

WEDNESDAY UNITED



THE SHEFFIELD DERBY

RICHARD CROOKS

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More than Five Years

SUMMER 2017, enjoying a holiday abroad. But at the centre of my thoughts was only one thing – the upcoming fixture release date for the EFL clubs for the 2017/18 season. It had to be. Wednesday had reached the play-offs for promotion to the Premier League in the previous two seasons, meaning expectations for the new season were high.

And of real import the other Sheffield team – United – had won promotion to the Championship, after six seasons in League One. They'd achieved it with ease – promoted as champions, that position assured weeks before the season's end having been managed since the start of the 2016/17 season by the born and bred Blade, Chris Wilder. The first Sheffield league derbies for six seasons would be the highlight of the football calendar.

That was the immediate focus for the fixture release date – sitting in a park, in some far-flung land, holiday irrelevant, iPad in hand, scrolling through the links on the BBC website. Jumping off the page was Sheffield Wednesday v Sheffield United, Saturday, 23 September at Hillsborough, with the return at Bramall Lane in the New Year on 13 January.

The most recent derby had taken place at Hillsborough in February 2012, with United in pole position in the League One table, and Wednesday some way behind. Wednesday won it 1-0 and for them it was joy unconfined, the same emotion for whichever team wins the derby. For Wednesday it was a crucial win in their quest for promotion.

Since then, Wednesday have been in the Championship, and were in the last two seasons real contenders to make the Premier League. United had been in the division below – changing their manager five times since the last derby. The bragging rights had belonged to the blue-and-whites.

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But by the summer of 2017 the two clubs were back in the same division. And does absence make the heart grow fonder? Hardly. But it does mean the Sheffield derby is back, and it does mean both clubs' supporters have a laser-like focus on this fixture.

The season had started well for both clubs – Wednesday losing their opening league game before embarking on an unbeaten run to the derby weekend, while for their part United had amassed two more points than Wednesday and were in a play-off position as the game approached. Sky Sports had seen the benefits of televising live this first Sheffield derby in almost six years, and the game had been put back a day to Sunday, 24 September with a 1.15pm kick-off.

Going into the weekend United were in sixth place in the Championship with Wednesday in ninth.

In the programme for their last game before the derby, United manager Chris Wilder observed, 'The new boys and those who have been around for a while will tell you that the changing room is buzzing at the moment and they are together ... it is a great time to be involved with this football club.'

The local newspaper *The Star* produced a 16-page derby pull-out from the main paper – the latter's front page announcing, 'Countdown to the 128th Steel City Derby'. Inside the pull-out there were features on the two managers involved and articles on past derbies by participants from both clubs.

The feature on Wednesday's head coach, the Portuguese Carlos Carvalhal, commented on his time at Sporting Lisbon and the derbies with Benfica, and his time in Turkey in charge at Beşiktaş and the Istanbul derbies with Galatasaray and Fenerbahçe. It reported, 'Owls boss unlikely to crack under the pressure after surviving fierce European showdowns', and went on, 'The Owls build-up has been relatively low-key It has been business as usual at Middlewood Road [Wednesday's training ground].'

For Wilder, the article observed, 'Meetings between his club and Sheffield Wednesday are the very best of British [derbies] ... you will never hear Wilder claim derbies are simply about the points ... United's players have been briefed in minute detail about what's at stake.' Wilder's derby checklist for his players is reproduced – 'Learn the history of the fixture; Understand what football means to the city; Win tackles, headers and races; Be passionate; But stay disciplined.'

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A clear difference in emphasis and approach.

Back to the main part of the newspaper and a two-page report on 'One of the biggest police operations to keep fans safe', which highlighted a series of raids had taken place on known and suspected hooligans, which would prevent them from attending the game.

Sheffield's District Commander Chief Superintendent Shaun Morley said, 'Both clubs have a hooligan element of more than 100 individuals ... police intelligence gathered in the run-up to the game suggested both groups were planning to clash ... the arrest phase of the policing operation was to make sure that certain people were not in a position to cause trouble.'

In the *Daily Telegraph* on the day before the game, a column by ex-England cricket captain Michael Vaughan, a Wednesdayite and now a commentator and pundit, was headlined, 'Wednesday need to win the Sheffield derby so I can wind-up Joe Root'. A Unitedite, Root is the current England cricket captain.

Vaughan commented, 'Every team think their derby is the biggest and the Steel City will stop ... I have some good derby memories and some not so good ... I will never forget Wednesday beating United in the FA Cup semi-final at Wembley [1993] ... I remember once being chased out of Bramall Lane by United fans, and the games are the worst to watch. You are just desperate for your team to win.'

He noted United 'have a bit of momentum ... and have a manager, that seems to get the best out of his players, which is the worry for Wednesday'. No matter, he concludes, 'Wednesday have the quality'.

The *Daily Express* headlined, 'Sheffield Wednesday v Sheffield United: No rivalry compares to Steel City derby – Wilder', concluding, 'When the teams emerge at kick-off on Sunday, the passion, the fervour and the roar that greets them will signal a long-awaited resumption of hostilities. It will not be for the faint-hearted.'

There was a keen focus on the game by the various betting companies – Betfair advertised 'Back Owls to take Steel City spoils', and offered odds of 23/20 for a Wednesday win, 11/5 for a draw and 16/5 for a United win.

Three weeks prior to the game, Wednesday had celebrated the 150th anniversary of their formation on 4 September 1867 by holding an event in Hillsborough Park for all their fans, and a celebratory dinner the next evening at Ponds Forge, Sheffield.

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Wednesday had gone to town. Among many highlights on this star-studded occasion was the unveiling of the 'Dream Scene' – a selected group of Wednesday players through the ages in the dressing room – painted on canvas, by the renowned Australian artist Jamie Cooper who had undertaken similar commissions at high-profile clubs including Real Madrid and the New York Yankees.

A limited number of 150 full-size numbered and signed prints of the 'Dream Scene' were available to purchase at £850. And it was the self-same 'Dream Scene' that adorned the cover of the programme for the game – Wednesday players from the 19th century to the 21st in their blue-and-white, left to right, Nilsson, Sheridan, Hirst, Waddle, Wilson, Curran, Spiksley, Crawshaw, Megson, Blenkinsop, Fantham, Walker, Bullen, Springett and Dooley – what a tale that cast could tell of derby games of yore.

The football programme for the derby game had no text on the cover, simply a reproduction of the 'Dream Scene' with no reference to the opposition. It was a celebratory edition of the Wednesday programme – 150 pages, with a reproduction copy of the Wednesday Reserves v Gainsborough Trinity programme on 1 September 1900, as an added bonus. The cost was £5. The usual matchday programme costs £3.

It was impressive, with plenty to get the blue-and-white juices flowing. Wednesday favourite José Semedo reflected on the derby game in February 2012, 'It was the biggest derby I have ever played in and when we scored the winning goal I went down on my knees and thanked God.'

Mick Pickering, the Wednesday captain for the Boxing Day game of 1979 – their 4-0 win against the Blades, said, 'I'd never experienced that atmosphere. It was like walking into a wall. When we came out of the tunnel, it was just unbelievable, the noise took your breath away.'

The September 2017 derby was an all-ticket affair. Wednesday had allocated their opponents less than 3,000 tickets in the Upper West Stand, with the remaining tickets for home supporters; 32,839 attended.

On that Sunday morning I travelled to Sheffield from Hertfordshire, leaving home at eight o'clock, and using the A1, a more interesting and most importantly more reliable road for the journey north than the M1.

I tuned in to the radio and listened to *Sportsweek* on Radio 5 Live with Gary Richardson – and who should be interviewed but none other than Chris Wilder. There was some discussion about the forthcoming game, with a much greater focus on Wilder, his background, his experiences

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as a ball boy, as a player and now as manager at Bramall Lane. And on Wednesday? Nothing.

Interview completed, Richardson asked his studio guest, Patrick Collins, the sports journalist with the *Mail on Sunday*, what his thoughts were. Evidently, Collins liked listening to Wilder and the views he put forward as a manager. I wasn't overly keen on listening to Wilder and his perspectives – all of which, no doubt, would cause Wilder, Richardson and Collins not the slightest problem whatsoever.

More particularly, where was the BBC's impartiality? If they're broadcasting the views of Chris Wilder, what about Carlos Carvalho? Wednesdayites pay the licence fee just as much as Unitedites. It seemed to matter not to the broadcaster.

In the previous day's edition of *The Times*, there was a two-page spread on the red and whites in the 'Sport' section, with the headline, 'It's real life here ... our lads go out and graft first'. It quoted Wilder as saying, 'The club represents a working-class background at its very best, based in the heart of the city. We consider it a city club, where the other lot down the road is outside.'

Interesting that Wilder appears to have little time for history – Wednesday played games at Bramall Lane as a home ground before the current occupants were formed, Wednesday have been in the city for 22 more years than their rivals, and the irony of ironies – the article had a strong focus on the Blades Academy, located nowhere near the city centre, in Shirecliffe, to the north of the city.

Wilder and his thoughts to one side, with Wednesday scarf in tow – colours worn only for the derby games – I arrived at my brother's home, in good time for the game.

And then the walk, a mile down to Hillsborough from his house, chatting about the forthcoming encounter, derby games of yore – the numbers of match-goers increasing as we descended the hill, gaggles of supporters emerging from backstreets, and converging in the direction of the ground.

A sea of blue-and-white enveloped the ground as we came to the junction of the Spion Kop and North Stand.

Then a great surprise – two people walking along Penistone Road, the road fronting Hillsborough's Spion Kop, each wearing a red-and-white scarf. Brave, foolhardy, proud are immediate thoughts that come to mind. They were aliens among the blue-and-whites, and they must have felt

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that way, as they made their way round the terraced backstreets to the turnstiles for away supporters on Leppings Lane.

Derby day nerves had set in on the walk down – they always do, there is something intangible in the air, the feeling this is the big one. Five years and more since the last derby. We can't lose this one, we can't lose to them. The perspective of not losing is always there, always to the fore. For no other game is that thought so marked.

Half an hour before kick-off we took our seats in the North Stand. We had season tickets, our position opposite the players' tunnel about a third of the way back from the front of the North Stand. Centrally positioned it provided a good view of the pitch.

In the ground, the anticipation was all there, the expectation heightened, the nervousness and tension all around. The chanting developed gradually at first and then with increasing volume, with increasing force and rhythm, as the half hour to kick-off counted down.

We can hear the United supporters chanting and singing, we hear 'United', we can't identify anything more because they are more than half the ground's length away, and Wednesday supporters on three sides of the stadium make a much louder contribution to proceedings. Not surprising given the ticket allocations, Wednesdayites substantially outnumber their rivals.

The supporters' large Wednesday flag made its uncertain way from front to back of the Kop, and back down again. For once the flag was not straight and looked more 'side-on' as it passed from hand to hand over the heads of those in its path.

The best view of the Wednesday flag and the packed Kop was had by those directly opposite, in the West Stand, and in the upper tier. Unitedites. Oddly, there appeared to be gaps among the seats in the away end. Surely, they had sold out their allocation of tickets? We could not understand it – maybe there were delays in getting to the ground.

The announcer calling out the names of the away team is met with a crescendo of booing – no one could have heard the names. It's useful to have the video screen to check the teams, see the video playbacks of great derby day games of years gone by. Unsurprisingly it focussed on Wednesday wins of yesteryear.

The screen positioned between the South and West Stands would not have been visible to most of the away support – they would not have

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been disappointed to miss seeing reruns of derby day goals from their opponents.

And the two line-ups? For Wednesday, there were no Sheffield-born players; the closest to the Steel City was Jack Hunt, who was born in West Yorkshire. Only four of the team were born in England. For United there were no Sheffield-born players, while nine of the team were born in England.

And a sign of the times – the numbers on the 22 players' shirts ranged from 1 to 33 for Wednesday, and 2 to 36 for United.

For Wednesday, the United team is relatively unknown – strikers Billy Sharp, their captain and supporter from boyhood, is on the bench, Ched Evans, the man who had been in the news for non-footballing reasons, is on the bench, Clayton Donaldson a recent buy from Birmingham City and a thorn in Wednesday flesh from previous games, is missing.

Leon Clarke – an ex-Wednesday striker who failed to set Hillsborough alight in his time there – is United's main man up front. Clarke is given a distinctly negative and hostile reception by the home crowd.

A crescendo of noise greets the teams as they enter the field of play – the loudest by far for any game this season. Two points of note – the two teams do not come out together, which does not follow the practice where players from both teams emerge from the tunnel side by side. Wednesday out first and then United; both teams are wearing their traditional colours, blue-and-white, red and white.

For many clubs an away fixture means wearing their away colours. Not today.

The coin is tossed in the centre circle – Wednesday are attacking the Leppings Lane end in the first half, so United kick off. Wednesday had won the toss and would attack the favoured Kop end in the second half. The game gets under way.

But two minutes in comes an absolute catastrophe. A free kick is conceded on the edge of Wednesday's area – but with the wall in place, two United players are around the ball and move in different directions, one receives the ball and within an instant it is in the back of the Wednesday net with goalkeeper Kieren Westwood rooted to the spot.

Utter silence falls around 90 per cent of the ground. And then with what seemed like a delayed roar half a second later, the visiting supporters are rejoicing and in raptures at the other end. A delayed reaction to us, no doubt because it takes that bit longer for the United supporters to be

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certain the ball is in the net, their players jumping for joy confirms the reality. Their vocal appreciation travels more than halfway down the ground. It is unwelcome and adds to the sense of unreality.

Fourteen minutes in and a long ball is played over the top of the Wednesday defence – the United striker Clarke is dawdling back and receives the ball. He must be offside. He's not offside. Come on linesman, what's wrong with you? He's offside, where's your flag? Clarke goes on and with only Westwood to beat he slots the ball in for 2-0. What's wrong with the linesman?

The away end, exuberant and utterly delighted, make abundantly clear their satisfaction with events. The home crowd are restless, frustrated, and aching to see pressure on the opposition, to see real penetration into their half and cause their goalkeeper problems. Half-time approaches and there is little to stir them.

And then, from proverbially 'nothing', comes a chance at the near post for Gary Hooper, and the poacher makes no mistake. The ball is in the net and Wednesday are on their way. The goal being scored in added time makes it even more important, or so it seems. Smiles are back on Wednesdayite faces with little question there would be doubts surfacing at the away end.

The players go off to a roar from the home crowd. Half-time feels a whole lot better now – the general mood around us has lifted, a more positive outlook, albeit everyone knew, and some vocalised the view, that Wednesday had to 'wake their ideas up' (an interesting concept – and one oft used at Hillsborough!).

The half-time interval sees the draw for the 50/50 competition (50 per cent of the proceeds of tickets sold allocated in prize money, 50 per cent to the club) take place on the pitch. It is always made by a past Wednesday player. For derby day it was Terry Curran, and Curran was a real thorn in the side of the Blades in the 1979/80 Wednesday promotion-winning season. A penny for Curran's thoughts on the first half!

In the second half Wednesday make an immediate change – David Jones, a defensive midfield player, is taken off in favour of Lucas João, a tall, quick, rangy striker from the head coach's Portuguese homeland. João had not played in the first team for a while and had been out on loan the previous season. No one doubted the wisdom of the change – the general view was he would cause the United defence problems – and a roar greeted his arrival.

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The whole flow of the game changed at the beginning of the second half as Wednesday were out and playing, putting pressure on the visitors' defence. It had an immediate impact on the crowd who could see the blue-and-white tide turning in their favour.

And on 66 minutes – rapture! A long ball over the United defence into the penalty area finds Lucas João on his own. Then comes the deep intake of breath in the crowd as he controls the ball. He has the goalkeeper to beat, he must score – but this is the derby, the pressure is immense, please let him score. Bang, the ball is powered into the back of the net in front of the Kop.

An emotional release for the blue-and-whites with pandemonium erupting around the ground. The volume is off the scale. Many Wednesdayites are up and gesturing at the visiting supporters at the far end of the ground. There is no reaction from those in the upper tier of the West Stand – but they must surely now be feeling the tide turning against them.

Most of the blue-and-whites in the crowd are off their seats and bouncing up and down. They are encouraged to do so, if encouragement were needed, by the words of the chant that accompanies the bouncing, which states in direct terms, that if you don't bounce you're considered to be a Blade. The ground is rocking. Back to parity, the game is surely there for the taking.

Within a minute and a half of the goal, United attack, their player appears to waltz through the Wednesday defence – 'where's the defence? what are we doing' cries many a Wednesdayite in vain. The red-and-white-shirted player shoots between Westwood and his left post, and into the net. How could that happen? Wednesday are behind again – no celebrations now, just silence, as we try to digest what's just happened. And it has happened – very quickly. Unbelievable. But it's not.

And the ground is not silent, there are celebrations, and chanting, and it's loud, and we can hear it, and it's in the upper tier of the West Stand. Things are a whole lot worse now.

From that point Wednesday show little signs of getting back on terms, and the final blow is made in the 75th minute. A ball is knocked hopefully in the direction of United's striker Clarke, on the edge of the penalty area, where he is up against the combined might of the two Wednesday central defenders. They fail to deal with it, the ball breaks to Clarke, and he does deal with it before slotting past Westwood for 4-2.

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For a moment, if silence could get quieter it got quieter – though not in the upper tier of the West Stand, where the celebrations are in full swing and they are milking every moment.

And then from a few around us there are voluble recriminations and outrage at the so-called Wednesday defence.

Fifteen minutes of the game remain plus added time – I hoped, we hoped. Nothing material happened that looked remotely like changing the scoreline. Someone ten or more rows behind us let rip with a loud and foul-mouthed tirade about the opposition – the essence of which was how had we let them do this? I have little doubt that many were uncomfortable with the language used – I was – but no one took him to task.

There was a world-weariness enveloping the home support with the events on the field. Wednesday were losing and the inevitable seemed to be coming, defeat. Defeat in the derby.

Soon after United's fourth goal people started to leave the Kop and make for the exits, and by the full-time whistle it looked as if the Kop was half-empty. The early departures did not go unnoticed by the patrons in the upper tier of the West Stand. They provided their own commentary and vocal encouragement to the exiting blue-and-whites.

We quickly learned this was the first time United had scored four goals away from home in this fixture. To say that rubbed it in would be an exaggeration, simply because what had unfolded before us had caused a numbness in thinking and feeling.

After the final whistle the Wednesday players – or most of them – walked towards the Kop to applaud the crowd for their backing and encouragement during the game. For the first time I can recollect the reaction from the Kop elicited some low-level booing in return.

Meanwhile, the opposition players, manager and his support staff are all out on the pitch enjoying every moment, looking to their celebrating supporters in the stand. The Sky Sports cameramen are following their every move, no doubt ready to present the man of the match with his prize. My two-second look in that direction was two seconds too long. Look away, now. Time to go.

Feelings? Bereft and empty are predominant, we've lost to United. Frustrated that we did not take the game to them, more frustrated that having got back on terms we let it slip in a proverbial flash. And hurt – there is nothing like losing in a derby game. It hurts, it really hurts. It may have happened before but the impact and the angst are the same.

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At the end of a game I text family and friends – I'd done so at half-time, and really had to do so at the end of the game, much as it lacked any appeal. The text was straightforward:

'Lost 4-2 ... very poor ... got it back to 2-2 ... defence then folded immediately ... the football gods are weeping ... I am too ...'

The reference to weeping was figurative but accurately reflected how I felt. Most of the recipients did not respond to the text – they knew how raw the emotion was. Some 'friends' did:

'Oh dear – blades were the better team' – Steve, Wolves supporter.

'Oh dear. Not good news and not what I had anticipated' – Peter, Scunthorpe United supporter

'Oh dear Richard ... not good' – Andrew, Charlton Athletic supporter.

'A really bad day in S6' – David, QPR supporter.

They all meant well – but no words can make you feel any better when you've just lost a derby. As for Steve's text, that made it a whole lot worse. And in truth how could they know the impact of this game? They're not Sheffielders, they had no concept of what the Sheffield derby is and what it means.

Walking through the concourse at the back of the North Stand and out of the ground there was an unusual quietness among the departing Wednesdayites – in defeat there is usually a lot of talk about what happened, what went wrong, why this, why that. Not today. Aside from the occasional comment most people were quiet, with their own thoughts. The unthinkable had happened. Maybe people were thinking how they were going to face up to any red and whites they knew in the workplace, in the pub, or at school.

I looked to the left at the club superstore as we made our way out. Before the game I'd thought about going in there once the game was finished, to get my partner's baby granddaughter a couple of Wednesday bibs. I couldn't face doing that.

We'd lost. I wanted to be surrounded by my own thoughts not by Wednesday souvenirs, and I certainly did not want the memory of defeat to be recorded by the purchase of Wednesday bibs for baby Willo. At her age she would not understand, but I made a promise I'd make it up to her.

Returning back up the hill I talked with my brother about what went wrong – our general consensus was that in the first half no one had a good game and the defence had been poor, João had come on and made

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a real positive difference, we were back in the game on merit, and then we threw it away with poor defensive play again.

I decided to call BBC Radio Sheffield's *Praise and Grumble* programme – the opportunity for supporters to air their views. My views are summarised – Grumble, Praise, Grumble.

I called, no one picked up at the other end. I left it five minutes as we made our way further up the hill. Called again, same result. I left it. No doubt the airwaves would be full of red and whites crowing, lauding their team and their performance. I could understand that, but arriving back at my brother's house I certainly did not want to listen to it.

My brother had recorded the game on Sky Sports – he was keen to see the goals, I was less so. Technology was engaged and we fast-forwarded to each of the goals.

All but one of them looked exactly as we'd seen them, albeit the television pictures had a much closer and focussed view, several replays, with commentary on the build-up, the quality of the goal, and analysis of the defensive shortcomings.

And the one goal not as we'd seen it? United's second, which Clarke scored from what must have been an offside position. Yes, it was clear that Clarke was dawdling back as the ball was played forward; it was equally clear that two Wednesday defenders were joining in the dawdle, and they were even slower pushing out than he was. No question Clarke was onside – my apologies to the linesman for questioning his decision at the time!

In fast-forwarding the recording, we saw various crowd scenes the cameras focussed on – one picked out Harry Maguire, the Leicester City central defender, who had played against Liverpool in a Premier League game the previous day. Transferred to the Foxes from Hull City, whom he had joined from the Blades, he had travelled to Hillsborough to watch the red and whites. He was with the celebrating Unitedites.

None of this made me feel any better.

A long drive home followed down the M1, likely to provide a more reliable journey at that time of day. A break was had at Leicester Forest East service station – a minibus had stopped at the same services, with many of the occupants wearing Wednesday shirts and colours. They were downbeat with little chat between themselves, and I was not in the frame of mind to strike up any discussion. It would only be negative, and the outcome of the afternoon had been bad enough.

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Social media was awash with the highs of the Unitedites and the lows of the Wednesdayites. We'd lost. I had no interest in taking part.

In the immediate aftermath of defeat the official Sheffield Wednesday website appeared to have less on the game than it normally provided – certainly no 'highlights' were advertised. Instead, prominence was given to Carlos Carvalhal and his statement, 'I take responsibility' – the essence of which was that in his role as head coach he takes ultimate responsibility for the outcome on the pitch.

All well and good, and of course, ultimately, he is accountable and will take overall responsibility for the team's performance. But it does not acknowledge the failings that afternoon on the pitch – Wednesday had, at best, lamentable shortcomings in the defensive play and a lack of attacking threat. For me – and I suspect many supporters – such an acknowledgement by both the head coach and by the players was key to recognising the impact of the afternoon on the supporters.

And most importantly, what was needed was a clear and resolute message from the team to the supporters that said something along the lines of, 'We are as disappointed as you, we did not do ourselves justice, it is as unacceptable to us as it is to you. We will do everything to put this right. We will be ready for the return at Bramall Lane in January.'

This was not Carvalhal's way – he acknowledged they had not played their normal game and had been put off it by the early goal conceded. For the press conference the following Tuesday, ahead of the game against Birmingham City, he was as animated, arguably as angry, as he had been in any previous media gathering.

He produced a £20 note for the assembled throng, screwed it up, banged down on it on the table, opened it up, and asked the assembled journalists the rhetorical question – 'What is it?' A £20 note, he stated, it is still the same £20 note he had brought out from his pocket. The meaning of his actions were presumably to compare the £20 note with his Sheffield Wednesday team, which is still the same Sheffield Wednesday team despite the defeat on Sunday.

The degree to which this display by Carvalhal convinced the journalists – or more importantly convinced the supporters – must be open to some doubt.

Umbrage had been taken by some journalists that no player was available to give his views, as was usual on such occasions. While the discussion was focussed on the game ahead, no doubt the journalists

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would have a focus on the performance against United. Many pointed out after that game that no player was made available to give their comments – a practice usually accorded after each fixture. It gave an impression that Wednesday were raising the drawbridge.

It was not until nine days later, on 3 October, that a player was made available to talk to the local radio station, BBC Radio Sheffield, for its phone-in weekday evening programme, *Football Heaven*. The presenter, Rob Staton, made the point:

‘It’s the first time we’ve had the opportunity to speak to one of the players after the Blades game and fans were obviously very disappointed after the match with it being the Steel City derby.’

The player responding was Tom Lees, the Wednesday captain on the day. He said:

‘We understand what the game meant, and we understand the importance of it, and we were all bitterly disappointed and the feeling afterwards, especially the day after, even the week after, it still hasn’t gone away. We’ve remembered the taste we left the ground with, it wasn’t nice at all.

‘We know exactly how the fans will have been feeling, everyone in the city, how they will have been feeling, because we had to endure it as much as them after the game, seeing the other side win. It was a very, very hard pill to swallow to be honest, we were very disappointed.’

Nine days after the game.

Wednesdayites had been enduring the pain of defeat for that whole time, and now a player was commenting on the game, the defeat, the impact on them and the fans. Now, nine days later, there was some empathy.

In the immediate aftermath of the game newspapers gave their views.

The *Daily Express*, ‘Nothing hurts more than a derby-day humiliation on your own turf and for Sheffield Wednesday this humbling will leave deep scars for their supporters.’ In one sentence this captured it for me.

The *Guardian*, ‘Sheffield United’s derby delight prompts questions over Wednesday’s attitude ... As good as United were, Wednesday were frustrating, limp, uncompetitive: everything you do not want in a derby.’ Frustrating yes, but a team able to come back to 2-2, having been two down within the first 14 minutes, is not a limp and uncompetitive one.

In the *i* newspaper Chris Wilder said, ‘It was special; I don’t think you can put it into words. We’ve had it rammed down our throats over the

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last six years so it's nice to give the supporters something back ... I don't think it gets any better than this.'

The *Daily Mail* journalist Matt Barlow quoted Wilder, 'This was everything for both clubs. I don't think anybody came here thinking it was just about three points. I've not slept a wink for about seven days.' And then the opportunity for Barlow to allow his hyperbole to runneth over, 'Clarke scored the second to complete the rout.' Some journalists must have their own dictionary to define the outcome as a 'rout' – 2-0, brought back to 2-2, then 4-2. A rout?

Grandson Charlie and his dad Ben had not been able to make the game – given the result I was pleased that Charlie had not made this his first Sheffield derby. It would be more than difficult to explain to him how his team had performed, had lost the game 4-2, and all this at Hillsborough. There would be more opportunities to see the derby, and most importantly opportunities to see a better outcome – I hoped!

On Monday morning I walked from home to the local shops – I saw John from a distance (a Charlton Athletic supporter of many years standing, his wife Margaret, from Darnall, Sheffield, a lifelong Wednesdayite) and called out, 'I'm not talking about football, John.'

He insisted he did not know the result as he'd been at a family wedding in Dorset – I confirmed the score, giving a very brief summary of the game. His response was clear and intended to be sympathetic, 'You can't win every time Richard, you can't win every time.' We parted.

Whatever the apparent truism of John's observation, it felt as though he really had not appreciated or understood the impact of a derby day defeat – it was my team, my club, we had lost to them. It was not any old game, it was THE game.

The programmes produced by the respective clubs for their next home fixtures made interesting reading. At Bramall Lane, the game three days later against Wolverhampton Wanderers had extensive and effusive coverage of events the previous Sunday, and a six-page 'picture special' from Hillsborough. The captain Billy Sharp – a Unitedite from boyhood – on the bench and an unused substitute on the day, had this to say in his column, 'We have all taken some stick down the years for whatever reason but at Hillsborough there could be no doubt of who were the better team. We had more spirit, wanted it more and showed the guts and character needed for a derby-day success.'

WEDNESDAY V UNITED

Wilder offered, 'The euphoria of Sunday ... it was a tremendous occasion and I thought we thoroughly deserved the reward. It was everything for us. It cannot be classed as just another game, and to do it there, in the manner that we did, was fantastic.' He went on, 'At this point, I want to say that I think Carlos Carvalho is a classy individual. He came up to me afterwards and wished me well ... he was very gracious on what was obviously a difficult day for him and his club.'

That last sentiment lingered with me, and two thoughts came to the fore – how would people regard the last red-and-whites manager to win at Hillsborough in a derby, and one who had also tasted defeat? Would anyone have a similar view of him? That man – Neil Warnock.

Inevitably, my thoughts progressed further – do we want the man in charge to be regarded as a 'classy individual'? Or do we want a winner in the derby? I have little doubt that Carlos would say the choice is not binary – he would want both. Me too, but if it's only one, I'm not concerned about the class of the individual.

Returning to the United programme – on offer for red-and-white supporters and blazoned on the front cover, 'Win a Signed Teamsheet from Derby Day Victory.'

In the weeks after the game the red and whites received more publicity, coinciding with their continued good form and results. Wilder was featured on the BBC Sport website a month later with an in-depth article on his background and managerial career, and it referenced again the derby day win, which was described as 'symbolic'.

He commented on the 'ridiculous scenes' of celebration after their victory, and went on to comment about his approach, 'The game doesn't change though. You have got to outwork the opposition, out run the opposition, then get on the ball and play in a way that people want to see you play and be positive with it. It's a competitive sport. I want to see people competing and wanting to win and the togetherness of the group.'

Back at Hillsborough the first game after the derby was seven days later against Leeds United. The programme had the views of captain Glen Loovens, a Dutchman who had been at the club for four years, and had missed the derby through injury. He commented, 'It's been a tough week for the boys, the fans and everyone connected to the club ... All teams go through little blips and you just have to get out of them by working hard and sticking to the task at hand.'

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And the derby day defeat is a 'little blip' is it? I've not heard it referred to as that before, and I hope I never do again.

Carvalho added, 'Of course everyone is disappointed right now ... I understand the frustrations of our fans, absolutely sure. We all do. No one wanted to lose the derby game last week, we all know what these games mean, but sometimes this happens in football and we have no choice but to move on.'

And did any of this make me feel any better? Not one iota. The hurt of defeat was still raw. Come on 13 January and the game at Bramall Lane – and we'd better be ready!