Thirteen years later, I was there in person to see Neil Young's goal win the cup again.

I was there for Dennis Tueart's overhead kick that overcame Newcastle in the 1976 League Cup Final. My last journey to Wembley as a City fan had been the night in 1981 that had seen Tottenham's Ricky Villa dance his way through a blue-shirted defence in an FA Cup Final replay

to score one of the great goals seen in the stadium. It was a magical memory, except if you supported City.

However, on Monday, 30 May 1999, I was sitting in the Royal Box as chairman of Manchester City, who were wearing not sky-blue shirts but yellowy-green with black stripes. As a fixture, it seemed on a much lower level than the FA Cup and League Cup finals. This was a Football League Division Two play-off final between Manchester City and Gillingham. The winner would be promoted to what – in the days when I had gone to Wembley to see the teams of Malcolm Allison, Tony Book and John Bond – would have been called the Second Division. A few days before, Manchester United had lifted the European Cup and completed the Treble. This, surely, was one of football's sideshows.

Except that for importance, this match, watched by 76,000, eclipsed any previous game Manchester City had ever played. In the space of three years, the club had collapsed out of the Premier League and been relegated again to land in the third tier of English football for the first time in its history. It was a measure of how far the club had fallen that, until that season, we had never before played Gillingham. I had been chairman for 14 months. Unlike my predecessor,

Francis Lee, I had not played for City or brought titles back to Maine Road. There would be no latent goodwill or nostalgia to protect me should things continue to fall apart.

Before the final, Francis had given an interview to the *Daily Express*. He was at a country club in Hampshire. He had just played 18 holes of golf and was talking to the journalist with a glass of champagne in one hand and a cigar in the other. He thought there should be no pressure on Manchester City. 'I don't go in for all this stuff about pressure,' he said between puffs. 'There is no pressure on somebody playing a match if he can play the game [well]. It's wonderful. You should just go out there and enjoy it, especially at somewhere like Wembley.'

However, despite Francis's words, there was plenty of pressure. In those 14, sometimes desperate, months since succeeding him, I had begun a programme of reform to modernise the club, shore up its finances and make it a credible sporting institution. There had been long negotiations to move to a new stadium that would host the Commonwealth Games in three years' time. That stadium, the City of Manchester, now the Etihad, would become the lifeline that would eventually see Manchester City win the Treble in 2023. That future, a future we could

not imagine, would have been imperilled by defeat in this 'sideshow'.

In the first leg of the play-off semi-final, at Wigan, we had fallen behind to a ridiculous, self-inflicted goal in the opening minute. I was sitting in the directors' box next to our manager, Joe Royle, who reflected afterwards that I had turned 'instantly grey' when we conceded after 20 seconds. He added: 'Bernstein knew better than anybody how utterly crucial it was for City to escape the wilderness at the first attempt, for failure to do so would torpedo the board's plans to rebuild the club's fortunes.'

Had we lost, Manchester City would have survived. There would, though, have been deeper cuts into the fabric of the club. Our credibility as tenants for Manchester's newest stadium would have been severely damaged. The enormous support from the fans – which had sustained us in our fixtures at Wycombe, York and Stockport – would inevitably begin to bleed away. All season they had chanted 'We're not really here' in self-mocking disbelief that one of English football's great institutions had been reduced to this. But we were here now. And we had to win.

When I became chairman in March 1998, the *Manchester Evening News* commented that I had 'come

out of the shadows' to rescue the club. Had we lost, we would have remained deep in those shadows. For how long, nobody knows, but it would have been long enough to have swallowed many of our ambitions.

Royle, who four years earlier had come to Wembley with Everton and beaten Manchester United to win the FA Cup, had treated the match as one of the most important of his career. Because our training ground at Platt Lane was so open, training had been shifted to Maine Road to preserve secrecy. Bill Beswick, a sports psychologist who would go on to work with England, had been brought in to speak to the players. Since December, led by Andy Morrison, a fisherman's son who had grown up in Devon, and Shaun Goater, a striker from Bermuda who had once been on Manchester United's books, we had lost only twice and I was confident we would not lose now. In the semi-finals, Gillingham had overcome a Preston side managed by a young David Moyes. Preston may have been a bigger threat. We had comfortably beaten Gillingham a few weeks before at their Priestfield ground.

Before taking my seat in the Royal Box, I ran into Gillingham's chairman, Paul Scally, who remarkably told me that, whatever the result, his manager, Tony Pulis, would



be leaving the club on the final whistle. There had been fierce disagreements over what Pulis saw as non-payment of his bonuses from player sales. I messaged Joe to let him know there was some disharmony in the opposition camp he might be able to exploit.

At the start of the game, pride and optimism battled with the inevitable nerves, but we never really got going. Out there, on Wembley's vast pitch, City lacked fluency and composure. We struck the post a couple of times but, as the last ten minutes approached, it was a scrappy, tense, agonising affair. At 0-0 there was nothing remotely enjoyable about it. There was too much at stake.

And then, in the 81st and 87th minutes, Gillingham scored. My heart sank. I was looking at the giant Wembley scoreboard – Gillingham 2 Man City 0 – and all I could hear was the Gillingham fans singing 'Going up, going up, going up!' The royal blue flags of Gillingham were waving. The light blue ones were scattered around the feet of our supporters. This was not going to finish well. All around me and in our end, our fans started streaming out. A mass exodus. Looking back later on the TV recording, I recognised a lot of the faces and it wasn't disappointment I was seeing, it was complete distress.

There was no time for happy endings. I sat there like a statue, a blank look determinedly fixed to my face. I was always conscious of not betraying my emotions but inside I was shaken, asking myself: 'What the hell are we going to do next season? Another year in the third tier is going to be more than difficult.' We had worked so hard to get our credibility back and we would have to start all over again. The second attempt to get out of the division would be much more difficult. On the bench, Royle, who had watched Scunthorpe win the League Division Three play-off the day before, turned to his assistant, Willie Donachie, and said: 'It's Scunny next season.' Resignation, frustration and despondency were swirling around.

As I looked down, Ian Bishop had the ball deep in our half on the right. Frantically trying to get something going, he saw Richard Edghill on the other flank. Bishop was coming to the twilight stage of his career but he was still the best passer in the division. Yet even he, summing up our day and the desperate urgency of the situation, lost his usual poise and sprayed it too far ahead of his teammate. It was sailing into touch for a Gillingham throw-in which would have given them another opportunity to eat up time. Suddenly, needlessly, and ultimately miraculously,

Mark Saunders in the Gillingham midfield lengthened his stride. Had he reached the ball, I suppose, he could possibly have run through on our goal or taken it to the corner flag. Instead, it was inches beyond his instep and, though he got there, the ball brushed his studs and went out for a throw-in for us. When that ball went over the touchline, it was the 25th second of the 90th minute of the game. The digital clock on the scoreboard read 89.25.

From the throw, we worked it infield back to Bishop. This time he played it forward, 25 yards along the ground. Paul Dickov, as impishly clever as ever, stepped over it and drew his marker with him. Our other substitute, Gareth Taylor, accepted the pass and laced it on to Goater. He was 20 yards from goal. The Gillingham keeper, Vince Bartram, who had just been named man of the match over the Tannoy, raced out and he and a defender converged to block Goater's low shot. They had done exactly the right thing but the collision wiped both of them out. So, when the ball rebounded to Kevin Horlock to the left of the D, Bartram was stranded. Horlock, with supreme self-possession at such a frenetic moment, calmly drilled a left-foot shot into the net. 'Ah well,' I thought. 'Another brick in the wall of "typical City". Too little, too late.'

Before Gillingham kicked off, the fourth official raised the board showing five minutes of stoppage time. All sorts of conflicting thoughts hit me. ‘Maybe? No. Surely not ...’ With 90 seconds left, City’s Dutch centre-half, Gerard Wiekens, clipped a 60-yard diagonal ball upfield. Taylor went up to win the header, nodding it down to Horlock, who fed the Goat. Shaun had scored 21 goals that season and naturally took on the shot from 20 yards but there was no gap as a Gillingham defender hurled himself into the line of fire to thwart him. The ball struck his legs and spun off to the right ... to Dickov.

Paul had become one of my favourite players but he was not what you would call a world-class finisher. However, Joe, who had been a fine striker for Everton, Manchester City and England, had been working one-on-one with Paul, coaching him to settle himself and pass the ball into the net. And when the moment came, Dickov passed it hard – but passed it nonetheless – side-footing it into the roof of the goal.

Given the magnitude of the circumstances, his calmness when the ball fell his way was astonishing. At that point, my mask slipped. A poker face was beyond me. Sheer elation hit me, followed by a wave of relief. We had

looked into the abyss, with all its implications for finances, the new ground, hanging on to our best players, the spirit of goodwill we had restored, City's profile and general credibility. And by the skin of our teeth, we had clawed it back. Dickov's goal was wondrous in every respect, the highlight of my sporting life.

In extra time, we played a lot better and could have won it. One extraordinary thing was the sight of our end filling up again as fans swarmed back into the stadium. Fortunately, the Wembley staff, showing great common sense, did not try to prevent a mass re-entry of those who had left in despair with City on the brink of defeat. I heard of one fan who left at 2-0 and drove all the way back to Manchester, refusing to turn the radio on and confront his disappointment. He did not learn how it had all unfolded without him until he walked into his home that evening.

At 2-2, of course, Gillingham could easily have snatched it but, at 2-0 up with hardly any time remaining, Pulis had withdrawn his strikers. Watching those 30 minutes of extra time was not pleasant but when the referee blew the final whistle I was very confident that we would win the penalty shootout. Having seen the miracle that saved us unfold, we simply could not lose this match now.

Only one moment threatened my certainty. At 1-0 up in the shoot-out after Nicky Weaver had saved Paul Smith's first penalty for Gillingham, diving to his right but improvising late to block the shot down the middle with his feet, Dickov took his turn. When they were at Arsenal together, our striker and Bartram, the Gillingham goalkeeper, had struck up such a firm friendship that they had been each other's best man. Dickov had beaten him once but this time his penalty hit the inside of the post, rolled along the goal line, struck the foot of the other post and stayed out. The emotional swings were almost unbearable. That torment did not last long. Adrian Pennock blazed wide, Terry Cooke stepped up for us and scored and, after John Hodge and Richard Edghill had both converted, we led 3-1.

Gillingham's Guy Butters had to score to keep them in it. It was a firm shot but, betraying his nerves, was hit at waist-height barely a yard to the right of centre. Weaver dived, saved and set off to hurdle the hoardings, waving his arms to beckon his team-mates to follow and led them on half a circuit of the old greyhound track until our captain, Andy Morrison, wrestled him to the turf for a pile-on. There was bedlam around me, too. The excitement, the hysteria, the release of tension was simply incredible.

Eventually, the players came up the steps to the Royal Box and I embraced every one of them. It was never my style to get into the thick of it with the players but that time I wanted to go on to the pitch to thank the fans. On the Wembley turf, in the midst of this euphoria, Morrison came over and said: ‘Chairman, you won’t forget about my bonus arrangements, will you?’